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10 Tips to Becoming a World-Class Volunteer

By Scott Pontier, Lead Consultant, Ministry Architects

When it comes to volunteering in ministry, there is a universal truth for everyone who signs up: everyone wants to know how to win. No one wants to volunteer in ministry and do a poor job, or just keep a seat warm. If you're volunteering in children's or student ministry, you probably hope to make a difference in some way.

It's not always easy to know you're doing that, though. In my experience, it's easy for volunteers to drift away from impact and even lose sight of the unique role they play in achieving the vision. It's not always the fault of the volunteer or the team leader, volunteer drift" just happens, like gravity.

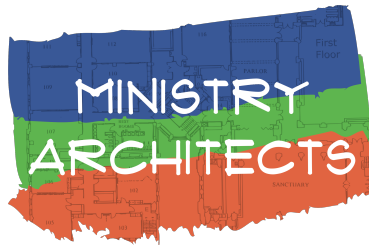
In fact, the Bible gives us a great example of this in Nehemiah. Nehemiah had recruited help to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and they did so in 60 days despite opposition from the outside. However, half-way through the project, just a single month in, the people who had volunteered for the job started to lose sight of the goal and needed to be re-oriented to the task at hand.

We'll go ahead and remind you that the foundation for volunteering in ministry always begins with a commitment to grow in your faith and cultivate a deepening spiritual life. If you're not committing to that basic premise, the following tips will never take root. But after securing your footing, these tips will help you stay locked on your target and know when you're winning.

- 1. Remember Your Target:** It's easy to fall into thinking that our role as volunteers exists to make us feel good, to give us time serving with other people we love, or even to accomplish some specific task. However, there's an audience out there that we can't forget – kids. Believe it or not, sometimes we can forget that they are our reason for doing this. You'll know you're winning as a volunteer if you can make sure every experience helps you focus on the life of the children or students you are serving. Did you make a genuine connection? Were you able to be encouraging? Were you able to speak positively with a kid? Asking these questions every time you volunteer will make you a great volunteer!
- 2. Remember You Are Not Alone:** Volunteering is multi-faceted. Though we are there serving kids and making a difference, we have a level of responsibility to the team we work with too. Being a great volunteer means helping to develop the kind of culture where the team loves to be together, loves to serve together and just plain loves each other. Nothing will

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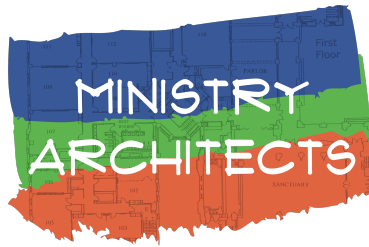
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make your team leader happier than you taking the time to invest in the lives of your teammates, especially outside of regular meetings.

3. **Remember You Are Not In Charge:** At the end of the day, all volunteers are following someone, whether it's a team leader, a staff person or a pastor. It's vital that, as a volunteer, you regularly check your willingness to follow your particular leader. Chances are that you and your team leader are both human beings, which means you'll both be making mistakes, dropping a ball or two, or even just plain not getting along. That's okay. What's not okay is when we fail to work on the relationships between team leader and team member. I used to tell my volunteers that I didn't need them to fight and die for me, as their leader, but they at least needed to fight for me. If they couldn't, then we needed to find a way to get them there. And if we couldn't do that, then we needed to find a different team for them to serve with. You will truly be a great volunteer if you take ownership of the relationship between you and your leader, if you continue to evaluate and work on your willingness to follow their lead.
4. **Know Your Role:** In any ministry, event or program, there are a lot of moving pieces. The role you will typically be playing as a volunteer will often focus on just a few of those pieces which means you need to have clarity on what you're doing. Great volunteers learn to ask great questions about what their role is. More than just asking "what am I doing here?" great volunteers also ask, "would it be helpful to you if I?" Many volunteers often go years just guessing at what they are supposed to be doing. Help your team leader out by getting crystal clear on you're piece of the puzzle.
5. **Know Your Apprentice:** It's probably a safe bet that you won't be volunteering in the same role until Jesus comes back, therefore we can assume that you will leave a hole in the ministry someday. Good volunteers consider this reality well ahead time and take action by finding their own replacement. But *great* volunteers even go above and beyond just finding a replacement; they actually apprentice someone into their role. Before you've even thought about leaving, you can be a great volunteer by bringing along someone else not only to fill your role, but also to take over your ministry. It's another layer of discipling that happens in your ministry.
6. **Know How to Recruit:** Aside from just finding a single apprentice, volunteers are the world's best recruiting tool for the ministry. Great volunteers share stories of their ministry

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with friends, relatives and the people sitting on the other side of the pew. When a team leader sees an existing volunteer drawing others into the team, they know they've got a world-class teammate!

7. **Be Prepared:** Whether you're leading a small group, dressing up on stage, running tech or making a meal, a great volunteer will be prepared well in advance for the task at hand. When you're preparing last minute for your role it creates anxiety inside you that then bleeds into the ministry when you arrive, even if you did eventually check all the boxes. Be on time for your role, for your team meetings. Think through what you're doing before you arrive and actually commit your ministry to prayer. I would rather have 3 volunteers who I can count on to prepare physically, mentally and spiritually than 300 volunteers who show up 5 minutes late and aren't ready to give themselves to the ministry.
8. **Be a Non-Anxious Presence.** Life as a volunteer can be chaotic at times. Materials and schedules might not be distributed on time, team members might not get along, and there may be underlying conflict with the team leader. If you've been on a volunteer team for a period of time, you know it's not always rainbows and sunshine. Good team leaders understand this and great team members work hard to avoid raising the anxiety level on the team in the room through the highs and lows. Great volunteers avoid gossip, avoid assuming the worst and provide calm and thoughtful responses to tension and mistakes.
9. **Be Aware of Your Seasons:** Life has natural rhythms to it with a lot of ups and downs and periods of joy and times of lament. Believe it or not, a team leader knows they have a great volunteer when that volunteer can identify when it's time for a break. Maybe you've had a particularly stressful period in your personal life. Or perhaps the group of kids you're working with for the last 8 years finally graduated high school. It's important to notice when the time is right to step away for a season. The ministry will always be there when you come back, and there are other ministries that need great volunteers as well. Know when it's time for a change and be gracious in the transition.
10. **Be There:** Perhaps the most important thing anyone can do to become a truly great volunteer is to simply be there consistently. As Woody Allen once said, "Showing up is 80% of life." Some of the best ministry has been done simply through being present with others. Great volunteers show up and consistently provide their presence to the ministry.

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