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Upfront

Give a Little Respect: How nonprofits win the dedication of their volunteers

By Alana Conner

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015
Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516
Email: info@ssireview.com, www.ssireview.com

Give a Little Respect

How nonprofits win the dedication of their volunteers

Every other month, roughly 1,000 Project Homeless Connect volunteers descend upon the Bill Graham Auditorium in downtown San Francisco to give some 1,000 homeless people a range of health and human services, including medical care, housing help, and legal advice. Since its inception in 2004, the cross-sector project has linked more than 18,000 Bay Area volunteers with more than 18,000 homeless people. Some 40 percent of those are repeat volunteers. "That's a great retention rate," says Amy Golsong, volunteer coordinator for Project Homeless Connect.

Research reported in the May 2007 issue of the *Journal of Applied Psychology* reveals how nonprofits like Project Homeless Connect keep their volunteers coming back for more. When volunteers feel respected – that is, supported and appreciated – by the organizations to which they lend their services, they feel more committed to them.

Project Homeless Connect supports its volunteers at many stages. "The day before the event, we hold an orientation where we walk volunteers through the different service areas," says Golsong. The organization also holds a rally, which San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom attends. During the event, each service area has its own leader who directs and helps the volunteers. And after the event, volunteers attend a debriefing where they can share their stories.

Social change organizations seldom offer this much support and respect to their volunteers, says Edwin J. Boezeman of Leiden University in Leiden, the Netherlands, and the article's lead author. "In fact," he writes in an e-mail, "some volunteer organizations may be weary of mentioning the ways in which they invest in ... their volunteer workers, as they are generally expected to focus all their material resources and efforts to helping their clientele." His study suggests, however, that investing more time, talk, and money into making volunteers feel supported could actually help nonprofits retain volunteers – and reduce the costs of recruiting new ones.

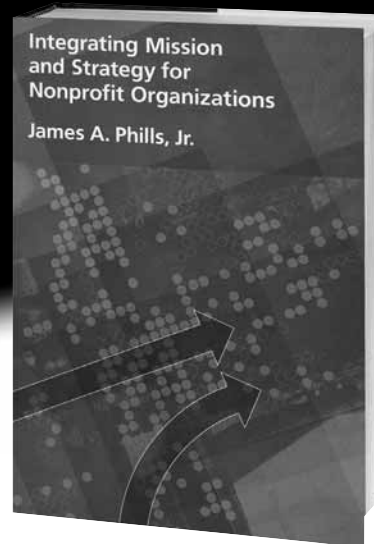
With co-author Naomi Ellemers, also of Leiden University, Boezeman further demonstrates that feeling proud of an organization stokes volunteers' devotion. Pride arises from knowing that an organization's work is making a dif-

ference. Most organizations are aware "that they should communicate to their volunteer workers why the work they do is important," notes Boezeman.

To explore what makes volunteers stick with an organization, Boezeman and Ellemers surveyed more than 500 fundraising volunteers from across the Netherlands, who answered questions about their feelings for and perceptions of the organizations at which they volunteer.

Boezeman cautions that "instilling feelings of pride and respect in volunteer workers is not an easy or quick thing to do. It requires continued and consistent organizational policy, and needs to be enacted and supported by people at different levels in the organization." –A.C.

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