

Shepherding Volunteers - Building a Bridge to This Fall's Leadership Team

Summary of Discussion

Is it possible that how we currently treat our volunteers will influence our volunteers to serve for another season? Volunteering in children's/youth ministry can be difficult and attrition could be high if there weren't someone who helps a volunteer rise about the difficulties and see that what they do matters for the kingdom. When volunteers are not valued, the difficulties become large and overwhelming. On the other hand the more we value our volunteers, while the difficulties don't disappear, being able to overcome the difficulties might seem more doable.

After researching 8 different websites who specialize in retaining volunteers, there were 9 common retention practices that most said were necessary if you want to keep your current volunteers serving. Our discussion will be to learn how many of these 9 principles are used and gather some feedback on how you have implemented these in your ministry.

9 Retention Practices

- **Keep volunteer retention in mind from the start**
 - As a first year Commander, I started keeping retention in mind because I did not like how hard it was to get people to volunteer. It felt like Awana had become a burden. So I am intentionally sharing weekly words of wisdom with my volunteers (prayer, scripture, and blog posts) as a way to show appreciation, encouragement, and to keep our team connected.
 - Volunteers are a gift from God...we should do our best to care for them in a way that values them and not just use them.

- **All volunteers understand your cause and why it matters**
 - Developing a connected community (i.e. Facebook, Band), feeding leaders before club, meeting before or after club, weekly emails are all good opportunities to continually keep your cause before your volunteers.

- **Thank, encourage, reward your volunteers - value their effort**
 - There are a lot of leader encouragement ideas on Pinterest. Search on "volunteer appreciation gifts".
 - During set up I'll go around to all my directors to see if they need help with anything (get copies, supplies, etc.) and will run and do that for them. I'll ask if there is anything that they need that isn't in the budget and will place it on a wishlist. There are a couple men who come periodically that will take the list and get what they need.
 - A we have a leader meeting after the last night of club where I feed the leaders and get their ideas. The Pastor will come and thank the leaders for volunteering -

sharing some things he's seen (from his perspective) that were a result of their service.

- We are going to video the kids telling their leaders "Thank you" and share it at Awards night.
- I share a weekly after the meeting "thank you" by mouth, email, and text.

- **Make volunteering flexible and convenient**

- For families with young children we offer a nursery that is staffed by a rotating list of volunteers
- We have cross-trained several of our volunteers in each club (2-3 deep for essential roles) to step in when someone can't be there due to other commitments
- Our primary volunteers (Directors, Small Group leaders) have committed to serving all year. They were encouraged when they understood that we had a pool of available volunteers who were willing to step in when they couldn't make it.
- We have a list of "Anywhere" volunteers that are on call and can fit in anywhere they are needed
- At our church we have an "8 on/2 off" club schedule - we work on handbooks for 8 weeks and then take 2 weeks off (church leadership takes these 2 weeks to offer opportunities to connect with families like movie night, fun fair, etc.). We always recruit prior to the next period of 8 weeks to get some of the younger parents involved for the next 8 weeks (orientation and training). Our hope is that some will see God at work and will want to serve for another 8 weeks. Not everyone can commit for a whole club year.

- **Provide an experience that connects your cause and not the organization**

- Our volunteers are going to Returning Hearts Celebration to serve fathers in prison as they spend the day with their kids.
- We travel to a faith-based orphanage. We bring lunch, play games, make gift boxes.

- **Create a community for your volunteers**

- Our church has a small group ministry that involves all our church members. The small group I belong to consists mostly of Awana volunteers that meets a couple times a month to pray, care for each other, and study God's word. We also spend time discussion problems and ideas.
- We use the BAND app so that all of our leaders are connected and can ask questions, receive updates, etc.
- We have a Facebook group to communicate news, schedule changes, upcoming meetings, even the Powerpoint that will be shown during Large Group. This is how we also stay connected during the Summer.

- We have a meal before for our volunteers prior to club where we have fellowship, information is shared, etc.
- **Share your leaders successes - how they made a difference**
 - When I have a team or individual volunteers that I would like the congregation to know about, I print certificates for the Pastor to hand out. This is how I help our church leadership share in what our volunteers are doing.
 - We share how our volunteers contribute to Awana on our church's facebook page. It also helps the church to understand how our volunteers are involved at a typical Awana meeting.
 - I select a "Leader of the Month" and recognize them when we hand out awards at the end of club. They receive a certificate and small treat. Thinking about letting both the volunteers and kids submit who that will be.
- **Cultivate for bigger roles - listen, equip and provide training**
 - We allow our leaders to request a role change and we spend time to orient and train them.
 - I identify someone to shadow me for a year - they help me make choices and I give them opportunities to lead.
 - I take the church directory and will pray for several names. If the Holy Spirit keeps bringing up a particular name to me, I have committed to go and talk with that individual about Awana. What is interesting is that often I will question how that individual would make a contribution and later find that they were the best fit for our ministry.
 - Don't see people as "what I need", but as "what they can offer".
- **Grow your volunteer team through your volunteers recruiting other volunteers**
 - We have a bring a friend night for both the kids and our volunteers (they bring one of their friends to assist them at club). Everyone gets ice cream at the end of the night.
 - If someone loves how they are treated, loves who they work with, and sees how they contribute to the cause - it is natural in the course of their conversations that they will tell their family and friends about their experience.

We would encourage you to sit down with your leaders and work through the following case study. Let them share their ideas from the list of 9 principles and how they might implement them.

Case Study

Every year one Pastor would say “We will have Awana next year if we have enough volunteers to staff the program.” (The Pastor was taking a wait and see approach to see if his volunteers would return). This year they dropped Awana.

If we were the Commander of this church, what could we do now to retain the volunteers we have and maybe even find new volunteers so that we may continue to reach boys, girls, and families with the Gospel next year?