

MEMBERSHIP RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION: WHAT EVERY VOLUNTEER NEEDS TO KNOW

A vital volunteer organization depends on its members for its success. Here are the basic principles of membership recruitment and retention covered in the Membership Game.

Recruitment

Recruitment of new members is everyone's responsibility – not just your membership committee. All committee chairs should be thinking about recruiting new members with the skills and experience they need in addition to how they mentor and integrate new members into their committee's work. Don't underestimate the power of one-on-one personal enthusiasm when recruiting new members.

Recruiting new members is an ongoing responsibility. Look for new members at coffees or cocktails in someone's home, at symphony concert settings, at large luncheons, at volunteer organization events/projects and in the everyday activities in which you are involved. Prospective new members can be anywhere you are and can occur at any time during the year.

Be mindful of the fact that younger generation volunteers may have different needs and expectations than older volunteers. Generation Xers often want to know how they will benefit from volunteering in your organization. Ask new members what they expect from volunteering so you can make the best use of their talents and interests.

Research shows that younger volunteers do not want to be micromanaged and that they want to "make a difference" in the organization in which they volunteer their time. They want more flexible schedules for their volunteer assignments and typically juggle many different volunteer activities as well as professional and home responsibilities.

Adding new members to your membership committee is a good idea because they may have a network of contacts that is new to your organization.

Your membership brochure is important. Be sure to include information on benefits of membership, your mission and projects, contact information, and a membership form. Make it look appealing and reflective of your organization. It introduces your organization and sets expectations for the readers.

As in most things, making a plan for recruiting new members will pay off in success. Set goals and expectations for how you will meet your goals.

Mentoring

It's extremely important to orient new members when they join your organization and assign them to mentor. Orientation will help new members learn about your organization, its members, and how things are done.

A mentor will continue the work of the orientation and facilitate the new members introduction to the group. The mentor will also get to know the new member best, become an advocate for them, and make sure that their talents are engaged in the most productive way for the benefit of the new volunteer and the organization. Mentors should also call new members before events to make sure that they feel invited and welcome. Mentors will become the "go to" person for answering the questions that new members will have.

Keep the orientation agenda and mentor job description up to date and revise as needed. After the new members have been with you for some time, ask them for suggestions on what they would have liked to know sooner or what might be left out in the future.

Engagement

How do you keep new members engaged so that they will continue to be involved? For starters, consider holding meetings at various times during the day so that different schedules can be accommodated. A new member won't last long if they can't participate in any of your meetings.

Be sure to involve new members in a project. People often drop out of an organization because no one ever asked them to do anything.

Show your appreciation. It is often said that you can't say "thank you" enough. Regardless of a volunteer's intrinsic motivation for a project, a thank you is always appreciated.

Let your membership know what's going on between meetings with a printed newsletter or via social media. Even those who can't attend meetings will want to be kept informed and up to date. Share your board's vision and future directions with all members via your newsletter.

When your membership socializes with one another, enjoys each other's company, and has fun together, your work together will be all the more fun. Encourage social activities for your membership.

Use your volunteers wisely. When thinking of the cost of a project, think of the value of your volunteer time.

Development

Developing new leaders and growing skill sets will make it easier for people to take on new responsibilities in the future and help you avoid burn out of long-term members.

While new members need an orientation, continuing members may need training for new skill development. Consider an annual training retreat to start each new year. Make it easier for new committee chairs by providing them with a year-end report from the previous committee chair.

Keep track of who held key positions in your organization so that you can refer to them as needed as resources. Keep track of member interests and skills so that their best talents will be called upon as needed.

Although your nominating and placement committee will identify key leaders, others may be able to provide valuable input.

Provide committee chairs with up to date job descriptions and revise these regularly as needed. In fact, committee chairs should revise their job description every year to ensure that it is up to date and as useful as possible. Including resources for the new committee chair is an excellent addition to the job description. In addition to the job description, a good “hand-off” of responsibility should also include a face-to-face meeting to answer any questions and make sure the new chair has a good understanding of the job.

A President-elect position is extremely important to ensure continuity of leadership. It will be much easier for a new President to take over if they have served in the President-elect capacity.

Miscellaneous

Always provide constructive feedback with the “feedback sandwich.” First, a compliment about something well done, then the constructive feedback, and close with a positive comment. This helps the person receiving feedback really hear what you are saying and not shut down or feel that their effort was unappreciated.

When members leaves your organization, be sure to have a conversation with them to find out “why.” Is there something you can be doing differently to retain members or was it something unavoidable such as an out-of-town move.

The League has many resources for volunteers including webinars, learning games, volunteer project descriptions, sample documents, a volunteer newsletter, and more. They can all be accessed from the League’s website americanorchestras.org.