

THOUGHTS ON MOTIVATING VOLUNTEERS

Robert E. Cook is executive vice president of the Illinois Association of Realtors. He's responsible for matters affecting the fifty-seven real estate boards in Illinois and their 33,000 members.

Bob is also an active church layman and past chairman of the governor's Prayer Breakfast Committee in Illinois. He has also served as president of the Wheaton College Alumni Association.

Much of Bob's success with the Illinois Association of Realtors depends on work done by volunteers who serve on committees. Following are some lessons he has learned about working with volunteers.

There's a difference between manipulation and motivation. Although the best real estate agents don't manipulate people, some do. Manipulation means you're inducing people to act on insufficient evidence; you're getting them to buy mink coats they can't afford and eat chocolate mousse they don't need. On the other hand, motivation means you're suggesting people buy houses they can afford and that fit their needs, or, in the case of the pastors, make commitments to Sunday school programs that will help kids.

Match the volunteers you call with the job you have in mind. Don't necessarily look for the born leaders to take the big jobs. That's the easiest way to do it, and it will be effective for a short term. Born leaders are likely to be successful, corporate leaders who already work twelve to fifteen hours a day. Jesus called fishermen, laborers, common people. He spent time with them, he worked with them. When Jesus withdrew from earth, he left behind ordinary people—little people filled with the Holy Spirit—to establish the Christian church.

* * *

Many leaders fall into the trap of relying too heavily on the ten percent of the people that are initially

willing; most volunteer organizations can operate quite nicely with ten percent. However, two things make this a dubious practice. First, you run the risk of overworking the willing ten percent—you run them until they burn out. Second, you aren't developing the capabilities of the entire organization. Since spiritual development often accompanies involvement in the programs of the church, the patient training and encouragement of reluctant parishioners is basic to (a) the building of a cadre of capable leaders and (b) the improved quality of the spiritual life in the congregation.

* * *

Getting people to accept a volunteer position is easy; inspiring them to do the work is difficult. One way to accomplish this is to discover their real needs and then show them how execution of their task will help satisfy these needs.

Expect resistance. I can recall our initial attempts to introduce the Multiple Listing Service to our members. The most successful real estate offices complained that the MLS would equalize business, allowing weaker offices to feed on the strong offices' talents because strong offices get more listings than weak offices.

We tried to show our members that the MLS served the best interests of clients. It speeded up the sale of houses by having several agents work on a house instead of just one—even though agents might lose half a commission once in a while. Since so many more houses were moved in a shorter period of time they ended up making more money anyway.

Church leaders should show volunteers how hard work can lead to spiritual growth. The more time a parishioner spends on a church project the better he will feel about himself, his church, and his contribution to it. It's like prayer—the more time you spend

in daily prayer the more productive the rest of your time will be. If you can show how faithful, diligent work will deepen their spiritual lives, they'll be much more inclined to keep at it.

* * *

Many young pastors fall into the trap of trying to do things too quickly, and when they see things aren't going to happen as fast as they like, they push their people too hard. This eventually surfaces as a form of criticism. Criticism guarantees that volunteers will do even less. It's a downward spiral that starts with the first word: young pastor criticizes, worker does less, job doesn't get done, worker is embarrassed, worker vows never to take another church job again.

The proper way to deal with a volunteer who's fallen down on the job (and make no mistake, it's the hard way for the leader) is to pitch in and help him do the job right. This might mean extra work now, but it will pay dividends later. Because the volunteer wasn't stabbed in the back or shot down even when he deserved a kick in the pants, you've made a good friend of that worker, and he is likely to work harder on the next assignment.

* * *

Success is a great trainer. If you can create a feeling of accomplishment in volunteers, they'll be eager for more involvement. For example, in our business the biggest hurdle is closing the sale. The reason it's tough is that the time for it is usually right after the client has raised all kinds of objections to the house. As a trainer I try and stay very close to our sales people through their first few closings. I make sure they realize that clients often raise objections just for the sake of doing so, to show they're alert, aware. They are often the most ready to say yes as soon as they've raised their objections.

I've found Christian witnessing has similar dynamics. People need to raise questions, but that doesn't mean they won't say yes to the Lord. Let them talk; answer their questions if you can; and if you can't, admit it. But then in as confident and positive a tone as possible, ask for a commitment.

I stay with my people through a few successful closures so they get that feel of warmth that goes with a sale. It's very motivating.

* * *

Someone who is in the position of motivating volunteers has to be able to take pride in seeing other

people shine. In my business the president of our organization takes the credit for the work I do all year long. I've learned to accept that. In fact, I look on my year as being successful if the president is greeted with thundering applause at the final installation banquet when he takes his bow and everybody says he did a fantastic job. In a private sense, I feel that applause is for me.

I realize that in order to become good at motivating people I have to work at motivating myself. It's no different for Christian leaders. A good preacher knows he has to work at it; a good motivator has to develop motivational skills. A person who realizes that the reason people don't volunteer for tasks in the church is not only because they are sinners but also because most leaders are bad motivators has taken an important step toward resolving the "volunteer problem." When the church leadership gets better at motivating people, the volunteers will be there.

* * *

I think there are several very concrete steps church leaders can take in improving their motivational skills. The first is to identify the needs of the people we wish to motivate. In the real estate business we don't try to sell a \$100,000 house to someone who can only afford a \$65,000 house. Similarly, why try to motivate church volunteers to staff programs that no one needs? Find out what kind of programs the people in the church need and you'll find people to staff those programs.

Second, work very hard at trying to discover what people are really saying when they say they don't want to volunteer for a particular job. Are they objecting to the job? Are they objecting to the person who would be their leader in that job? Or are they objecting because they don't have time to do the job?

When someone looks at a house I'm trying to sell and says they don't want to buy it because the paint is peeling off the walls in the living room, I look very hard to find another reason behind that objection. They know, and I know, that it only costs about \$50 to repaint a room. Chances are that if they are objecting to the paint peeling off the walls, there's a larger objection that may be unconscious even to themselves. Usually if you let people talk enough and don't overreact to the initial objections, the true objection will eventually become clear.

When you discover what the real objection is, then you can do something to meet that objection. And that means you've recruited another volunteer.

—Robert E. Cook