



REPAIR THE WORLD

The Engaged
Congregation: A
Guide to Supporting
Volunteers

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The Engaged Congregation Series

This guide is one in a four-part series designed to provide synagogues with a step-by-step process of creating and maintaining a culture of volunteer engagement. Volunteer engagement is a strategy that can build a congregation's capacity beyond what staff alone can accomplish. It transforms a congregation into an engaged community in which congregants are partners in co-creating their community's future, as they serve as members, learners, volunteers, contributors, donors, participants, and passionate advocates. The four main steps to implementing a volunteer engagement initiative are addressed in these four guides:

The Engaged Congregation:
A Guide to Creating a Volunteer Culture

The Engaged Congregation:
A Guide to Volunteer Cultivation

The Engaged Congregation:
A Guide to Supporting Volunteers

The Engaged Congregation:
A Guide to Acknowledging Volunteers

The guides can be downloaded at <http://weRepair.org>

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Learn more at www.jffixler.com.

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How to Use this Engaged Congregation Guide

1

Set aside an hour to read through the material and make notes.

2

Come back a few days later with 90 minutes to 2 hours to devote to this Guide's activities.

3

Work through the contents of each section.

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4

Share results with at least one other individual at your synagogue. Brainstorm together on next steps.

5

Make it practical: Immediately try at least one new idea.

Use this guide to...

- Assess your current practices for selecting and supporting volunteers
- Craft effective interview questions
- Formulate plans for training and supervising volunteers

Good intentions are wonderful. In fact, Rabbi Assi taught in the Talmud that “even if one no more than thinks of performing a good deed but is forcibly prevented from doing so, that person still receives credit for the intention.” But we know that our synagogues need more than good intentions to prosper. The challenge is to turn those good intentions into concrete actions.

We know that all volunteers want to do well. Nobody sets out to have a bad volunteer experience. Yet even with the best of intentions, volunteers don't always follow through. They say or do the wrong things, and they can make serious mistakes. When such situations occur, they contribute to a negative volunteer experience and undermine a synagogue's efforts to create a culture of strong volunteerism.

What's going on when volunteers fail to thrive in their roles, despite good intentions? Sometimes challenges are simply unavoidable, but many difficult situations can be prevented through a strong program of volunteer selection and support.

Complete a simple audit on volunteer selection and support to gain perspective on how you might create a stronger foundation for volunteer success.

Selection and support make up the foundation for long-term volunteer satisfaction.

2 do:

Complete Activity 1, page 3

Activity 1

Selection and Support: A Self-Audit

Introduction

Selection and Support make up the foundation for long-term volunteer satisfaction. Check the box that best describes your *current* practices in these areas:

Selection	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
We identify the specific needs of a volunteer position before recruiting for the position.			
We provide a volunteer position description to all candidates for the position prior to selection.			
We build enough time into the recruiting process to identify the right person for each volunteer role.			
We conduct interviews before placing volunteers in key roles.			
We conduct reference checks on volunteers prior to putting them in difficult or sensitive roles.			
We share with potential volunteers any concerns about their work and solicit their input as to how they can and want to be successful.			
We listen carefully to what volunteers tell us about what brings them satisfaction.			
Those who work with volunteers share information about the interests and skills of volunteers in order to deepen everyone's talent pool.			
Volunteers are regularly evaluated for their leadership potential and invited into roles of greater and greater responsibility.			
Selection	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
We have standard, printed policies and procedures for volunteers.			
We provide volunteers with training relevant to their positions throughout the term of their work.			
We have designated points of communication through which volunteers can safely and comfortably communicate their concerns.			
Volunteers know how to share concerns and ideas appropriately and productively.			

continued

Activity 1

Selection and Support: A Self-Audit (continued)

Introduction (continued)

Selection	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
We conduct regular reviews of long-term volunteers and gain their assistance in improving our volunteer programs.			
We regularly and appropriately recognize and celebrate the contributions of volunteers to congregational life.			
Volunteers are given the opportunity to move up a career ladder, to the extent of their interest in doing so.			
Volunteers understand and take advantage of the benefits of volunteering.			

How well did you do?

