

Volunteers in orienteering

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By e-mail on 8 January, Victorian orienteering clubs were asked to respond to the question: "What strategies have you found most effective for attracting and retaining volunteers?"

This is an important question. A measure of the vitality of an orienteering club is its ability to bring to its activities sufficient volunteers with a good range of skills.

We were asked for strategies. I start with comments about tactics – handling the situation at the place where the action occurs. Toward the end, I offer two thoughts about strategy.

Three fundamentals for attracting and retaining volunteers are that:

- a person asked to volunteer sees the invitation as an informed compliment.
- the activity is worthwhile and likely to be satisfying.
- The volunteer is respected.

I'll take these in turn.

Making an invitation an informed compliment

Inviting a person to volunteer involves asking them, then managing (or coping with) their reaction to the invitation.

Before you invite a person to join your volunteer group, find out a little about their skills, their other interests – just a little, not a lot. Doing this serves to compliment them in two ways – that you have bothered to take an interest in them, and that you think that they would be suitable for a particular job. *Not* doing it smacks of carelessness, desperation or hollow flattery.

Your invitation is likely to be well received if you are a person with a positive outlook and are enthusiastic about the role for which you have made the invitation.

But, like inviting love, your invitation to volunteer can be a 'turn-off' if you appear very needy or if your first invitation appears to require a long-term commitment. So, invite any new potential volunteer for a short-term, specific role. Be prepared to reasonably negotiate terms to fit the volunteer's other commitments.

Making an activity worthwhile and satisfying

Purpose

Volunteers want to do their job well and to feel satisfied when its purpose is achieved.

Give your volunteer's job a clear purpose, show that it serves other people in some way, and design it so that a successful outcome is easy to see.

Satisfaction

The volunteer's satisfaction will build if the job given to them takes advantage of one or two of their already existing skills.

Explanation and support

Explain the role to the volunteer. Start with what you want achieved then how you expect your volunteer to achieve it. Make it straightforward; don't introduce complications that rarely occur. Be readily available in person, by mobile phone or by two-way radio if further guidance could be needed. Until a volunteer is 'seasoned', always make them feel supported.

The best way to learn a set of skills is to gain a broad idea of what to do, then have a go, realise that you could have done it better, then have another go to further refine how you do it. Through this iterative process of skills-development, you need support.

Mistakes

Realise that if the volunteer does something wrong, the most likely reason is that *your* explanation of the role was insufficient or confusing. Explaining things well is harder than you think, especially if you are competent enough to do some of these things automatically. So, in your own time away from the pressure of an event, practise explaining a role that you plan to give a volunteer. Make your explanation to an older child or a friend unfamiliar with orienteering. Watch their face as you go. Then ask them how they would do what you just told them and to tell you frankly any part of the role that they did not understand.

Recognition

At the end, thank your volunteer for their participation, ask if they liked doing it, how they found working as part of this team, if there is anything more they would like to know about orienteering, and whether they would like to volunteer again for this or another role.

Recognising volunteers and thanking them in front of an audience is less easily done in orienteering than in, for instance, parkrun, where a large group of participants gather at a particular time in a venue of limited area. When Street-O mass-started at 7pm, we called for volunteer control-collectors among those present and thanked the ones that raised their hands. But orienteering events (unlike parkrun) are organised by clubs, many of our volunteers need refined skills and a volunteer roster is set well before an event. Arenas are wide and just a small minority of events have a mass start. In our club, when Ruth organises an event, she thanks rostered (and other) volunteers on the day, e-mails them later to say who did what, and publishes a list with an event report in the next edition of our second-monthly club newsletter. Essentially, as you can see, such recognition is within our club.

Perhaps, for most events, we could create the expectation that the organiser of each event be asked, in addition to writing an event report, to feature one of their volunteers in a couple of paragraphs together with a photo to be published in the weekly OV bulletin.

