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Why Youth Workers Sabotage Volunteers

Greg McKinnon

Every youth worker wants volunteer help, right? Not always.

We youth workers are always screaming for more help. Too often, we work eighty-hour weeks, sacrificing family, friends, and health just to do everything that has to be done. I remember a youth worker I met several years ago. He came up to me after a seminar I had led and began pouring his heart out about the lack of help in his youth ministry. He had to do everything with the help of a few college students who had come up through his program. I sympathized with him, and tried to offer him some suggestions for finding, recruiting, and training more leaders.

A year later, that youth worker took a job at a different church, one with a history of strong adult support for the youth ministry. Shortly after he began working there I began to understand why he hadn't received any help at his previous church. He himself was the reason! Although there were plenty of adults there to help, he didn't use them. He was trying to do everything himself. As a result, the program was severely hurt.

Do We Really Want Those Volunteers?

Why do many of us scream for volunteer help, but either fail to use, or worse, run off the helpers we do have? There are at least three major causes.

One major reason some of us fail to use volunteers is due to our own *personal insecurity*. If we're struggling with a poor self-image, we're going to run into problems working with other adults.

One way our insecurity can manifest itself is through "the more I do, the better I am" attitude. Many of us believe that our worth is tied up in our performance. We put in those eighty-hour work weeks to prove our worth to ourselves and to others.

If you know someone like this, you're aware that they let you know how

hard they're working. They're constantly telling you about their long hours and lack of help. One youth worker I knew who fit this mold was constantly informing people of the tremendous sacrifices he was having to make for the youth program. At the same time, the adults who worked with him were complaining about not being used, or being given menial jobs. This man even kept a record of every little thing he did. I mean *everything*. He recorded every phone call, every person he talked to. This served as a measuring rod for how he felt about himself—and as long as he was busy, he felt good about himself.

Another way our insecurity can bubble to the surface is in the fear that if we get other people to do "our" work, then people will think that we're not doing our job. When we see ourselves as hourly workers, rather than as members of a management team, it's hard to ask other people for help. We think we're imposing on people to ask them to volunteer their time. After all, we reason, many of the people we're asking to help already put in fifty or more hours per week with their own job.

But we are not paid to put in hours; we're paid to minister to young people. If we can minister to young people better by involving other people—and we can—then we are doing our job when we get other people involved.

Still another manifestation of our insecurity can be our tendency *not* to ask for volunteers for fear we'll be turned down. I remember my first job as a summer youth director. I'd sit there, staring at the phone, afraid to call anyone I hoped to recruit. I'd imagine everyone I called turning me down. Usually I'd put off calling till the last minute, and then I *would* get turned down because they already had plans.

Never Did Like Those Adults

A fourth symptom of our insecurity can be uneasiness with other adults. Many of us are threatened by adults, primarily because we can't control them like we can kids. When we're sure of ourself, we're not threatened by others who are sure of themselves. But when we're insecure, we're always threatened by those who are self-confident.

I remember when, early on in my ministry, my volunteer coordinator of youth ministries expressed dissatisfaction over his not being more involved. This fellow was a strong-willed person who wanted to be given more responsibility. He wanted either to be more involved or to get out of the job.

Up until that point in my ministry, I had always recruited volunteers who were willing to set back and let me run the program. But now things were different. I felt like letting him just quit—but I didn't. I swallowed my fears, sat down with him and talked about ways that he could get more involved. In time he became one of the greatest assets I've ever had in my ministry. But if I had given in to my own feelings of insecurity, I would have passed him by.

Many of us also struggle with trusting other adults. Why? Some of us had a

bad relationship with our parents; we see other adults as "the enemy." For example, we may find that we always side with the youth when there's a conflict between an adult and a young person.

I heard about one youth group where several of the junior high students asked one of the adult counselors if they could go to an activity that was reserved strictly for senior highs. In keeping with normal procedures, the adult told them they couldn't go. So the young people went straight to the youth worker and asked him the same question. He told them they could go. It's no wonder that this particular youth worker finds it hard to recruit leaders. Our volunteers have to know that we support them or they'll find something else to do—and quickly!

