

# Creating a Happy, Healthy Volunteer Base

Tara Bolker, Maxine Louie

Volunteers are crucial to the healthy sustainability of our dances, as much to build community as to get the job done. In this workshop we'll talk about the importance of volunteers, different kinds of volunteers, recruitment, engagement and retention. We'll also work to address some specific volunteer challenges, useful whether you're a committee of one or part of a large organizing team.

Maxine got started being a volunteer by doing small tasks for the Spring Thaw weekend in Toronto. Tara ran a dance weekend in Florida for nine years, which she took over from group that had been running it for 20 years. All the attendees at this weekend had a job, which made the weekend affordable and created a sense of community. In order to make this work there was a clear structure with specific "point people": key volunteers (such as a kitchen manager) who knew the jobs.

## Important points for success with volunteers

1. Match the job to person
2. Delegate tasks
3. Show proper appreciation

## The Value of Volunteers

- Free labor (monetarily)
- Easy to find - don't have to look far, they are dancers
- Some will have specific skill sets
- Connection bonding
- They bring new ideas
- Passing on of knowledge and culture
- They are valuable if you have them

## "Art Project" Exercise

Participants were given a piece of paper and a pen. We were told NOT to look at anyone else's paper, and that we had to use the pen and paper provided. We were given a set of instructions, starting with: "Trace your hand." Other instructions followed, such as, "Draw 3 lines at top of page," "Make 3 triangles in a row anywhere on page," "Fill in the middle triangle," etc.

This was to show how different people interpret the same set of instructions, and they were all correct. *Lesson learned:* If you are delegating a job and want it done in a specific way, be specific (not general) with your directions. The more that directions are open to interpretation, the more varied the results will be.

## Delegation, and "Don't just help. Stand there!"

There are different types of volunteers. One might simply be stacking chairs (while waiting for friend who is talking to others). Another is a team or board member, who have decision-making capacity,

based on knowledge of how the organization works. One can also distinguish year round volunteers and volunteers for special events. The key need is to match a job with a person, keeping the group needs in mind. Make sure the big picture is understood. You can delegate more effectively if you know what you want and what is important. The magic of coordinating volunteers is all about delegation. Delegation does not mean less work; it means different work. It is important because spreading tasks to a wider group of people builds community.

Sometimes well-intentioned helping, if performed without direction, might make things worse, more complicated, or confusing. The idea of “Don’t just help. Stand there!” is a humorous way to make this clearer to potential volunteers. Establish it as a rule of thumb that allows volunteers to hang back until really needed. They can let someone in charge know that they want to help, and then “stand there,” being ready and available to help when needed and instructed.

### **Recruiting volunteers: How do we get them on board?**

Keep your eyes peeled for potential volunteers. There are always new people coming in to dance. Get to know them. See what their likes are. If you think someone has something to offer, get them started on something small. Try to engage people without being overbearing. A personal approach works much better than hanging/posting a sheet of tasks for volunteers. Ask likely prospects one-on-one! Asking on a personal level shows potential volunteers that they are valued and wanted.

Since, volunteers do best when matched well with their task, it’s great to explore with each volunteer what he or she wants to do? When a volunteer first steps up, make the job easy to do. Have a manual of what needs to be done with descriptions of jobs/tasks. A good volunteer coordinator knows what they want, and is a matchmaker. When first matching people to jobs, you may need to break down a task or spread it out among a group of volunteers. For example, rather than just ask one person to make a flyer happen, you might have one person design the flyer, and another make sure it is printed and distributed.

If someone offers to help, try to have a specific job ready for them when they are ready to do it (are there some simple jobs that can always use doing?). Or, if you aren't ready for them, thank them and ask if they can come back in “5 minutes,” or some other specific time, but not too far in future.

### **What's in it for them?**

There are multiple reasons that motivate people to volunteer. They might like to:

- Meet new people (working together as a social outlet)
- Become part of the organization- a sense of belonging
- Experience the satisfaction gained from making events happen
- Make a difference to their community in various ways
  - Improve the social tone
  - Contribute to the quality of events
  - Do a good job at something behind the scenes
  - Feel appreciated/seen/acknowledged (so, be generous in your thanks to volunteers!)
- Have a project
- Learn new stuff and grow
- Benefit from work exchange ... receive discounted or free admission into events

- Or become involved, even if NOT a dancer

And we should acknowledge that some dancers are just consumers; they don't want to volunteer.

### **Why some choose not to volunteer, or quit**

There are also many reasons that people might not wish to volunteer. Perhaps:

- The tasks are unclear tasks.
- Every idea they give is shot down.
- They may not have, or be willing to give, the time a job takes.
- They don't feel welcomed.
- The job may be too difficult for them.
- They have a fear of getting roped in, taking on too much.
- There is a mismatch of cultures (older/younger, different characteristics).

If you find you have a problem with volunteers not showing up or having difficulty getting tasks done, consider these factors.

### **Keep your dance organization growing**

Volunteers often become more involved, and take a larger role over time. Many board members of dance organizations got their start by stacking some chairs after a dance.

Strive to provide transparency about all that goes into putting on a dance or event. Help dancers to value all the jobs that have to be done to make it all work and be successful.