

# Lessons Learned From Volunteerism

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## Twenty-Two Years of Volunteer Experience

I have been a volunteer for 22 years. It's a great experience and during all this time, I have experienced as well as learned several lessons and things. One of the most important things is that the volunteer ought to be committed to their organization in a specific way that the company can depend on them. Volunteers should use a nonjudgmental approach so that they can learn and gain valuable and worthwhile experience. They must know their duties, responsibilities, and rights so that they will have choices and feel comfortable rejecting an offer or saying no to an offer. They must be the one who always looks for opportunities that strengthen their community so that they can create a more cohesive, safer and stronger society.

## Meaning and Social Value of Volunteerism

Volunteering is the commitment of time and energy for the benefit and welfare of society and the community, the environment, or people who are living without their families. It is an ambition that is undertaken freely and by choice without the concern of financial gain. It was a warm September day back in 2011, and I had nothing specific to do, so I decided to become a volunteer to experience a different way and approach life and also to do worthwhile in my spare time. I decided to sign up with the Salvation Army in Brooklyn, New York City, in the United States of America. Everything was going well there, but later on, I decided to volunteer at the men's shelter in The Canaries. Soon after that, with the same intention, I signed with the women's auxiliary committee. After that finally, I decided to volunteer at the animal shelter in my community.

## A Commitment Tested at a Men's Shelter

It was a cold day in the winter of 2012; I was scheduled to be at the men's shelter for the whole evening to assist in serving and cleaning after meal time. The winter was bitterly cold and there was strong wind rattling at my window pane. The fireplace was unable to decrease the coldness of the wind in the living room. At that time, my bed was appealing to me, but that could not happen. I was imagining the large number of men at that time who were coming to the animal shelter as the demand was too great. A huge number of abandoned animals were arriving that night at the shelter. The number of volunteers was short, so the Salvation Army started calling for extra volunteers. There had been a fire in a three-story building in Bayside, but it was not enough for all the people. Several people were out in the cold and they had no place to stay which could save them from that cold winter. The auxiliary committee was having its annual fund-raising event for the community project,

so the volunteers needed to be high everywhere.

## Responsibility to Organizations in Need

I knew that these organizations were depending on me to be there in their time of need. They had called earlier in the day to find out my availability, and I did confirm that I would be there. I thought I would give each organization 2 hours. The night was bitterly cold, and this cold made me think that I was not able to go there. Then I decided to inform the organizations that I would not be able to come, but instead of doing that I kept putting it off. Later on, the cold increased, and the night got darker, so I finally decided not to go as it was too late, and I went to bed. I made a mistake in that I put my phone on silent so that nobody could disturb me. In the morning, I realized my mistake and was so ashamed of my actions. These organizations were depending on me to be committed to the cause and be there if I said I would or be responsible enough to inform them if my plans changed.

## Consequences of Failing to Honor a Commitment

I created a situation in which nobody could be able to trust me and how could these organizations trust me in the future? They could never believe my words and my commitments. I was beginning to feel nauseated over the whole situation because I really liked to volunteer at these different organizations. I started to question myself about my actions. Volunteering means just what it said and needs strong commitment. If I was not obliged to volunteer I could have canceled my shift at any time. Volunteering gave me a sense of pride and fulfillment of knowing that I was giving back something good to my community. What had happened to the way I used to feel going to these different organizations? I felt so alone and ashamed for many days, even though I was not able to get out of my house. I was tormented and could not find any peace within me. I started thinking that maybe I should not go back, but suddenly, my phone rang, and it was one of the organizations on the phone. They called me to enquire if I was alright or not. I was so ashamed after that and felt guiltier about my actions. I decided to tell them the truth, and I confessed to what I had done. She listened to me carefully and after my confession, she told me that I was welcome to come to the organization whenever I was available for volunteering. I felt much better, but at the same time, I felt horrible to think that they thought about me when I did not even think about them.

## Reliability and Accountability in Volunteer Work

I realized that volunteers must be committed to the organizations so that the agencies can trust them and depend on them. As a volunteer, a person is expected to be reliable, committed to the program, carry out the specified job, avoid over-extending oneself and do meaningful and satisfying work. Volunteer work is a great effort to do something good for the people and gain no return; in short, it is a selfless good deed. It is a process in which people help and support needy people. It includes

helping out disabled children, supporting people with disabilities or homeless people, collecting money for a good cause or reducing the rate of poverty, teaching someone without taking fees, spreading awareness about a particular issue in society, offering something good to the needy people, help and support the needy people. It is a selfless act without any selfish concern and it is designed in a way to encourage the good causes for the help and welfare of the society.