Others of us don't trust adults because we're still reliving our own youth. Youth ministry is a perfect slot to indulge in this particular fantasy. One youth worker I knew was a nerd as a teenager and was never part of the "in" crowd. After he graduated from seminary, he found himself working at a church where the youth group was made up of jocks, cheerleaders, and other members of the local "in" crowd. He was well accepted by the group, as well as by their friends at school. As a result, he began to re-live his high school days with the youth of the group.

At last this youth worker was popular like he had always wanted to be as a kid but never was. Yet one of the results of his new-found acceptance by the kids was a corresponding lack of trust in the adults of his congregation. His was a youth-centered world.

Still others of us distrust adults because we don't want to be under their scrutiny. We see the adults as the church's (and maybe the pastor's) spies.

No matter what our reasons for our discomfort with adults, such mistrust will devastate our efforts to recruit and keep adult volunteers. They need our support and encouragement, and we need to spend time with them, give them feedback on how they're doing, and encourage them. But if we're uncomfortable with adults, it's unlikely that we'll put much effort out to do any of these vital tasks.

I knew one youth worker who could not confront his adult workers openly, but was always talking behind their backs to other adults. It didn't take the members of his church long to find out what he was doing. Once they did, he couldn't get any volunteers.

Pride

The second reason many of us fail to use volunteers is due to our *pride*. Some of us, to put it plainly, have an ego problem. We want personal recognition. Because of this, we often run people off without consciously realizing it.

In order to get and keep good volunteers, we have to give them a certain amount of recognition. But if we are caught up in an effort to gain

recognition for ourselves, we won't give our volunteers the recognition they need. We can even go so far as to take credit for something someone else did. Use of such tactics certainly won't inspire adults to stand in line to volunteer for our youth ministry.

Big egos also keep us from recruiting great workers. By "great" I mean people who are successful at what they do. We must have our own ego under control before we'll recruit people who will inevitably draw favorable attention to themselves. Many of us are threatened by someone who the kids really like.

Pride can also cause us to buy into the myth that no one can do youth ministry as well as we can. We're afraid to give volunteers responsibility for fear that they won't perform up to par. yet in order to keep adults, especially competent ones, we have to give them opportunities to move into positions of increased responsibility. There may be many things that we can do better than volunteers, because we've been doing them longer. But if we'll swallow our pride and step aside, the benefits to our volunteers, and in time to our program, will far outweigh the wincing we may do at the beginning.

Still another result of pride is the tendency to reserve all decision-making to ourselves. Yet the complaint heard most often from volunteers is that they're not consulted about decisions which affect them. In his book *Megatrends*, John Naisbitt pointed out the trend in management away from hierarchy and toward networking. Although lay people may not have been trained in youth ministry, they're not ignorant. They have a tremendous amount of wisdom and knowledge to contribute to the decision-making process.

Spiritual fat-headedness is probably one of the worst forms of pride. When we get the idea that we're more "spiritual" than most of the adults in our church, we develop a protectionist attitude. We want to "protect" our youth from our less spiritual volunteers. Nothing turns adults off, and turns them against us, more quickly than being made to feel that they're not as "spiritual" as someone half their age.

Nearsightedness

The final reason why many of us either do not use or lose our volunteers is our *nearsightedness*. So many of us just grind out what is needed day by day, week by week, with no goal or direction for the future. This short-term approach to ministry makes it difficult for us to grasp the benefits of involving more leaders.

A music minister was recently sharing with me how busy he was with hand bells, instrumental groups, choirs for all ages, ensembles, voice lessons and much more. When he finished I looked at him and said, "You're doing everything you'll ever do in life." I explained to him that he would never have any more hours in a day, and since his days were already packed, he would not be able to do anything else unless he began to give some things away to other people. In time he did, and his ministry expanded.

Yet many of us say we don't have time to devote to recruiting and training workers. One youth worker told me she hated it when leaders called her all the time with petty questions. Another youth leader said he felt it was just easier to do it himself rather than try to get other people involved. And it probably is easier in the short term—but not in the long run.

If we know the advantages of involving adults, we'll get started in the process right away. If we don't, it can become difficult to get started later, because by the time we realize that we need more help, we're usually burnt out, and the few leaders that we'll have left will be overworked and undersupported.