<p>If you had a lot of "rarely" boxes checked, pick a few areas to work on.</p>	<p>List three areas that you'd like to work on right away.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3.
<p>If you had a lot of "sometimes" boxes checked, take a close look at what you are doing sometimes and see how you can make your action more consistent and apply those actions to other areas of your volunteer program.</p>	<p>Of the actions you marked "sometimes" which can you make more consistent and apply to other areas of your volunteer program?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3.
<p>Also take the time to appreciate what you do well.</p>	<p>What actions did you mark "always"?</p>

Making the Right Match

Screening Volunteer Applicants

Our tradition teaches us that making the right match between people is an almost miraculous act. Indeed, according to Rabbi Yose ben Halafta, the process of making matches between individuals is so important that it has completely occupied God's time since the end of Creation, Numbers Rabbah (3:6).

Although the above statement referred to marriage, the same principles of match-making apply to organizations and their volunteers.

Most problems with volunteers can be traced back to very poor or nonexistent selection practices. Selecting the right volunteer for a job starts with defining the volunteer position and finding potential volunteers to fill it. (Review **The Engaged Congregation: Guide to Volunteer Cultivation** for information and activities to help you.) Once one or more candidates have been identified, the next step in the selection process is screening.

Other than for board and possibly committee positions, few congregations make a point of screening volunteer "applicants" for volunteer positions. We are afraid to reject someone who is offering to help. In point of fact, though, we disrespect volunteers by placing them in assignments in which, for whatever reason, they cannot be successful.

Screening, which usually consists of conducting a volunteer job placement interview, creates the expectation that the synagogue is committed to making the volunteer experience satisfying and enjoyable. The purpose of the interview is to make sure that the match of volunteer with assignment is right—for both the individual and the synagogue. The interview is an opportunity to communicate expectations and time commitments (refer again to the work you did in the **Guide to Volunteer Cultivation**), as well as answer any questions and respond to any concerns the candidate may have.

The art of interviewing is about listening and paying attention to your gut reaction to what is being said. If your gut is telling you that something is awry, you are most likely right, but you can further determine whether or not an individual is right for a job by asking great interview questions.

We disrespect volunteers by placing them in assignments in which, for whatever reason, they cannot be successful.

There are three kinds of effective interview questions:

Situational questions give the congregant the opportunity to respond to a situation that might arise in the course of the volunteer assignment. This gives the interviewer the opportunity to see how the congregant will respond under pressure in a real situation, and will reveal the congregant's problem-solving skills. There is rarely a right answer, but the congregant's response will often indicate whether they are the right person for the assignment.

Experiential questions give the congregant the opportunity to tell you about their relevant experience. These targeted questions get better results than open-ended questions. By asking the congregant what they would do differently next time, you discover their ability to adjust their thinking and learn from their experiences.

Problem solving questions allow you to view the congregant's problem-solving ability in real time. Because there isn't a right or wrong answer, you catch the congregant off-guard and get a response that reflects their true personality.

Other effective questions:

- **Describe why you are interested in this assignment.**
- **What might prevent you from being successful with this assignment?**
- **What are your three greatest accomplishments?**

Screening can be a very positive experience for congregants. It allows them to discuss their skills, talents, hopes and dreams. When congregants understand that your role is to help them find the right fit for them, they will be receptive to your help and guidance. If you think congregants have potential to be leaders, you can groom them for that role by how you place them as a volunteer. Give congregants the opportunity to start slowly and build success. If their first placements are successful, they may be willing to accept another assignment or take on added leadership responsibility next time.



2do:

Review Figure 1, page 7

Complete Activity 2, page 8

Figure 1 Interview Questions

Making the Right Match

The following types of interview questions will help you make successful matches between volunteers and volunteer assignments.

Situational questions

Example:

"This volunteer assignment is to survey congregants for the skills and talents that they wish to share with our congregation. What would you do if a congregant refuses to respond to your telephone interview and is belligerent to you?"

"Despite all our planning, sometimes events logistics don't work out quite the way we want. What would you do if you showed up to volunteer and found a problem, such as the room being locked or the refreshments not prepared?"

Experiential questions

Example:

"Tell me about a time where you developed a project. What did you do? What would you do differently next time?"

"Tell me about a time when you were not able to do a job as well as you wanted. How did you handle it?"

Problem-solving questions

Example:

"If you were to design a system to collect data on the skills and talents that congregants wish to share, what would you do?"

