

Tending a Hand: Amy Grat on the Care and Feeding of Volunteers



Amy Grat (International Trade Education Programs Chief Executive Officer), Photos © John Livzey, 2017

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Everybody loves volunteers. With few exceptions, they are the unsung heroes of many organizations. Often they do yeoman's work for little recognition and in exchange for only knowledge, experience, and future consideration. So, it seems like an easy, win-win relationship for all involved. But that may not always be the case. Sometimes volunteer situations don't work out well for either party. In addition, great volunteers don't just automatically happen. They have to be recruited and managed properly. Like many tasks today, there is an art to it. And International Trade Education Programs (ITEP) chief executive officer Amy Grat studies this art to better manage ITEP's volunteer corps.



"Volunteers are not 'regular' employees. But that doesn't mean they should be treated like second-class citizens either. They are performing real work and should be respected for their expertise and talents. Unfortunately, with some organizations that's not always the case. As business people, leaders, managers, etc., we spend a lot of time and energy on the recruitment, onboarding, and retention of employees. We study why they should want to work for us and why they might leave us. But we don't apply similar sophistication to volunteers. Yet the cost of recruiting and losing volunteers can be significant; it often at least partially offsets the cost of the hiring/retention process, which is already in place anyway. So we should also use it for volunteers. The volunteer process is worth much more thought, time, and energy than many people give it. It should almost mirror the employee process."

A bold statement, Grat stands by it. In fact, she doubles down on it, citing compelling reasons why not performing that type of due diligence can be potentially harmful.

“You think long and hard about what motivates an employee to join your organization. But leaders should pay the same attention to recruiting volunteers! Think about it. Volunteers may be plugged into virtually everything in an organization, from facing clients to accessing the physical plant, online systems, and personnel. Shouldn’t they be properly trained, vetted, and protected? That safeguards both you and them. But, what tools do you have in your tool box to recruit, retain, and manage them? If there’s a problem, what mechanism addresses it? At ITEP, our mission statement illustrates our commitment to treating volunteers as valued members of our organization. In fact, volunteers are third on our clientele list, just under youth and educators, which makes sense given our mission. We have an entire set of statements about what we owe and how we treat our volunteers.”

Grat believes in treating volunteers as with the same care as employees. But she acknowledges that there can be anomalies.



“When volunteers enter, they are a bit of a black box. So a thorough onboarding and orientation benefits both parties, and it’s a great opportunity to define clear expectations on both sides of the table. At ITEP, we hire specifically for culture and fit. But many organizations—particularly all-volunteer organizations—may not have the luxury of choice. That can prove problematic. I advise stepping back and really identifying motivations (on both sides) for volunteers. Figure out the best and appropriate fit for each volunteer within the needs and culture of an organization. If someone doesn’t fit, don’t accept them. So how should an all-volunteer organization like WTS-LA structure its volunteer program?”

“WTS-LA leadership rotates and committees are reformed on a regular basis. So there’s always a risk of institutional memory loss and the danger of reinventing the wheel. There is also the potential for volunteers to work outside of their expertise area. To avoid that, make it a best practice to document protocols and procedures for every volunteer role. Every organization should do that, but it’s particularly important for all-volunteer entities. Another key element is mentoring. It’s very difficult to impart culture and other intangibles, things that aren’t easily written up in a spec sheet. Incorporating a mentoring program for volunteers can go a long way toward conveying institutional knowledge, culture, and other ‘soft’ elements.”

In addition to imparting intangibles, a mentoring program for volunteers can serve another vital function.

“One of the biggest ways to kill a volunteer’s spirit is to pigeonhole that volunteer. Someone gets identified as a good fundraiser and that’s all that volunteer gets to do. Volunteers have a lifecycle. And what brought them into an organization may change or even cease to exist. Mentors can provide a critical feedback loop as a volunteer moves through time. In addition, all organizations should have a regular self-evaluation instrument for volunteers. Organizations stand to gain a lot from a volunteer’s perspective.”

Finally, Grat addresses a common question for many organizations: how do you give volunteers the recognition they deserve?

“Of course, never take anyone for granted, particularly volunteers. And don’t assume that a volunteer has a single motivation for his or her work. While altruism may have gotten them in the door, other motivations can include ego, professional pride, networking, etc. Know and understand the volunteers that work for you. Recognize and acknowledge their contribution specifically. Do you have a person assigned to do that? Is there a volunteer manager/coordinator? For many non-profits, the focus is always on the mission,

as it must be. But as a result, I see a lot of outward-focused awards that address only that mission. With WTS-LA, for example, the awards focus largely on transportation, again, as they should. But perhaps there should also be a Volunteer of the Year award each year. At ITEP, we have a Spirit Award, where we recognize a volunteer who has made an outstanding contribution to ITEP's mission. That kind of acknowledgement means quite a lot to volunteers. In short, working with volunteers isn't hard. It just requires the same commitment and responsibility as does working with employees."