

Conversation #4

WHAT KEEPS HIGH-CAPACITY LEADERS FROM ENGAGING OUR MISSION?

Where would your church be without volunteers? It's a bit of a scary question, isn't it? Inherently, churches are volunteer organizations. Practically, churches cannot run simply on paid staff. The model is unfeasible, and the work is simply too great. But it's more than just a practical reality; it's a theological necessity, too. God has given people gifts and talents that are designed not just to glorify Him but also to help the church accomplish its mission. So for both theological and practical reasons, the church will always be a volunteer organization with, at best, a limited number of paid staff who equip and lead volunteers in fulfilling the mission of the church.

So, with that in mind, how are your volunteers doing? Too often, churches settle for a mediocre volunteer culture. Realizing that the faithful will always serve, leaders fail to be intentional about the experience they create for volunteers. A suboptimal culture is inevitably the result. Ask most volunteers how well supported, encouraged, and nourished they feel, and they'll tell you they feel overworked, undervalued, and undersupported, even if they love their church and the leaders under whom they serve.

Because of a mediocre culture, most churches retain just enough volunteers to keep things afloat. This also has a serious and unintended consequence—higher-capacity leaders stay away. They simply don't want to be a part of poorly led teams. The result is that church leaders can't find enough great leaders who

can attract other capable leaders;

don't drop balls;

love a challenge;

constantly overperform.

And yet the very people who attract other capable leaders, don't drop balls, love a challenge, and regularly overperform stay away from the team because of how it's led.

In many cases, the very leaders you're hoping to attract are in your congregation; it's just they won't serve until you change the culture. The conversation in this chapter focuses on how to do just that. It's a critical conversation because engaging your best leaders and volunteers will take your mission to a whole new level. It simply will.

THE QUESTIONS EVERY VOLUNTEER ASKS BUT NEVER SAYS OUT LOUD

So what's your culture really like? Sometimes it's hard to drill down deep enough to find the truth. Honest conversations are hard to come by. But if you try hard enough, you can imagine what they'd sound like. One way to get honest feedback is to poll your volunteers. But my guess is that—

particularly in the church—your volunteers might be too polite to tell you exactly how their experience has been. Go ahead and ask (it won't hurt), but take it a step further.

So what's the next step? Ask the questions you would ask if you were a potential volunteer. Every volunteer asks questions about an organization, even if they never say them out loud. How do I know? The same way you know. I've asked the same questions myself when I've signed up to serve somewhere. My guess is you have as well. The team that understands this has a distinct advantage in attracting and keeping great volunteers. Leaders who get this can create the kind of culture in which volunteers thrive.

Develop great, healthy answers to these five questions, and volunteers are far more likely to stick around. Better yet, they're likely to grow and flourish under your leadership.

1. Are the relationships around here healthy?

No community should have better relationships than the local church. After all, our faith is based on a Savior who reconciled the world to Himself, forgiving our sin. What could we possibly hold against one another? And yet often the local church is home to some of the most fractious, passive-aggressive relationships out there. We have a Savior who came full of grace and truth, yet church leaders will often swing to either extreme: all grace, so issues are never dealt with, or all truth, so people get hurt. Many people love the mission of the organization they work for; they just can't stand the personal politics and dysfunction.

One of the greatest gifts church leadership can give to a congregation is healthy relationships. So be healthy. We talked about personal health extensively in chapter 3. But the basis of health in an organization, other than having healthy leaders, rests on changing one thing. Talk *to* people you disagree with, not *about* them. That will change far more than you think.

2. Will serving help me grow spiritually?

It's ironic that in many churches and organizations, people equate serving with burning out, not being renewed. And yet Christian service should be a paradox of renewal: When we give our lives away, we find them. When we serve, we grow.

Growth flourishes in a healthy environment. Pay attention to the issues addressed by the other four questions, and you'll have an environment that favors growth. But you also need to care for volunteers spiritually, or at least provide an environment in which spiritual growth flourishes. This goes along with giving them personal attention.

Pray for them.

Pray with them.

Share your journey.

Encourage theirs.

Mentor your key leaders.

You can't guarantee spiritual growth will happen, but you can provide the environment in which it can easily happen.

3. Am I just a means to an end?

I wish I could get some of my early years of leadership back. As much as I would have denied it at the time, I think I naturally saw people as a means to an end. The end was (and is) a great one: fulfilling the mission of Christ's church. But people matter. A lot. Nobody likes feeling used, but that's often how churches and other organizations treat people.

