

# **Building High Performing Volunteer Teams: The Opportunities, Challenges, and Rewards**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the dynamics of building high-performing volunteer teams within non-profit organizations. Central to our findings is the "Katli-Ozdemir Engagement Model", which emphasizes trust, clear communication, and recognition as key components to foster a supportive and engaging environment for volunteers. Through a detailed case study, we illustrate the successful application of these principles, highlighting strategies like regular feedback, milestone celebrations, and management of team interactions and efficiency. The practical evidence presented demonstrates how creating a supportive and engaging environment is crucial for enhancing volunteer satisfaction, retention, and the overall performance of the team. This paper offers valuable insights and practical implications for non-profit organizations striving to optimize their volunteer engagement practices and achieve higher levels of team efficacy and sustainability.

## **WHY WE VOLUNTEER?**

Volunteers are the lifeblood of nonprofit organizations, embodying the passion, commitment, and drive essential for achieving mission-critical goals. They bring diverse skills, perspectives, and the willingness to dedicate their time and energy without financial reward, demonstrating a collective commitment to social, environmental, or cultural causes. This selfless engagement enriches organizations, enabling them to expand their reach and impact significantly beyond what would be possible through paid staff alone. Volunteers truly are the heartbeat of these organizations, pumping vitality, innovation, and a sense of community into every project and initiative they undertake.

The dedication and efforts of volunteers significantly impact the success of nonprofit and community-based initiatives. As driving forces, they contribute not just through sheer numbers, but through their invaluable time, talent, and effort. This is quantifiably evident in the United States, where volunteers' contributions are valued at approximately \$187.7 billion annually (Campbell, 2020). The economic efficiency is further emphasized when considering the substantial savings nonprofits incur by not having to cover the usual employee expenses, such as salaries and benefits.

In Australia, the tangible impact of volunteers is reflected in the over 520 million hours of community service provided in 2012-13 financial year alone (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Moreover, volunteers' roles in advocacy and awareness are profound. The 2020 Australian wildfires saw volunteers not only in rescue operations but also in driving significant awareness efforts, showcasing the strength of community spirit and collective action. Over 195,000 volunteers across various fire services illustrate the vast network of community support and the indispensable role they play in times of crisis. While it's challenging to quantify the precise economic impact of volunteer firefighters in Australia, their contribution is undeniably significant. If we consider a modest estimate where each volunteer dedicates 150 hours annually, the overall input becomes considerable, especially considering the extended hours given during demanding seasons. Calculated against the average weekly wage in Australia, the value of this volunteerism is estimated to be around A\$1.3 billion, reflecting both their commitment and the substantial benefit to the community (Cull, 2020).

Volunteers aren't just free labor; they are passionate individuals looking to make a difference. The act of volunteering is rooted in the selfless desire to give back, contributing positively to the community and touching lives. It's a journey that offers deep personal fulfillment, with the majority of volunteers experiencing an uplifted mood and a profound sense of accomplishment, evidenced by over 90% of individuals experiencing a boost in their mood from engaging in volunteer work (McGarvey, Jochum, Davies, Dobbs, & Hornung, 2019).

Beyond the intrinsic benefits, volunteering serves as a gateway to skill development and potential career advancement, with a significant portion of employers favoring candidates who have dedicated their time to volunteer work (Associates, 2006; Barkley, 2023). Volunteering has been identified as a valuable context for both informal and non-formal learning, which can contribute significantly to enhancing employability. Volunteer work can foster the development of a range of both 'hard' and 'soft' skills, which are transferable to the workplace and thus improve career prospects. A study on young volunteers participating in Italy's Universal Civil Service highlighted how such experiences contribute to the development of both hard and soft skills, enhancing future employability (Maria Luisa Giancaspro, 2021). It also opens doors to new social connections, fostering friendships and community engagement. At its core, volunteering is often propelled by a passionate commitment to a cause, driving individuals to support and advocate for issues close to their hearts.

The positive feedback loop created by volunteering—where helping others can also lead to personal benefits—underscores the value of giving back to the community (Saad, 2024). It's a reminder that acts of kindness and support can ripple through communities, improving the lives of both the giver and those receiving help. This mosaic of motivations underlines why we volunteer: to enrich not only the lives of others but also our own.

