

Thought Leadership Series

Leading Volunteers Well

Churches Depend on Volunteers but Manage Them Like Staff. Neither Assumption Serves Anyone Well.

Most volunteers serving in a local church are already giving their best hours to someone else. They have a job, a family, and a set of obligations that fill the majority of their week. What they bring to the church is what remains: evenings, weekends, early mornings, and the energy they choose to invest after everything else has made its claim. That gift deserves to be taken seriously.

The Assumption That Undermines Volunteer Culture

When churches manage volunteers with staff expectations, they do not get better volunteers. They get fewer of them.

The most common mistake churches make with volunteers is treating the relationship as more obligatory than it is. Staff can be held to schedules, performance standards, and escalating accountability. Volunteers cannot, and attempting to manage them that way produces predictable results: quiet withdrawal, reduced availability, and eventually departure. The volunteer who feels more managed than valued will simply stop coming. There is no resignation letter. There is no exit interview. There is just an empty slot on the schedule and a ministry leader wondering what happened.

The opposite mistake is treating the volunteer relationship as too fragile to structure. Churches that avoid clear expectations out of fear of pushing people away create a different problem. Volunteers who do not know what is expected of them cannot succeed in the role. They cannot prepare, plan around it, or feel the satisfaction of doing something well. Ambiguity does not protect the volunteer relationship. It drains it.

The relationship that actually works sits between these two failure modes. It treats the volunteer as a capable adult with genuine constraints, gives them a role worth showing up for, and respects what they are giving without demanding what they cannot.

A volunteer can walk away at any time. That reality should not make the church timid. It should make the church intentional.

Respecting What Volunteers Actually Give

Most volunteers are not giving spare time. They are giving chosen time. The difference matters.

When a volunteer shows up on a Sunday morning or a Wednesday evening, they have made a choice that cost them something. They could have stayed home. They could have used that time for rest, family, or the dozen other things competing for it. They chose to be there. A church that treats that choice casually, that wastes volunteer time in poorly run meetings, that asks people to show up without a clear purpose, that changes plans without notice or thanks people without specificity, is communicating something about how it values what was given.

Time Is the Volunteer's Primary Contribution

Unlike a paid staff member whose time is contractually committed, a volunteer's time is entirely discretionary. Respecting it means starting and ending on schedule. It means not calling a two-hour meeting for something that could be a fifteen-minute briefing. It means giving volunteers enough lead time to plan around their commitments. It means not routinely asking for more than was agreed without first having an honest conversation about capacity.

Preparation Is a Form of Respect

A volunteer who arrives to find the materials are not ready, the room is not set up, or no one is sure what they are supposed to do has been handed a message about their value. Preparation communicates that the church took the volunteer's coming seriously enough to be ready for it. That standard is not difficult to meet. But it requires intentionality that ministry leaders operating at full capacity sometimes allow to slip.

Recognition Should Be Specific

Generic appreciation lands differently than specific acknowledgment. Telling a volunteer that they did a good job is kind. Telling them that the family they greeted last week came back because of how welcome they were made to feel is something else entirely. Specific recognition connects the volunteer's contribution to actual ministry impact. It answers the question every volunteer is asking, whether or not they say it aloud: does what I do here actually matter?

The volunteer who feels their time is respected, their role is clear, and their contribution is meaningful will show up consistently. The volunteer who feels otherwise will eventually stop showing up at all.

Clear Expectations Protect the Relationship

Clarity is not the enemy of the volunteer relationship. Ambiguity is.

Every volunteer should know, before they begin, what the role requires in terms of time commitment, preparation, and frequency. They should know who they report to, what success looks like, and what the pathway is if the role is not a good fit. None of this requires a formal employment contract. It requires a direct, honest conversation that respects the volunteer enough to tell them the truth about what they are signing up for.

When expectations are unclear, the ministry leader ends up frustrated that the volunteer is not meeting a standard they were never told about. The volunteer ends up confused about whether they are doing well or quietly failing. Both parties carry the tension without ever naming it, and the relationship deteriorates in a way that could have been avoided entirely by a fifteen-minute conversation at the outset.

Role Definition Is an Act of Care

Defining a volunteer role clearly is not bureaucratic overhead. It is a way of communicating that the role matters, that the person filling it matters, and that the church has thought seriously about what it is asking. A volunteer who knows what their role is can own it. A volunteer whose role is vague can only approximate it and hope for the best.

When the Fit Is Not Right

Not every volunteer belongs in the role they first fill. Some discover the commitment is more than their season of life can absorb. Some find the role itself is not aligned with their gifts or interests. A church culture that makes it easy to step back from a role, adjust a commitment, or transition to something more fitting retains volunteers

over the long term. A culture that treats any reduction in commitment as a form of failure loses them permanently.

The Over-Reliance Risk

When a church builds its ministry around a small number of indispensable volunteers, it is not building ministry. It is building a dependency.

Every church has volunteers who do more than their share. They are reliable, capable, and deeply committed. They fill gaps without being asked. They stay late and arrive early. They are the people ministry leaders reach for first because they always say yes. That pattern is worth examining carefully.

A volunteer who cannot say no is not thriving. They may be serving out of genuine love for the church, but over time the inability to set limits produces the same outcome as any other unsustainable commitment: exhaustion, resentment, and eventual withdrawal. The church that allowed the pattern to develop often does not see it coming, because the volunteer kept saying yes right up until they stopped entirely.

The structural question is whether the ministry could continue if that volunteer stepped back tomorrow. If the answer is no, the church has a dependency it should address before circumstances force the issue. That means developing additional volunteers for key roles, distributing responsibility more broadly, and creating a culture where it is genuinely acceptable for any volunteer to reduce their commitment without guilt.

The Volunteer Who Becomes Indispensable

When a single volunteer holds institutional knowledge, relationships, or operational responsibility that no one else shares, the church has created a vulnerability. This is not the volunteer's fault. It is a leadership and structure issue. The right response is not to burden that volunteer with more, but to intentionally build the bench around them while the relationship is still healthy.

A Diagnostic for Ministry Leaders

These questions are designed to surface whether your church's volunteer culture is one that sustains people or gradually depletes them.

- ▶ Do volunteers in your ministry know clearly what their role requires before they begin, or do expectations emerge informally over time?
- ▶ When did you last ask a key volunteer how they are doing in the role honestly, not just whether they can cover a slot?
- ▶ Are there volunteers who have quietly reduced their involvement in the last year? Do you know why?
- ▶ Is there a volunteer whose departure would significantly disrupt a ministry area? What would happen if they stepped back tomorrow?
- ▶ Does your church make it genuinely easy for a volunteer to step back or transition roles without shame or social cost?
- ▶ Are volunteers recognized in ways that are specific enough to communicate that their individual contribution was actually noticed?

Go Deeper with the Reference Guide

The Leading Volunteers Well Complete Reference Guide expands every theme in this piece with practical frameworks your leadership team can use immediately. It includes:

- Staff vs. volunteer relationship comparison: what makes the two distinct and what that requires of leadership
- Role Definition Framework with field-by-field guidance and a fully completed example
- Onboarding Conversation Guide: what to cover before a volunteer begins
- Ministry Dependency Assessment: a structured tool for identifying over-reliance risks
- Volunteer Health Checklist: an annual review across role clarity, time respect, recognition, and sustainability
- Recognition Framework with four types of acknowledgment and when to use each

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