The answer here is similar to that of question 2. Care about them. Encourage them. Ask questions. Listen to their stories. Pray for them. When you have a healthy, Christcentered, energized team that knows they're valued, the mission advances further and faster anyway.

4. Will you help me develop the skills I need?

A friend of mine who has visited a lot of churches and nonprofits recently told me that—as well-intentioned as leaders are—the vast majority of organizations are, in his view, poorly run. That's a tragedy.

Why is the local Walmart better run than the local church? Seriously. One is selling products that last a day, a month, or a year. The other is brokering life change that lasts forever. The church should be the best in the world at recruiting, training, and releasing people into ministry and their calling.

Many volunteers who come your way are highly capable people who just need a little training to know how to master the specific task you're giving them. A good heart just needs to be supplemented with a good skill set. Set aside an evening or a Saturday to properly train volunteers as they start serving, and then top up their training from time to time to help them get better at what they do. Don't just leave them to figure out what to do all by themselves.

5. So, am I signing up for life?

In many churches, serving is like the Hotel California. You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave. You're a Christian for life, but that doesn't mean you have to serve in one role for life. But many churches just assume people will.

What if you start putting a time line on every role? What if your conversation sounded more like: "Why don't you try this for a season? Can you serve with us for this semester/ year?" Or say something like, "People in this position typically serve for a two-year term. You can try it out for a month before you commit to that term."

Every church will definitely have some longer-term serving positions (for example, at Connexus, we ask our high school small-group leader to serve for four years, but we're clear on the term from the outset). Most other roles can easily be shortened to a few months to a year.

If you start providing end dates for roles and create a healthy volunteer culture, you'll notice something surprising. Many people stay after their term has ended. They'll actually sign up for more. Surprisingly, when you give volunteers an out, many lean in. At Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, for example, volunteers are interviewed every six months and can elect to keep serving or stop. It facilitates some incredibly healthy conversations, according to family ministry director Frank Bealer. (For more on Elevation's innovative approach to volunteers, listen to episode 20 of my leadership podcast.)

REASONS HIGH-CAPACITY PEOPLE LEAVE YOUR TEAM

Answering the questions above is a great starting point to creating a healthy volunteer culture. But there are other factors that take a team from functioning to outstanding. And again, many church leaders miss these. If you pay attention to them, your volunteers can begin to thrive. In fact, some volunteers might tell you that your church provides the best environment in which they've served, period—their workplace included. If you think about it, why shouldn't the church offer a better environment in which to work and serve than most businesses? Why can't the church be the most rewarding place to serve?

To keep your highest-capacity volunteers engaged, you have to be hyperintentional about your volunteer culture. If you fail to keep high-capacity leaders engaged in your church mission, it's likely because of one of these factors.

The Challenge Isn't Big Enough

People with significant leadership gifting respond best to significant challenges. Underchallenge them and they won't stay engaged for long. So many church staff and nonprofit staff I talk to are worried about giving their volunteers too much responsibility. Surprisingly, that might be exactly why you *don't* have enough high-capacity volunteers. The best leaders want a meaningful challenge. If you're underchallenging them, they'll leave. How do you overcome this? Give your biggest challenges to your best leaders. Check in on them and support them, of course, but don't shy away from giving capable people big challenges.

Your Vision, Mission, and Strategy Are Fuzzy

People want to serve a cause bigger than themselves. Which is great, because that's what the church, and even most nonprofits, is all about: causes bigger than themselves. But often our mission, vision, and strategy are fuzzy. Mission is the *what*. Vision is the *why*. Strategy is the *how*. Even if they're written on a piece of paper, in many organizations most people functionally can't tell you what they are. That's a shame. The motivation for volunteers *is* the vision. Their fuel is the *why* behind the *what*. And—get this—the church has the best vision and mission on planet Earth. So why on earth do we hide it?

Without clear vision, volunteering ends up being about filling a slot, meeting a need, or doing your duty. Or, in the worst case, volunteering can become more about serving the ego of the leader than it is about serving Christ. But when you keep the true mission of the church or your organization central, people rally. For example, in addition to leading a local church, I sit on the board of directors for an extremely well run local food bank. Their mission? *A city in which no one is hungry*. That's inspiring. Give your volunteers something to focus their hearts on, and they will give you their time and energy.