And when other potential leaders see what has happened to the current volunteers, they won't want to get anywhere near the youth ministry.

Time for a Change

So what can we do if we discover that we're a volunteer destroyer? First, take the Are You A "Volunteer Destroyer"? test. If we conclude that we're a volunteer destroyer, admit the problem. Are we insecure, egotistic, or simply nearsighted? Whatever the reason, confess it. Then we can begin to develop some strategies for change.

If we're insecure, admit it to God. Ask Him to help us overcome our insecurity. Next, we should share our insecurities with our church leaders and ask them to help us and pray for us. James 5:16 tells us to admit our faults to one another and pray for each other so that we can be healed.

If our insecurity makes us reluctant to ask for help because we're afraid of being turned down, I can recommend two steps I've taken to overcome the problem. First, I have potential volunteers fill out a Interest Finder survey where they can indicate the things they'd like to do. When I call someone on that list and ask them to teach, go on a trip, or sponsor the youth newspaper, I already know they're interested.

My second step has been to recruit other people to do the calling. Helping to plan and organize youth events by calling other adults to bring food, decorate, chaperone, drive, or whatever is one of the items people can volunteer for on the interest survey. Everyone who checks this is put on a committee that is responsible for recruiting all of our adult help.

If we discover that we're having a problem with pride, then we also need to admit it to God and ask for forgiveness and strength to overcome it. If we can remember times that we have actually taken credit for something others did, we need to go to them and ask for their forgiveness. We also need to restructure our planning and administrative methodology to get our leaders more directly involved in decision-making and major responsibilities.

Finally, if we realize that we're approaching youth ministry with a short-term vision (or no vision at all), we need to ask how what we're doing now will affect our youth ministry 3 years, 5 years, or 10 years from now.

I'd also recommend three guidelines which may seem counterproductive in the short term, yet pay important dividends in the long run. First, I never twist people's arms to get them to volunteer to help with youth. I usually find myself compromising my standards for leaders when I do this. I'll hear myself telling potential volunteers everything they *won't* have to do rather than what I really expect of them! I've learned that I would much rather go without a leader for awhile than coerce someone to take a job.

Second, I always tell my leaders that they can get out at any time. If they tell me they'd like to give up their job, I let them give it up within two weeks. In the short term this presents difficulties, but in the long run, it's much easier to recruit adults when they know that they're not stuck, whether they like it or not, once they sign on the dotted line.

Third, I start with fewer programs initially in order to have more time to train leaders. I've found that in the long run I can actually have more programs than I would have had otherwise.

Destroyer or Developer

We can't keep screaming for help if we're not willing to get more adults involved and do the things necessary to keep them involved. But if we're volunteer destroyers, don't despair. With some honest self-insight and a little hard work, we can become volunteer developers.

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Are You A "Volunteer Destroyer"?**Take this test and find out.**

1. How often do you go behind people and check up on them?
 All the time—10 points
 Most of the time—7 points
 Some of the time—3 points
 Never—0 points
2. Do you give priority to things that make you look good?
 Yes—10 points
 No—0 points
3. Do you tell people how many hours you've had to work?
 Yes—10 points
 No—0 points
4. Do you ever say, "I'll just do it myself; it will be easier"?
 Yes—10 points
 No—0 points
5. Do you sometimes feel threatened by adults?
 Yes—10 points
 No—0 points
6. Are you afraid to ask adults for help because you feel you're imposing on them?
 Yes—10 points
 No—0 points
7. Do you look forward to the praise you'll get for doing a good job?
 All the time—10 points
 Most of the time—7 points
 Some of the time—3 points
 Not at all—0 points
8. Are you uncomfortable around adults?
 Most of the time—10 points
 Some of the time—5 points
 Very seldom—0 points
9. When you give someone something to do, do you:
 Tell them in detail how to do it?—10 pts.
 Give them specific guidelines?—5 pts.
 Give them considerable freedom?—0 pts.
10. How many adults have you recruited in the last year?
 0—10 points
 1-2—7 points
 3-5—3 points

___6 or more—0 points

Scoring

0-29 points—You have more help than you can use.

30-49 points—You have most of the help you need.

50-69 points—You're doing a lot of pleading for help.

70-100 points—You're doing it all by yourself.