Yet, transitioning from the initial spark of wanting to volunteer to the complex reality of volunteer engagement brings to light a countless of challenges. In the realm of volunteer management, organizations encounter a suite of strategic challenges that must be met to cultivate a mutually beneficial environment for the volunteers and the institution. Securing and maintaining volunteer involvement is a nuanced endeavor, particularly against the backdrop of a 65% retention rate, which underscores the urgency for more dynamic engagement strategies. The efficacy of volunteer roles is often contingent upon the quality of training provided, a process hindered by limited financial resources that can also affect volunteer morale and effectiveness. Additionally, most volunteer programs operate with a fraction of the necessary budget, necessitating a careful allocation of resources that aligns with organizational goals. The increasing diversity of volunteers and the growing trend of remote volunteering compel the need for simplified and effective communication pathways to bridge gaps and foster understanding. Furthermore, demonstrating and measuring the real impact of volunteers' efforts is critical, yet many organizations lack the mechanisms to effectively do so. Innovative thought and a commitment to bolstering the role of volunteers within the non-profit sector are imperative in overcoming these obstacles.

### **Case Study: Optimizing Volunteer Engagement at the Project Management Summit**

**Background:** The 2020 PMI Turkey Project Management Summit sought to leverage the expertise of volunteers to orchestrate a global project management event. With over 30 volunteers from 3 countries and 7 cities, the goal was to facilitate a summit that offered substantial professional development and networking opportunities.

**Challenge:** The primary challenge, particularly relevant in today's digital era, was to efficiently manage a diverse and geographically dispersed and fully online volunteer team to execute a high-impact summit. This involved recruitment, training, allocation of resources, overcoming communication barriers, and measuring the impact of volunteer work.

The transition to virtual collaboration introduced hurdles in maintaining effective communication, fostering team cohesion, and ensuring that all members felt valued and included. This experience highlighted the necessity for developing robust virtual engagement strategies, such as regular video meetings to build rapport, digital tools for project management, and virtual team-building activities. These adaptations were crucial in overcoming the physical disconnect and sustaining a productive, motivated volunteer team.

**Approach:** The team was organized into sub-teams, focusing on specific functions such as marketing, sponsorship, and program management. Regular check-in meetings and action items were established to ensure alignment towards common goals. Key performance metrics such as the loyal volunteer rate, volunteer

satisfaction score, conflict resolution rate, and overall retention rate were identified to track progress.

**Implementation:** The summit successfully facilitated over 100 meetings and resolved around 202 action items, leading to 68 lessons learned. This was achieved through clear communication protocols, regular check-ins for feedback, and investment in team skills development, including special leadership trainings.

A key lesson from our experience involved the challenge of maintaining volunteer motivation over extended periods, particularly in projects with long timelines or delayed gratification. We learned the importance of setting and celebrating short-term milestones to provide a sense of progress and achievement. Incorporating regular recognition events and feedback sessions also played a crucial role in sustaining enthusiasm and commitment among our volunteers, proving that consistent acknowledgment of contributions significantly impacts overall team morale and engagement.

**Outcomes:** The summit boasted impressive numbers: more than 15 speakers, 4900 total PDUs (professional development unit), and 1170 ticket sales. From the data presented, the achievements of the Project Management Summit's volunteer team were substantial and instrumental in its transformation into a high-performing team. Metrics such as a 96% loyal volunteer rate and an impressive volunteer satisfaction score of 4.79 highlight the effective engagement strategies implemented. With an 86% conflict resolution rate, the team excelled at addressing and overcoming challenges. Finally, an 82% retention rate signals the team's success in creating an environment where volunteers feel valued, resulting in sustained commitment and impactful participation in the summit's activities.

These metrics collectively provide a comprehensive view of the team's effectiveness and are fundamental in identifying areas for improvement and growth. They serve as a testament to becoming a high-performing team by ensuring that volunteers are loyal, satisfied, able to resolve conflicts efficiently, and remain committed to the organization long-term.

The success of the summit can be attributed to strategic enhancements in team performance, characterized by:

1. **Streamlined Team Dynamics:** The team instituted robust ground rules & norms for effective communication, conflict resolution, and decision-making, ensuring that each member was aligned with expectations for timeliness and collaboration.

*Practical Project Management (PM) Tools Used: Ground Rules One Pager, RACI Matrix based on functions, Kanban Board, Gantt Chart, and Conflict Management Matrix*

2. **Ongoing Engagement:** Through regular, structured check-ins, the team maintained a continuous feedback loop that not only affirmed their progress but also identified areas in need of development.