## Volunteerism as a Global Social Practice

It is not just related to a particular society or cause, but it includes the whole world. Anyone could take part in it and make it more valuable. People around the world do volunteer work just to make a difference in their society, and all people belong to diverse regions and cultures. Volunteer work provides happiness and satisfaction to the people who join it to gain satisfaction. It gives a new direction and new meaning to life. Volunteering is a brilliant and amazing effort that always makes a person happy. Research and studies recommend that if a person works to make others happy will get more pleasure and satisfaction.

## Service to Elderly People

It was the Christmas winter of 2011; I volunteered at the center, which was created for elderly people. Later on, I volunteered at the same place every year for the past five years, and I worked each time for the elderly people. Christmas is a special time of the year when everyone would like to be home with family and friends. But I felt more special to know that I was making a difference in these individual lives, and it made me truly committed and blessed. Christmas can be one of the happiest times of the year for the ones who have their family and friends, but at the same time, it can be one of the saddest times if someone is all alone and does not have any family or friends. For example, children are gone away, the death of a husband or wife, depressing feelings, and having no one to celebrate this day. When I looked at the joy and smiley faces of the elderly people at my center, I felt more committed and happier about my cause. It does not matter that what is going on around me, I knew I will always be there for this people on this special time of the year. I know it is one of the most worthwhile causes that offer hope to these individuals. They felt pleased by knowing that someone cared enough to be there on Christmas day for them. Available for people like elderly people gives me satisfaction and pleasure, and it provides me the happiness that I am serving my community. Even working for people or supporting them in small tasks makes life wonderful and soothing because it could create a huge difference in people's lives.

## Creativity Motivation and Personal Development

Volunteering also provides the capability of creativity, motivation, and vision to a person that will help him to gain success in his personal and professional life. It not only provides help and support to

people but also makes a volunteer more capable and efficient. Volunteering motivates people and allows them to enhance their own learning abilities and skills. A person could achieve great success and accomplishment in life just because he is helping and supporting needy people without hoping for anything in return. It is important to mention here that volunteers never work for money or any other benefit, the only cause of their effort is to help the needy people and make their lives easier. It has positive impacts on the giver (who is a volunteer) and receiver (who is a needy person) as well.

## Emergency Service During a Snowstorm

I remember another winter time of the year 2012 when there was a snowstorm arriving. A group of nurses was asked to sleep over in order to cover the units because most of the nurses would not be able to sleep during the tour of their duty. We took turns sleeping and caring for the patients not only for that night but for the entire week. We were well supported by the supervisors and our unit manager. The management provided us with free meals for the entire week and a place to take a bath and sleep. It was a very enjoyable experience for me, working with my co-workers for one week. I really got to know them a whole lot better. There were no arguments about the assignments on this tour. In the past, there was always someone who was not satisfied, but this time, it was the total togetherness of the whole group. Everyone helped each other, and the atmosphere was so relaxed. Every morning, there was new energy and a passion for caring for our patients. We were committed to our organization and enjoyed giving our time and energy to them.

## Learning a Non-Judgmental Approach

Volunteers should have a non-judgmental approach so that they can learn and gain priceless experience. I want to mention another experience of my work here. Again, in the winter of 2012, I was volunteering at the men's shelter in Brooklyn. I was disgusted to see the same three healthy looking males that came into the shelter every evening for a warm cooked meal. I thought to myself, why are they not working? If they do not want to volunteer, they should not be here. This is a place for the homeless and the underserved people not for the ones who are lazy and just want to enjoy a meal. In the start, I refused to serve them by walking away every time they were next in line, and when I had no choice, I gave them a very small portion and when they requested more, I would pretend I did not hear them. My behavior was totally out of control at one point when one volunteer asked if I knew them personally and what was the reason for my action. I was horrified, and I did not know that my actions were that noticeable. I thought about it for a second and I felt good by thinking that they have learned their lesson, so they would not come back because of the treatment that they have received. That night, I went home feeling mission accomplished. ("Trusted guide to mental", n.d.)