You're Disorganized

Disorganization is epidemic among church leaders and nonprofits. Few things are more demotivating than giving up your time as a volunteer only to discover the staff person responsible didn't set you up to succeed. The tools they need to do the job are missing or incomplete. The rest of the team is late. Or maybe—worse—they're not even 100 percent sure what they are supposed to do or how they are supposed to do it. You can always find people who will put up with disorganization, but many more will simply give up. And high-capacity people will make a beeline for the door. The more organized you are (on time, prepared, other holes plugged), the more your volunteers will be able to excel at what you've asked them to do

You Let People Off the Hook Too Easily

I know, I know. They're *volunteers*. And you can't hold a volunteer accountable, can you? Yes. You most certainly can. And should. For everyone's sake. If a volunteer is late, it's really no different than if a staff member is late. Sure, you want to address it kindly, but you need to address it.

Again, few things are more disheartening for a motivated volunteer than if they did their homework and showed up early only to find that others didn't, and then, to top it all off, a staff person excuses the behavior of the people who didn't pull their weight with lines like, "It's okay; we're just glad you're here." The high-capacity leader dies a thousand deaths every time he or she hears a staff person utter those words. And then, almost 100 percent of the time, the organized, highly motivated, exactly-the-kind-of-leader-you-were-hoping-to-keep volunteer will leave, and the slackers will stay.

You're Not Giving Them Enough Personal Attention

Another big challenge for church leaders and nonprofit staff is the innate desire most of us have to treat all people "equally." You don't want to play favorites, so everyone should be treated the same. Again, that's a mistake.

The church should *always* be a loving organization. But certain people require more of your time and attention. Unless you're intentional, you'll end up spending most of your time with your most problematic people and the least amount of time with your highest-performing people. Flip that. Cut ties with the low performers and spend most of your time walking alongside and developing your best leaders. And before you think that's completely unfair, just know your entire team will thank you for it because you'll end up with a strong team.

By the way, Jesus did this, too. He had crowds of disciples, but then a group of seventy-two, an inner group of twelve, an inner circle of three, and he placed his greatest investment in one (Peter).

You Don't Have Enough Other High-Capacity Volunteers Around Them

It's never fun to lead alone. As soon as you find a high-capacity volunteer, your next step should be to recruit more and move others alongside them. Nurture this team. Build into them. Take them to lunch. Take them with you when you travel. Do life with them (again, I think Jesus modeled this pattern). Like attracts like. And the more high-capacity leaders you have serving, the more you'll likely attract.

Sadly, many leaders don't do this, and high-capacity leaders once again walk away, demotivated.

Treat Volunteers the Way You Want to Be Treated

If you think about it, creating a great volunteer culture is closely tied to the Golden Rule: treat others the way you want to be treated. Create the kind of organization in which *you* would like to serve.

By being organized, holding people accountable, keeping the mission front and center, and employing some of the other strategies outlined in this chapter, you'll create the kind of culture in which people love to serve. It's worth your time and effort, because in churches and the nonprofit world, leading and managing volunteers is one of the most important tasks you'll have. Quite literally, the mission depends on it.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk About It

1. Have you ever asked any of the five questions volunteers ask but never say out loud? Which questions do you ask most frequently?
2. How healthy would you say your volunteer culture is on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being very unhealthy and 10 being extremely healthy? Discuss the reasons for your answer.
3. Do you think your church currently does a good job engaging high-capacity volunteers? Why or why not?
4. Is the sense of challenge at your church high enough to attract high-capacity people? What could you do to challenge people at a higher level?
5. What do you think would happen to your mission if your volunteer culture became significantly healthier? What could you accomplish that you're currently not accomplishing?

Get Practical

1. Would your volunteers describe your staff or senior leadership as well organized? What impact do you think your level of organization/disorganization is having on your volunteers?
2. Discuss creating end dates on the terms of service for your volunteers. With which teams could you start this practice? Remember that when you give your volunteers an out (and have a healthy culture), many lean in.
3. Do an honest analysis of your training and ongoing support for your volunteers. Do you do a *great* job of preparing and supporting volunteers? If not, what will it take you to do a better job in these areas?

Make It Happen

Identify your single biggest obstacle to creating a great culture for volunteers. Once you've identified it, create a six-month plan to remove it.

In addition, identify two to five other key obstacles to creating a great volunteer culture. Now design a one- to two-year plan to address each of the obstacles.

Make sure you assign responsibilities and accountability and meet periodically to evaluate progress.