"We're working on improving communication here at the synagogue. How would you recommend changing or enhancing our print communications [or Web site or eNewsletter]?"

Activity 2

Drafting Interview Questions

Making the Right Match

Review the requirements for a volunteer position you are trying to fill. If you haven't yet done so, complete a volunteer position description (explained in detail in **The Engaged Congregation: A Guide to Volunteer Cultivation**). Then craft your screening interview by responding to the following questions.

Important skills for this volunteer role:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Situational questions that will elicit information about these skills:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Experiential questions that will elicit information about these skills:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Problem-solving questions that will elicit information about these skills:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Once you've selected volunteers with the help of the screening process and matched them with the volunteer assignment that is most appropriate for them, you can begin carrying out plans for ongoing training and supervision. These plans will help them perform at a high level and encourage them to volunteer for the synagogue again and again.

Training

So often we turn volunteers loose as soon as they agree to help the congregation. We don't share with them the history or impact of the project, we don't share how the position fits with other volunteer assignments or with the roles of staff, and we don't even hold them accountable for what they do. Instead we hope that things will go well—and are sometimes surprised when they don't.

Your response to the following questions will help you lay the groundwork for a training plan:

- **What does this volunteer need to know to do the job well?**
- **What are the expectations for this volunteer assignment?**
- **What resources will the volunteer need to perform this assignment?**
- **What are the contingency plans if something goes wrong?**
- **How will you and the volunteer assess the efficacy of the assignment?**

Training doesn't have to be long or cumbersome. It only needs to cover the information that the volunteer needs to know in order to be successful, and inform them about how their assignment fits into the bigger picture.

Training can be generalized for all new volunteers and be done in real time, on the telephone, on DVD or on the Web (using Podcasts, Skype, or online learning technologies). If the project is episodic in nature, such as an event or social action project, it can be done when the volunteer shows up. The training can be given by staff or a well-qualified volunteer.

Develop a checklist of what you think all your volunteers need to know and what each volunteer needs to know for his or her particular assignment. Utilize your existing volunteers as trainers and mentors. They have the best understanding of what knowledge, skills, and procedures will be helpful to the volunteer. Document the training and develop a curriculum so that it is standardized and can be used repeatedly.

Example:

- **Review position description**
- **Review expectations of the assignment**
- **Review impact of the volunteer's work**
- **Review all of the bottom line don'ts, such as working with children without a criminal history check**
- **Review of resources available and resources needed**
- **Review policy and procedure**
- **Review pertinent risk management issues such as universal precautions and driving**
- **Review of emergency contingencies**
- **Identify the volunteer's supervisor**
- **Review of project evaluation and reporting requirements**

2 do:

Complete Activity 3, page 11

Activity 3

Building a Plan for Volunteer Training

Taking Good Care

Some volunteer roles require very little training. The group that comes in once a month to stuff and label member mailings probably needs only the basics. Other roles require more in-depth training, possibly over a period of time. Volunteer receptionists, for example, may need an introductory training to get them started, a more in-depth training a few weeks or months into their work, plus ongoing tips and support to understand how to liaise with the public on behalf of the synagogue.

To lay the groundwork for a program of volunteer training, you need first to establish what core information must be communicated to every volunteer, regardless of how long or short their assignment. Next, determine the "need-to-know" information for larger or ongoing volunteer assignments. Finally, consider the needs of high-level volunteers like board members—what do they need to do their best work?

Use this worksheet to create a list of your training needs and formulate a training plan.

Brainstorm and makes notes here about the core information every volunteer needs to know:

Note here what volunteers need to know when they are working on large or ongoing assignments:

What do board members and other high-level volunteers need to know?

Complete the Template on the next page to design a volunteer training program.

Activity 3

Building a Plan for Volunteer Training (continued)

Taking Good Care

Volunteer position title:

Training needs for this position:

What gaps in knowledge or skill will impede the volunteer in this role?

Complete this chart to create a training plan

Training session	When?	Where?	Led by whom?	Notes and requirements

Activity 3

Building a Plan for Volunteer Training (continued)

Taking Good Care

Training session	When?	Where?	Led by whom?	Notes and requirements

The ability to guide, teach, and supervise others effectively is highly esteemed in the Jewish tradition. Our Sages teach that before God entrusted Moses with the leadership of the Jewish people, the Holy One first tested his ability to supervise the sheep of his father-in-law's flock. It was only after God saw that Moses cared enough to look after a vulnerable lost sheep that the Holy One determined that Moses had the needed compassion to lead his people.