*Practical PM Tools Used: Check-in Meetings, Capability & Capacity Discussions, Regular Lessons Learned & Brainstorming Sessions,*

3. **Reflective Practices:** Celebrating past successes and learning from challenges served as a cornerstone for growth and continuous improvement.

*Practical PM Tools Used: A Retrospective Board for successes, challenges, and learnings. Personalized Thank You Notes. Documenting and sharing success stories and case studies internally (via intranet or email) and externally (on social media or organization websites). Virtual Team Gatherings to Celebrate Together.*

4. **Skill Enhancement:** Targeted leadership development training provided volunteers with the tools and knowledge to excel within their roles.

*Practical PM Tools Used: Hosting Live Training Sessions, Workshops, or Guest speaker events. Feedback & Survey Tools such as Google Forms to understand the learning needs of volunteers, and make improvements.*

5. **Cultivating Appreciation:** Recognizing the contributions of each volunteer reinforced their value to the team, fostering a culture of appreciation and boosting morale.

*Practical PM Tools Used: To recognize and validate the skills volunteers gain, digital badges and certificates awarded upon completion of achievement of certain milestones.*

These elements were pivotal in crafting a collaborative environment that propelled the summit to its triumphant execution.

This case study exemplifies how structured management and a commitment to volunteer engagement can lead to the successful execution of a large-scale international event. The team's excellence in the face of complexity sets a benchmark for future initiatives, proving that with trust, collaboration, and data-driven insights, volunteer teams can achieve remarkable outcomes as presented in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1. KATLI – OZDEMIR Engagement Model**

The model encapsulates the key principles vital for nurturing high-performing volunteer teams. Trust serves as the foundational layer, ensuring team members feel secure and valued, leading to roles being clearly defined and conflicts resolved constructively. This underpinning of trust escalates to ensure expectations are met and collaboration flourishes, aligning everyone towards unified goals. Sustainability is central, facilitating the team's ability to maintain performance and adapt over time. At the pinnacle is high retention, an indicator of the team's success in creating a positive experience where volunteers feel compelled to stay engaged, mirroring the efficacy of management and adaptability of the team's environment.

High retention rates are both a sign of and a contributor to the success of the model, indicative of a well-functioning volunteer team. The practical implications of our findings extend beyond academic interest, offering tangible strategies for nonprofit organizations to enhance their volunteer engagement and management practices. By adopting the insights from the "Katli-Ozdemir Engagement Model," organizations can improve volunteer satisfaction, retention, and overall team performance. This includes the integration of clear communication protocols, regular feedback loops, and recognition programs into their volunteer management systems. Furthermore, our research suggests that investing in volunteer development—through training and leadership opportunities—can significantly bolster volunteer commitment and effectiveness, ultimately leading to more successful and sustainable volunteer-driven initiatives.

The strategies and insights shared here underscore the transformative potential of effectively managed volunteer teams. To practitioners in the field, consider these key takeaways: prioritize clear, ongoing communication to foster a sense of community among volunteers; employ strategic recognition practices to enhance volunteer satisfaction and retention; and leverage digital tools to streamline collaboration,

especially in virtual settings. Additionally, embracing a data-driven approach to volunteer management can offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of engagement strategies, guiding continuous improvement efforts. Adopting these practices can significantly elevate the impact and efficiency of volunteer-driven initiatives.

## CONCLUSION

Volunteers' economic and social contributions are invaluable, deeply woven into the fabric of society and the heartbeat of non-profit organizations. Managing such an indispensable force requires an approach that goes beyond traditional methods—rooted in data-driven insights and a deep understanding of the social dynamics that drive volunteer engagement. Volunteers join organizations to make a meaningful impact. It is the joy and growth they experience, the opportunity to shine and contribute in ways that resonate with their personal missions, that transform volunteer work from a duty to a delight. So, empower them to make their mark: allow them to GLOW with enthusiasm, GROW through enriching experiences, and ENJOY every moment of their journey towards making a difference. In this vibrant space, each volunteer is not just a part of the organization but a part of its ongoing story of change.

Success in this arena is epitomized by a team's synergy and trust, with each member feeling recognized and invested in clear, shared goals. Yet, retention of volunteers cannot be reduced to a mere technique or policy; it's a reflection of a holistic and fulfilling experience. By fostering an environment that values and actively engages volunteers, organizations don't just retain help—they cultivate a committed and passionate community, dedicated to the collective mission. Retention, then, is not just an outcome but a measure of success, indicating a nurturing and supportive environment that resonates with the volunteers' desire to make a difference.

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