

Value Your Volunteers — Don't Just Appreciate Them

Valuing the people who volunteer in your ministry matters more than appreciating them. Here's why.

New to children's ministry, I had it all together. The best curriculum, programs, policies, and more. But I didn't have the people power to pull off an effective ministry to children. And I knew I needed to figure out why.

Ask leaders just about anywhere, and they'll agree that [finding and keeping volunteers](#) is one of their biggest struggles. Recruiting takes tremendous time and effort, and when we find a valuable volunteer, we do everything we can to keep that person serving in ministry. There are workshops, articles, resources, and even entire companies that specialize in appreciating volunteers. We set aside portions of our budgets for appreciation gifts and dinners. We let our teams know all the time how much we appreciate them.

But what if that's not enough? What happens when we spend all this time and money [appreciating our volunteers](#)—but they still head for the door?

Often we confuse what it means to appreciate someone with what it means to value that person. In verb form, these two things seem synonymous, but there's an important difference.

To appreciate someone is to recognize his or her contribution. We often do this with gifts and words of appreciation, which is important and appropriate. When we [appreciate our volunteers](#), we're recognizing what they've done. However, when we value our volunteers, we're assigning their worth—meaning we're recognizing who they are as individuals and what they uniquely bring to the ministry. The difference between valuing and appreciating our volunteers is an emphasis on their identity versus their actions.

Appreciation plays a critical role in a volunteer base. People need to feel their hard work and dedication matter and that we notice their efforts. Valuing our volunteers goes one step further. When we value people, we let them know they're important members of the team—not because of what they do, but because of who they are. How do we go beyond appreciating volunteers to valuing them?

Hold Volunteers to a High Standard

Ministries have policies and procedures in place that set a standard for volunteers. Leaders become disappointed when reality doesn't meet expectations. To avoid disappointment, make your expectations known for how you want policies and procedures met, and follow through. Explain what you expect from your volunteers, and then hold them to it. Let them know your standards are high, and communicate your belief that they'll meet the standards. Holding volunteers to a standard communicates the value they bring to your ministry.

One of the biggest mistakes I've made over the years is in how I respond when a volunteer is unable to serve at the last minute. In an effort to seem understanding, I've said things like, "It's okay, we'll make it work," or "No problem, we'll be fine." After giving a similar response to one volunteer, she responded with, "So you don't need me?"

I wasn't communicating a high standard with that approach. I realized I needed to find a way to be understanding while still communicating our ministry's high standards. Volunteers aren't just warm bodies filling roles, and they need to know that. Each volunteer adds unique gifting and perspective. If a volunteer misses a scheduled day, be understanding but also clear that he or she is an important part of the team. Explain that it's about the unique part that person plays in your ministry. Ask if there's any way you can help, and let the person know you and the kids will miss his or her presence.

This same standard goes for people who are no-shows. Not following up with a no-show can send the message that the person's absence wasn't noticed. In her nursery ministry, Sylvia calls members of her nursery team after they're 15 minutes late. While this is a helpful reminder that they're supposed to be serving, it also allows for her to ensure they're okay. Rather than assuming they forgot, she's showing concern that they may have been delayed for emergency reasons. If she can't make contact, she follows up later in the week. This holds them to a higher standard while communicating concern for their well-being.

Doug's children's ministry had struggled for years to connect with children outside the church. When a few of his volunteers came to him with ideas, he knew he'd tried most of the ideas over the years with little success. Still, he had three ways to respond. He could've dismissed the team's ideas since he'd already tried most. He could've invested in the team by training them on how to connect with children, using his ideas and suggestions and steering them away from ideas he didn't think would work. Or he could've listened to their ideas and let them try them. He chose to value the team by letting them try the ideas their way. By doing this, Doug let go of the reins of leadership a bit. Because they had a part in decision making, they felt valued and empowered to follow through with the decisions they made.

To value our volunteers, we must invite their ideas and participation. We must be willing to let go to some degree and allow them to inject their perspective and ideas into the ministry.

“Develop a strategy with a team, rather than for a team,” says Ashley McCollum, general manager of BuzzFeed’s Tasty recipe site, in Fast Company magazine. “They’ll [be more willing to] push the boundaries if they are the ones who helped set the boundaries in the first place.”

This is an unseen investment in your team that communicates their value. You commit to it with an expectation of future benefit: the growth in expertise and confidence of your volunteers. By giving away your leadership, you’ll see your team’s talents grow.

“Buy Stock” in Your Volunteers

A basic explanation of the stock market is that buying stock in a company represents part ownership. You become part of the company. Buying stock in volunteers is similar. It means knowing them; we have a stake in their lives. The decisions we make affect them and the decisions they make in their lives can affect our ministries.

Valuing volunteers means being part of their lives outside the ministry. This doesn’t mean you have to be best friends with all your volunteers. It means you show genuine interest and care for them. If the only conversations you have with a volunteer are about the ministry, then the only value you see in that person is what he brings to the ministry. To speak into his life, you must have a vested interest in his family, job, health, and interests. When you value someone, you have a vested interest in that person’s life outside of ministry duties.

Just like buying stocks can be risky, buying stock in volunteers has risks. When you take the chance to become part of their lives, it can hurt even more **if they decide to leave**. But as ministry leaders, we’re called to minister to people, regardless of their commitment.

Protect Your Volunteers

Just like anything of value, we protect our volunteers. Having insight into our volunteers’ lives helps us do just that. Protecting volunteers not only benefits the ministry, but it also demonstrates value for them and their families.

The number-one thing our volunteers need to be protected from is **burnout**. Burnout can cause problems in a person’s health, career, and family.

It's our responsibility as ministry leaders to ensure our volunteers are making healthy decisions when it comes to serving. Sometimes we must tell a volunteer to slow down or take a break for the sake of health or family.

Secondly, we protect volunteers from themselves. Helping others can be a great distraction from dealing with our own problems. Serving others provides stability and routine in the midst of chaos. However, sometimes the chaos may affect the ministry or the ministry can add to the chaos. If a volunteer is dealing with a family crisis such as a divorce or a serious illness, give her a leave of absence to allow her to work through the crisis and heal.

Finally, protect them from others. People disagree and bicker, but we must be our volunteers' biggest fans and cheerleaders. Back up your volunteer if a parent disagrees with him. If a conflict arises in your ministry, deal with it swiftly and find a solution. Volunteers are most effective when they serve with confidence. That confidence gets a boost when they know they're valued so much that you'll protect them.

Your Volunteers are Worth It

Volunteers are the greatest asset your ministry can have. Early in my ministry, I spent a lot of time building my programs and policies. I had a clear vision, an excellent curriculum, detailed policies, and a calendar full of activities. The only problem was that I was lacking the people power to implement it.

More than a well-designed ministry would attract a great volunteer team, I realized it was the volunteers that would build a great ministry. I quickly learned the importance of valuing people over programs. Value goes way beyond appreciating volunteers for their actions; it speaks to their identity. When we value our volunteers, we can show them the heart of God; that their worth is found not in works, but in Jesus.

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Taken from this website: <https://childrensministry.com/worth-of-volunteer/>