Many of the best volunteers do their work independently. Staff would describe these volunteers as low maintenance. However it is poor risk management to have all of your volunteers work without supervision. When volunteers are unhappy with their work, they may quit by quietly walking away and abandoning their assignment. They would rather leave than tell you that they are unhappy or think that they are not performing to expectation. More often than not, this difficult situation can be avoided by providing quality volunteer supervision.

It is the unusual volunteer who chooses to volunteer alone. Volunteering is a social activity, and volunteers often measure their level of enjoyment by the relationships they build as a volunteer. By supervising volunteers well, we are filling their need for a relationship and managing that relationship in a way that creates a successful outcome for both the volunteer and the synagogue.

The wise congregation develops a supervision plan in advance of volunteer placements. It identifies a staff member or volunteer who is not only qualified to supervise but also has the temperament to support and encourage volunteers. These organizations understand that volunteers will rise to their level of expectation. They train their supervisors

to clarify expectations for the assignment, provide access to resources, assist with problem solving, monitor accountability and provide ongoing support and recognition. When volunteers are clear about their assignment, timelines, and boundaries, they are much more likely to be successful. The guidance provided by a supervisor

can make or break the volunteer experience. Phone calls or personal visits with volunteers can have a profound impact on them.

It isn't difficult to find supervisors. They are often your high-performing volunteers. Your supervisors should be invested in the outcome of the volunteer's work and willing to spend the time to nurture great performance without micromanaging. Supervision can be very rewarding and enjoyable. It is a way to build trust and commitment from the volunteers.

"I did not find the world desolate when I entered it. My fathers planted for me before I arrived, so I plant for those who come after me."

—Talmud

2do:

Review Figure 2, page 15

Complete Activity 4, page 16

Figure 2 Setting Expectations

Taking Good Care

Satisfaction doesn't happen by accident. Satisfied volunteers enter into their roles with appropriate expectations about what they will do, how they will work, who will work with them, and what the outcome of the work will be. You can lay the groundwork for satisfaction by setting expectations with volunteers from the first interaction.

Adapted from Volunteer Management Mobilizing all the Resources of the Community by Rick Lynch and Steve McCurley.

Defining expectations

- Set priorities
- Establish clear responsibility for results
- Define the level of authority for decision making
- Define the impact of the assignment
- What is the time commitment and timeline for the assignment?
- Review the resources available for this position
- Define the checkpoints for progress reports, methods for checkpoints (personal meeting, email, telephone call)
- Discuss how you and the volunteer will evaluate the assignment when it is completed!

Activity 4

Building a Plan for Volunteer Supervision

Taking Good Care

To build a plan for volunteer supervision, fill out the following chart:

Volunteer position description	Supervisor	Date for first meeting to define expectations	Date of checkpoint #1	Frequency of checkpoints

Conclusion

Towards a Strong and Sustainable Synagogue

By now you've got some good ideas about how to create or strengthen your strategies for volunteer selection, training, and supervision. Once you implement those strategies, it won't be long before you'll start seeing evidence of deeper connections between volunteers and the synagogue community. Successful volunteer engagement programs that include strategies for effective selection, training and supervision engender these deeper connections and result in a stronger, more sustainable synagogue community.

"The highest reward for a person's work is not what they get for it, but what they become because of it."

—John Ruskin

Additional Resources

Further reading and resources in volunteer engagement:

- *Boomer Volunteer Engagement: Collaborate Today, Thrive Tomorrow*, by Jill Friedman Fixler and Sandie Eichberg, with Gail Lorenz. VolunteerMatch. Book and webinars.
- *Boomer Volunteer Engagement: Facilitator's Tool Kit*, by Jill Friedman Fixler and Beth Steinhorn. VolunteerMatch. Book and webinars.
- *Building Sacred Community: Volunteers in Your Congregation*, by the Union for Reform Judaism. Book and webinars.
- *Volunteer Management: Mobilizing all the Resources of the Community*, by Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch
- *You and Your Nonprofit: Practical Advice and Tips from the CharityChannel Professional Community*, Norman Olshansky and Linda Lysakowski, Editors