## Reflection on Personal Bias

The next day, I started judging my behavior, and I asked myself why I felt that way. I did not know the situation of these men and never tried to find out. Instead, I was ready to pass judgment just by looking at these individuals because they wanted to eat the meals. The more I thought about my actions, the more miserable I felt that I should know about them before judging them. What if it was my own family and friends? Would I like someone to treat them in this manner? I got the answer quickly and that was no. It might be possible that they had lost their jobs, or an eviction, or they got fired from the work. Judging people does not require intense self-examination or compassion so that day I realized that I lacked both of them. I felt miserable, and my behavior was despicable and unnecessary. For a long time, I was not able to forgive myself. Judging mainly serves to create barriers between the people and these barriers only prevent a person from growing and improving with time.

## Open-Minded and Respectful Service

Volunteers should have a non-judgmental approach so that they can learn and gain valuable experience. In order to be a valuable volunteer in the best possible way, a person should have an open mind, and it does not matter what the situation is. When people open their minds, they can learn something new, and it might be possible that it is something that they can apply to their own lives. People do not know why an individual goes to the shelter, why they are homeless, why they live in cars or under bridges and in the subway. Circumstances happen to the best of people, and volunteers have no idea when it will be their turn. Judging or condemning another person is easy but it could be harmful to everyone. Volunteers must learn to see and accept people of every behavior and nature.

When volunteers attempt to judge someone, they should ask themselves if it is necessary. Is it kind? Or is it true? This will help them to set the tone for their actions. Whether volunteers like it or not, they all have biases and judgments, but it is possible to overcome that bias with a lot of work and self-reflection. When people are open to alternative points of view of the people, they need to try to be more positive. It's a tough habit to break, but if a person makes a conscious effort, it can be done. The world would be a much better place if people could all be conscious of their actions. The volunteers should choose to see the world through a filter of love instead of judging harshly. Let volunteers look upon their fellow human beings with compassion and love. The volunteers never really know about other people's life stories until they have walked in their shoes. Volunteers should have a non-judgmental approach so that they can learn and gain valuable experiences for their valuable cause. ("Points of light", n.d.)

## Respect and Dignity in a Methadone Clinic

I also had the opportunity to utilize a non-judgmental approach when I volunteered at the methadone clinic in the spring of 2012. I work there as a volunteer. I treated clients with respect and dignity, and I called them by their names and titles as they requested. I respected their confidence and honor. I gave my best performance when serving the clients who visited for their medication. I did not question, and I did not judge anyone. All I knew was that they had their reasons to be there and that was none of my business. I did my job with a smile and tried to help them. I just wanted to perform my best for them, and I gave them my full attention whenever they needed it. ("Trusted guide to mental", n.d.)

## Non-Judgmental Care for Sickle Cell Patients

It was December 2012 when I was working at a community clinic in Brooklyn. I tried to be non-judgmental to a group of sickle cell patients. This particular group of patients frequented the clinic on a monthly basis. After admission, they all came together on the steps of the hospital, drank coffee, and smoked all day. In the night, they came in and complained of excruciating pain, requesting pain medication every three hours, and sometimes they asked for medication before the three hours. I realized their behavior, and I prioritized my workload so I could be available whenever they called for their pain medication. I did not let their behavior cloud my actions toward these sickle cell patients. I believe them when they say to me that they are having pain. I never thought that this could be wrong because their actions were portrayed differently. Being in pain is one of the most horrible feelings in the life of a human being, and knowing that there is someone whom they can depend on whenever they need their medication will give them some type of comfort. ("Trusted guide to mental", n.d.)

## Volunteer Rights Duties and Personal Boundaries

Volunteers must know their duties, responsibilities, and rights so that they will have choices and feel comfortable rejecting an offer or saying no to an offer. It was a warm September day in 1990 when I had signed up to volunteer work for too many different organizations. I was unable to keep the appointments, so I put my phone on silent mode and went shopping. I was a new volunteer at that time, and I was excited about volunteering at these different organizations because they all have particular activities. I really enjoyed doing the volunteer work, and when any organization called, I was unable to say no to them. Even though I knew that the other agencies might call and ask for that same time slot. But for me to say "no" is one of the hardest things to do. The little word "no" without guilt is something that I was not able to do just because I thought that it could hurt someone's feelings. I would rather say yes, even though I knew I would not be able to keep my word. Finally, I realized that I could not be in three or two places at the same time and instead of saying "no," I decided to turn my phone off and go shopping.

