

The Cepia Club

Paper Series #2

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How To Volunteer In Politics: A Short Guide

1. Choose a Candidate or a Cause

Make sure you've researched the relevant issue(s). Have the facts AND opinions to examine. Give the matter serious thought. You don't need 100% agreement with what you support. That is an impossibility. Instead, choose something about which you feel strongly or in which you have deep interest. It will sustain your commitment. Choose something that has at least some claim to support and WILL BE supported. You don't want to do it alone or be a martyr for it.

2. Add Your Talents to the Organization

If you have a skill or a resources that fit into a need of the organization, then offer them. If you do something well, like writing and pamphlet design, then offer to make literature. If you write letters, then write them for the cause. If you're good on the phone, then make phone calls. If you do anything well that could help, whatever you do will help the organization succeed. Be honest about what you can and cannot or will not do so neither you or anyone else is surprised.

3. Add Your Vision and Enthusiasm

If you see an opportunity to do something that will help the cause, then do it. Refer to any guidelines or obtain advice if needed or wanted. If

you can add your idea and motivation to the cause then it gets the cause closer to success. Stay focused on the overall goal of the organization. Try new things that might work. Don't keep doing things that don't work. Always do the things that work best. Don't wait for others to do it. If you're a leader, then lead. Don't kill the enthusiasm of others, especially if their enthusiasm is constructive. Instead, give vision and encouragement always and guidance if needed. Many people doing many things help achieve the overall goal. Lastly, don't let your ego get in the way. Be confident and open-minded. Be willing to ask for help and to receive constructive advice. Don't let others discourage you. Competent leadership and hard work will eventually get the credit in the end, no matter what others do to advance their personal agenda.

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4. Be Active

Fifty percent success on one big thing is just as good as 100% success on three small things. Both are better than perfection on something meaningless, unhelpful, or negative to the cause. Be persistent and consistent. Work diligently and smartly. Also, have the commitment and the passion to do your very best. If the cause is a good and just one, it deserves dedicated effort and wide support.

Rest if you need a little relaxation. Don't overwork if you need some personal time for thinking about the real meaning of life. Smell the flowers, walk the dog, go on picnics, or play with the cat. Enjoy life. A healthy person is more effective than someone exhausted or stressed without relief. People respond to positive, rational, calm, and thoughtful people. Reason, wisdom, prudence, frugality and morality attract supporters.

Finally, finish what you start and don't ignore the questions or requests of others. Ignoring things or leaving them undone reflect poorly on you as a leader or worker and are a discredit to the entire cause.

5. Spread the Word and Grow the Movement

No cause ever became a widely accepted reality by being kept a secret. No candidate was ever elected without the help (volunteers or votes) of others. If your cause is just, and its goals realistic, then the effort can only succeed with a positive attitude.

Don't scare people with visions of horror or predictions of doomsday. Instilling fear can only bring negative results. Trying to motivate people with hate and bigotry breeds violence and destruction. If a cause is a good, rationally, calmly explain the reality and future consequences and use your organization to create a positive solution will create the desired POSITIVE change. Contribute to success by changing the present through unity and cooperation, tolerance and understanding, logic and morality.

Team work is needed. Alter the unwritten future for the better by having everything about you, your organization, and its goal contribute to a fair and reasonable solution that benefits everyone. By being an agent for positive change, you attract the necessary supporters. Such supporters are either workers in the cause or sympathizers. The workers should be encouraged to do what you are trying to do: inform and motivate others. The sympathizers get informed and, if not active participants, they may contribute to the solution by simply signing a petition, donating money or resources, or voting at the right time for the right person.

Respecting both the workers and the sympathizers, numbers count. The more people you canvas with the information and solution, the more people who will help. The more people who help, the more sympathizers you gain. One good worker is better than 3 mediocre ones. Yet, 10 mediocre workers may be supporters. They may be 10 more votes or give 10 more dollars. Success for a cause comes when enough people not only think the solution is correct, success comes when enough people act on their beliefs.

A List of Volunteer Activities and How to Do Them

6. Be a Captain

Different from the organization's leadership committee, a captain is a less intense and less time consuming role that contributes greatly to the success of the cause. The captain is responsible for a geographic area. (Captains may also be in charge of a functional capability, like organizing local chambers of commerce). Whether a region, county, city or village, or neighborhood block, a captain is the front-end representative of the organization in the area. The captain has a two-fold role. The first role is to create awareness in the area for the issue or cause (or candidate), and the organization. "Sell" the desired solution. The audience for this activity can be friends, family, neighbors, local business or association leaders, or the general public. The methods used include: face-to-face encounters with people in the area (this is always the best sales method); calling them by phone; writing them by letter; or sending them email. Raise awareness. Look for speaking opportunities.

Captains should always use the guidelines established by the organization and try to obtain the literature from the headquarters or website to distribute by hand, postal or email. Captains can write letters to the editor (see below for details on LTEs) to the local press. They can contact and visit the local newspapers, radio and television stations and get them to print or broadcast the organization's press releases. Even more, a captain can cultivate awareness and sympathy for the cause in the publishers, editors, owners, managers, directors, and reporters of the local media outlets. Try to convince them to devote time and manpower to cover the issue and

the organization. Captains are responsible for finding places and receiving permission to post yard signs, posters, or literature stands or table displays at local community or association events. The second role of the captain: enlist, organize and lead others to do the same things listed above.

