



Leading Volunteer Projects

By [Jeffrey Bennett](#) | Submitted On December 16, 2006

So, your church has identified a volunteer opportunity and you have prayerfully considered. After all, you have a lot of experience with the type of project; it fits your skills, talents, abilities and spiritual gifts. Though it may be a stretch, you are sure that you are the right person for the job. You approach the church leadership and offer your skills. You are so convincing and enthusiastic, that they select you to head the project.

Heading the project? Didn't you volunteer just to assist in some way? What do you know about leading anything? Suddenly you lose passion, find yourself doubting the very skills, abilities and gifts that gave you confidence enough to volunteer. This is obviously new territory and leading a group of volunteers is way different than leading a team at work. This is definitely going to test your abilities. Well, where do we begin?

People volunteer for many reasons. They may have skills and love to contribute or they may enjoy being in the mix. Perhaps they step up because nobody else is volunteering. You may be suddenly in charge and maybe by yourself because of the last reason...nobody came. Rick Warren wrote in the Purpose Driven Life that the reason many churches fail is because the workers aren't working.

Here's another fact, 90% of businesses fail within the first five years. You think that's amazing, 90% of those businesses fail after the next five years. That's sobering, and it has a lot to do with vital project management skills many leaders lack. These are basic skills that are transferable under any situation. If churches can't successfully complete projects, they'll never survive.

The first crucial step in good project management is to adequately identify the need and communicate it. This is your opportunity to create a vision that is in harmony with the direction your organization is headed. Ask for direction and provide feedback from the leadership or committee who assigned the job. This vision is critical to understand up front. If you can't communicate it back in a relatively simple paragraph, then you and the leadership are not on the same sheet of music. Consequently, you will not be able to adequately motivate those who will work on your team.

Vision is critical. Unlike at the office you may not have an official position, wear a uniform or be able to command a performance with a ready made team. Dr. John Maxwell, successful pastor, author and motivational speaker said that leading a group of volunteers is the most challenging of leadership situations. You don't pay them, they don't have to work for you, and you don't have authority. Though you do not provide these attributes in traditional fashion, you can supply them as you create vision and communicate. More on that later.

Once you have a grasp on the project and have created a great vision, the next step is to recruit the team. Having the right people in place will set you up for success early. Think about it, you took on the job because you knew you could do it and you had some passion for it. Why would you want anyone else on your team except those with the same desire? This doesn't mean to turn all the volunteers down. All the different members of the body can contribute somehow. This just means focus your efforts on actively recruiting quality and qualified leaders. These you know you can count on to see their part through.

With your clear vision, break down the project into bite size parts, or something that you can manage in sub groups. For example, Mount Zion Baptist Church in Madison, Alabama is celebrating her 150th Anniversary. They wanted to have a big celebration to mark this significant milestone. The one heading the project communicated her clear vision and divided the complex project into many different sub committees who reported to her. The subcommittees met needs such as publicity, creating a portable museum, writing a book, creating events for children, cleaning the campus, and about ten others. She had the right people in place.

How do you recruit capable people? Start by identifying those who are skilled and capable of leading the subtasks. They are reliable and have influence in their inner-circles. Once identified, let them know that you truly admire their skills in the areas that you need and think that they are the people to lead. You may have to approach them several times to get a commitment. Then use them to recruit their own crew. See what you have just done? You recruited a leader who is capable of rounding up the people he or she will work with.

Follow this process until you have recruited enough leaders to handle all the major portions of your projects. Offer encouragement and continue share your vision with the leaders that you have recruited. Keep the team focused.

Afterward, gather your team together. At this crucial meeting, develop a reverse time line. This time line begins on the absolute last date that you need to be finished with the project and ends with your next meeting. This will give structure and focus for future meetings. Agree to make the meetings count by only discussing progress and or shortfalls necessary to work out to finish the project on time.

Remember, these meetings focus only on the project. You must be the one to enforce direction and discipline. Keep in mind that the completion date that you agreed on is at least a few weeks before the date required. For example, if your church cleanup day is to be completed by the first day of fall Sunday school session on September 15th, make sure you have a walk through or inspection of the area by September 7th. This allows a week to work out any contracting issues for repairs to tables, fix the playground equipment or order supplies that you may have identified as a result of the clean up.

Invite the pastor or staff members assigning the project to the first meeting. Allow them to open with prayer, share their vision and give inspiring words. This will set a positive tone and give credibility. Again, you have nothing to offer the volunteers but motivation and desire for success. So use everything you can to make the project equally valuable and exciting to every member.

As mentioned earlier, keep every meeting focused on the big picture. It's important that everyone involved knows what success looks like and how they will benefit. As project leader, encourage the subgroup task leaders to outline their plan in relation to the project time line. Set them up for success by demonstrating how they should set up their task meetings. Their meetings are where they work the kinks out.

Again, work out the shortfalls at each meeting. Whether at task level or at the project level, resolve issues or set a separate date to work them out. Nothing deflates motivation faster than making a plan and not following up on the progress. Suppose in the meeting, the publicity committee discloses they have met a probable road block trying to get the church to budget \$300 for flyers. To resolve the issue, you agree to speak with the deacons or budget committee. Suddenly it's a month later and you haven't made a move, toward resolution. You did not follow up and have nothing to report to the committee. This leads to disappointment as well as setting the standard that allows everyone a free ride from accountability. Always follow through with plans and solutions.

Of course, you are going to successfully meet shortfalls with a good plan that can be followed up with frequency. As a result, you provide vital feedback to the church. You are sincere about success as well as shortfalls. You also make sure the report goes to the rest of the congregation so that they will feel "in the loop". The more people you get emotionally involved, the better support you get for the project.

Leading volunteers is a rewarding experience and definitely a challenge to anyone's leadership abilities. Many people are counting on you, even though they are not traditionally accountable to you. However, there is no great mystery to successfully leading complex projects at any level. Start with the stated vision, picture of success, resolution management, follow-up and accountability, and you can motivate a committed team to accomplish great things.

Jeffrey W. Bennett is the Founder and director of LayMentor Ministries. This ministry is dedicated to training church and other volunteer leaders to be more effective. Jeff speaks and writes on similar concepts taught in most MBA courses and makes it easy to adapt to all leadership levels. The volunteer drives our churches and communities and the impact can be amazing. He is also the author of the Missionary/Adventure novel Under the Lontar Palm available on line at <http://www.jeffreywbennett.com> or in major and online bookstores.

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