## Guilt and the Difficulty of Saying No

Later on, I felt guilty about my actions. A simple “no” would have been good enough; instead, I crumpled under the pressure of too many invitations just because of the fear of hurting someone’s feelings. However, at that particular time, I did not think rationally. Now, I was left to deal with all my anxieties and fears for not doing the right thing at that time. I kept wondering will I would ever get this opportunity again so that I could get it right. Many different thoughts were going through my head. All I wanted to do was to volunteer, and now it is causing me so much stress and anxiety. Was it worth it, I wondered? Volunteers must know their duties, responsibilities, and rights so that they will have choices and feel comfortable rejecting an offer or saying no to an offer.

## Setting Healthy Limits in Volunteer Work

Sometimes, the tiny little word “no” is the most difficult word to say. No matter how hard people try to be strong-willed, volunteers will likely find themselves stumbling over those two letters because they cannot say no. Saying no comfortably and without guilt requires a person to really think about what he stands for, and he needs to develop good boundaries. He should have an idea of what one is comfortable with and know ahead of time so that the decisions to say “no” are easier and one is not tempted to cave in. A person should always remember that saying no allows others the opportunity to say yes. A person most likely is not the only one who is being asked to volunteer time. There may be someone else better suited to the position at hand. Never say yes on the spot, and take time for it. If volunteers are asked to do something and they are feeling the pressure to say yes without thinking, they should step back for a second and not commit right away. Tell the person asking that you need to think about it. If they cannot wait for the decision, learn to eliminate them as unwanted obligations from one’s life. In order to break the habit of giving an automatic yes response to requests from others, a person needs to delay the answer in order to think through the options carefully. The old adage to think before one speaks is important here. A person can learn to insert time between an invitation, demand, or request, and the sense of control will immediately increase. A person should also bear in mind that saying no to the request is not like saying no to a person.

## Applying Boundaries at a Hospital Health Fair

It was the summer of 2016 when I experienced saying no without feeling guilty. It was my hospital’s annual health fair, which was held on the third Saturday of August. It was late in the afternoon when my supervisor telephoned to request my help for the fair. Knowing my weakness in saying yes when it should have been no, I decided to wait for a while before returning the call. I really hated to miss an opportunity, and this was an opportunity to serve my community, but I was not really able to serve. My thoughts were, “Will she call me in the future”? I wondered. I was pacing the floor, trying to find the courage to say no. Finally, I came to realize if I did say yes, then I was going to be frustrated with

myself and angry with my supervisor even though I could have just said, “No, the more I thought about the decision that had to be made, the more stressed I became. Then I had that moment, and I asked myself what my priorities were and focused on what I wanted more. I felt justified in saying no. I then returned the call to my supervisor and said no, I cannot volunteer for the fair, and to my surprise, I felt no guilt.

## Applying Boundaries in Personal Relationships

I also have the experience of feeling comfortable saying no in my personal life. It was April 2016 when my friend Daphne was staying with me for a month. Every day I had to take her to the subway station which is roughly a ten-minute walk from my house. At first, it was not a problem and I took her in the car every day. But when I came back to the house there were no parking spots available. Most of the time, I had to sit in my car and wait until the road-cleaning rule was lifted. This was taking a toll on me due to the fact that I worked at night. I needed to sleep, and not getting enough sleep had made me irritable. Being too nice was becoming a problem for me. After missing my sleep for a long period, I got the courage to say “no, I cannot do this anymore”. Saying no to my friend was much easier than I thought. I guess when a person puts their priorities in order, no one seems insignificant, least of all oneself. Volunteers ought to look for opportunities that strengthen the community so that they can build a more cohesive, safer, and stronger community.

## Community Renovation and Collective Responsibility

It was the winter of 1990 when the women’s movement decided to work with the community center. The purpose was to renovate the committee hall, but no one showed up to help with the renovation. This was supposed to be the highlight of the community, and everyone was excited about this project. The center was in a deplorable condition, and this was the place where all the community children congregated for their evening project. This project would give the children a sense of pride to be associated with a center that was well cared for. All the children in the community knew about the project, so on that particular day, they started to gather around to watch the transformation of the old building. They waited and waited, and when nothing seemed to be happening, they all felt hurt and disappointed. The news quickly spread that there was no leadership and that no one cared about the event. The burden was on my shoulders to make amends to the neighbor children because I was the one supervising the project. This did not go well with the women’s movement. I was the one in charge, so what went wrong? Everyone wanted to know. I usually pride myself on getting things done, but this time everything went horribly wrong.