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7. Trees

Phone, mailing, and email trees are a tried and tested method of political activism. They work, if done right. One volunteer can have an exponential impact on raising awareness and enlisting active support. First, make a list of anyone who would be willing to be part of the phone, mail, or email tree. Contact them and ask, first, if they would be open to receiving the organization's literature or announcements. Second, ask them if they would "forward" the info or notices of election dates, invitations to events, rallies, etc. by either phone, mail, email, or a combination of

them. If someone says “yes” to the first question, but “no” to the second, then make a note of that. You will know that it is a terminal point. Try to get the people who will forward the communication to come up with a minimum number of people they will contact-any number will do. Also, make sure that all the communications you send to the tree expressly say to “please keep forwarding to your contacts.” In using the tree, don’t burden people with junk or “spam.” Don’t waste their time with unimportant communications. If people get turned off, they won’t be part of it anymore.

8. Canvas

Going door-to-door in a neighborhood takes a lot of energy and patience. You need to always be gracious and say “thank you” even if people slam doors in your face or cuss at you. Canvassing is a great way to raise awareness and enlist support. Obtain the literature to distribute from the headquarters. Better yet, print any downloadable pamphlets, posters, or flyers from the website at your own expense to save the group money. Don’t be aggressive or argumentative! If some says “no,” move on. If someone needs to think about it, note the name and address and revisit them IF invited to do so.

9. Writing Letters to the Editor (LTEs)

Writing an LTE is a cheap way of mass communicating the cause, the organization, and the desired solution. When writing letters, be open to learn from each experience. The more you know about the rules and desires of the newspaper or other publication, the better the chance of getting published. Daily newspapers want only brief snippets of public opinion. Newspapers published

three, two or one time(s) a week welcome more detailed letters. First, use only simple language (like Hemingway) and clear statements (like Steinbeck). Write a rough draft. Organize your thoughts. Always revise and rewrite! It makes the end result better. Have one or two other people proof read for ideas, clarity, typos or grammar mistakes. Be open-minded about constructive advice. Your ego is less important than representing the cause the best you can.

Always include a name, phone number or email, or mailing address (papers won’t publish unverified or anonymous authors). If you have emails of the local papers, then send it that way. (When doing this, a signature won’t always be possible. The paper will call to verify your authorship). If you send the letter by postal mail, make sure you send it in time to make the deadline. The best way of all to deliver your letter is to hand it personally to the assistant editor or editor.

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10. Hosting an Event

As mentioned above, the best way to raise awareness is face-to-face contact, in a calm, respectful, informative, and educational dialogue with other people. It is important to also listen, answer other peoples’ questions, and hear their suggestions. They may have something insightful to say. On the whole, if done right, it may take 6 hours total to talk to 10 separate people. The result could be 5 or 6 out of ten in agreement with the organization. It may produce only one or even no one signing up to actively help the cause. Don’t give up the effort to talk to individuals, but an using an event may cover those same 10 people in one or two hours of effort for the same result. That would be an efficient saving of time, money, and energy. An event can also be planned for 100 or more people.

Planning any event, not too large for your ability to execute, and never too small to be worthwhile, takes reasonable expectations and a lot, a lot, of work. First, determine how many people you can honestly expect. Make sure you have a facility large enough and enough literature and money to cover the needs. Most of the time you don’t need to rent a meeting room or hall. Sometimes hosting an event in your living room works just fine. Don’t rely on only one form of drawing attendance. Take the time and effort to send nice (not necessarily expensive) personal invitations in the mail. Make calls or send emails to those people for RSVPs. Also, if it is open to the public, think of placing an advertisement in the local media—a newspaper or a radio or television station if you can afford it. And at the same time as you do that, try to get the media, especially the ones

your paying, to give you a free announcement in a calendar or community events announcement, or in a press release that you write promoting the event. You can also design smart, sharp looking posters cheaply on your computer and print them in color or black and white on your printer. Use a simple design and attention-grabbing but not distracting graphics. List just the facts of who, what, where, when, and, if applicable, how. Less confusion is always more effective in this regard. Receive permission to place flyers or posters in public places, on bulletin boards, in store windows, or anywhere not prohibited by a local ordinance.

Next, always plan on having enough refreshments. Try to provide at least some free food and drink. They don't need to be exotic or extravagant. You can buy or make them yourself if necessary. People are always thrilled about good coffee and home-made, chewy brownies. Keep things simple and keep the cost proportionate to your event.

If you will do a presentation, find a competent and presentable spokesperson. If you plan on a roundtable, then find some one capable of leading the discussion. Entertainment never hurts. If you can't afford to pay anyone, then find a volunteer band or guitar player and singer. The entertainment or other attractions should never distract from the main purpose of the event, whatever it is. Decorations are a nice touch but should be tasteful and well done, not obnoxious, out of place, or sloppily done.

It is important not to get too ambitious with an event. The main purpose should always be to raise awareness and enlist support. Otherwise, you're just throwing a party. Be realistic about what you

plan and the numbers that will realistically show up. Don't spend more than you can afford to lose just in case it doesn't turn out as expected. Finally, no event is ever a waste of time or money or effort. Even if things never work out as planned, the success and utility of the event may not be apparent for a long time.

Now you have some basic ideas for volunteering in politics. It only remains for you to decide and act. Which cause are you going to support? It may just be up to you to get something done. Good luck and happy success.

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