And some multi-skilled orienteers have given very much to the front line of orienteering over many years. OV should actively seek to nominate these people for major awards within and beyond orienteering, including Order of Australia.

Leading volunteers

It takes skill to lead a team of volunteers. For some orienteers, this skill may need to be taught and developed.

Respecting volunteers

Make the job safe, i.e. of acceptable risk both physically and mentally. Some unfamiliarity and uncertainty is inevitable, but too much is unduly stressful.

This comment is so important that it deserves to appear in a box.

Respect a volunteer's time. Show such respect in the following ways.

- If there are several volunteers attending an event, have a volunteer co-ordinator. This person would normally be the event organiser.
- As far as is reasonably practicable, give each volunteer a start and finish time for when you expect them to be present.
- If you are co-ordinating a team of volunteers, give each one a job and some autonomy to plan and do it. However, be clear about what *must* be done in a particular standardised way.
- If you give a volunteer more than one job, explain the priorities and by when the jobs should be completed.
- Run the event efficiently. Don't waste the time of volunteers with unessential activities. Conducting an orienteering event is indeed complicated but, for the sake of volunteers, don't allow it to be more so than it needs to be.

- Welcome the time given by volunteers as a gift, *never* as a commodity. Always do unto others as you would have them do to you.

If you act as a volunteer co-ordinator, deal firmly with *unfair* criticism levelled at a volunteer member of your team. Empathetically deal with disputes between volunteers and address the occasional issue of a volunteer whose behaviour is harming teamwork.

Regarding strategy

My comments so far have looked at orienteering from within – more about retaining than attracting volunteers. The strategic question is how do we attract *non-orienteers* to participate and volunteer in orienteering? What possibly keeps them away from us? I offer two ideas about this – about orienteering itself and about a trend in volunteering. I have more questions than answers.

A common thought among orienteers is, “How do I become more skilled at ‘doing it right’, i.e. become more physically and mentally fit to meet its many challenges?” A thought *less* commonly expressed is, “What do I gain from ‘doing it wrong’?” We’ve all experienced ‘doing it wrong’ during an event. This has valuably helped us recognise our limitations yet reach into and discover our own resources – to cope with heat, cold and rain, fatigue, being confused, being lost, failure or loss of equipment, injury, or abandoning our course to provide help to another participant. Such occurrences bring out our best human qualities – optimism, courage, tolerance, honesty with ourselves, fairness, kindness and the humour induced by adversity. And mappers and course planners know that the results of their efforts, despite the time given to them, are never perfect. They learn with good grace to cope with critique. To me, the opportunities for display of these many human characteristics is the essence of orienteering – more so than one’s placing on the score-screen. That’s one reason why many people stay so long in the sport – they love both the sport and the characteristics of those who take part. Yet, like any rich fare, orienteering is an acquired taste. The question we face for our medium-term future is how do we get non-orienteers to acquire that taste? Is its seeming complexity too daunting?

Second of my comments on strategy is what seems to be the scarcity of volunteers. Indeed, there are more sports available than when orienteering got going in Australia more than fifty years ago. Perhaps the pool is more thinly spread. But there is another factor. Through most of my life, the focus of my volunteering has been on ‘local’ matters such as assisting to run orienteering events, weeding and planting with a ‘Friends’ group in the local bush park, guiding students with the critical appraisal of an article or with exam preparation. Now, global issues – climate change, various forms of protest, world health, first nations, influencing and being influenced on social media – engage the emotional energy and time of volunteers. With ‘local’ volunteering, pleasure in participation comes from being with others in your group to achieve (usually) a short-term purpose. With volunteering to promote global issues, pleasure comes partly from interacting online with thousands of others and the grand ‘theatre’ of a large protest event, but also from the righteous feeling that you may do good for people you’ve never met including future generations. The question we face (and that is faced by many organisations that rely on volunteers) is how to make a substantial case for the worth of ‘local’ volunteering when the future of the planet seems to be at risk.