## Reflection on Letting the Community Down

As I thought about the situation, I was so disappointed in myself. This was a project that was very dear to my heart. It was designed for the children in my neighborhood, and I had let them down. My phone was ringing nonstop, and everyone wanted to know what had happened. But this only added to my frustration. There were several things that I could have done to prevent this from happening, and I could have had the names and numbers of all the volunteers to keep them informed of where we stood on the project, what was expected of them and what the plans were. I should have had a meeting to discuss the details of how we were going to proceed with this project and what to do if it rained so that everyone involved would know their task beforehand. I could have arranged for food to be brought in. I should have been more detailed. I came to the conclusion that not much planning was put into this project, so the people were not certain what time to be there or if the project would still go on if it rained. There was so much uncertainty that no one bothered to show. I was crushed. I usually pride myself in planning and organizing, but this time, no planning was put into this project. I felt awful and had no choice but to remove myself from the committee and hand the project back to the committee. This was one of the darkest days of my life.

## Choosing Opportunities That Strengthen Communities

Volunteers should look for opportunities that strengthen the community. Volunteering provides a chance to perform the tasks with the best skills and expertise. It enhances and increases the capabilities and abilities of a person. It teaches about teamwork, leadership abilities and capabilities, problem-solving skills and administers tasks. Learning new skills can be beneficial to the individual and increase their capabilities. The impacts of volunteering are always positive and worthwhile. It provides the opportunity to make a society or community a better place to live in.

Volunteering gives the best experiences to the people who join it to make society a better place. It not only provides satisfaction and pleasure of good cause, but it also helps an individual to learn about various skills and trainings. It develops and improves positive attitude in the people. Volunteers ought to look for opportunities that strengthen the community.

## Rebuilding a School Through Volunteer Action

It was in the fall of 2012 when I experienced the joy of volunteering for my community and society. The project was rebuilding a basic school for the children in my district, and it was a dream come true for me. I was very excited because this was my childhood basic school. It was in desperate need of repair, but the community could not afford the materials, let alone the manpower, to do the job. I had been going home to Jamaica for a number of years, and it had always been in the back of my mind to

do something for my community that would make a difference in everyone's lives. Finally, I decided to reach out to my past friends and associates on Facebook page about my intention. I invited everyone to join me in rebuilding this basic school for the community.

## Fundraising and Community Mobilization

It was a blessing, and the news spread like wildfire. In one meeting, we raised more than enough money for the materials. I informed the school principal of my desire to rebuild the basic school and asked for volunteers from the community. The outpouring of volunteers was enormous. They worked to form the rising of the sun to the setting of the same, and in two days, we had a brand new basic school. Words were inadequate to express their joy. I was humbled to see the children standing around laughing and playing and being so excited to see their new school taking shape. After we completed the project and we handed the keys over to the leaders of the community, this was one of the most joyous occasions of my life, and I will never forget it. From that day, volunteering in my community has become a household word. That was how things got done, especially for the aged and the widows in the community. Volunteers ought to look for opportunities that strengthen the community.

## Applying Volunteer Lessons in the Workplace

I also had the opportunity to apply what I have learned at my workplace. Volunteering is nature's way of socialization and getting to know one's surroundings, meeting new people and finding useful contacts. It was another snowstorm in December 2012 when thirty inches of snow was expected. All the hospitals in my community were in dire need of nurses and any other medical personnel they could get. This was an opportunity for me to volunteer for my community, and I seized the moment. I immediately call my supervisor I told her I would be happy to come in for no matter how long the storm lasted. She was overjoyed and asked if I could get some of my friends to volunteer, too. I called my friends, and we all decided to volunteer for the hospital. Service to others has always been important to me. I grew up with an understanding of the value of serving others and the positive impact it can have on the lives we touch. I have always been happiest when I have attended to another's needs ahead of my own. I packed my bag, said goodbye to my family, and went off to the community hospital to serve and wait out the storm. That night was very special. Everyone seems to be in a good mood, working harmoniously together. My supervisor and administrator were pleased to have us and brought us coffee and donuts. I was very happy to volunteer to help at my workplace.

## Conclusion on the Lessons of Volunteerism

In conclusion, being a volunteer has taught me many things. I have learned volunteers ought to be committed to the organization so that the agency can depend on them. Volunteers ought to use a

non-judgmental approach so that they can learn and gain valuable experience. The volunteer should know their rights and responsibilities so that they will have choices and feel comfortable saying no. Volunteers ought to look for opportunities that strengthen the community so that they can build a more cohesive, safer, stronger community. Volunteers make significant contributions to the global economy, thereby enhancing the social connections between different sectors. Volunteering encourages people to be more active in civic engagement and concerns about citizenship.

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