

The Proper Care and Feeding of Club Volunteers

By Dan Stra and Del Albright

Note: For the sake of brevity the masculine gender has been used in this article.

Volunteer (noun); an anomaly within the human race. Rarely seen, the volunteer frequently works in the background while doing things for the benefit of others. Volunteers work for free and with the best of intentions yet they get little thanks - nor do they expect it - and, in fact, are frequently criticized and sometimes publicly insulted when things don't go well. Volunteers get enjoyment from the success of others. Volunteers have a very short life span with an average life span of less than 7 years. With proper care and feeding this time period may be extended. On the other hand, improper care and feeding of a volunteer can significantly reduce its life span. Due to the rarity of a volunteer any actions that would reduce its lifespan are to be avoided at all costs.

Motorized Recreational Club Volunteers

Historically, motorized recreation sports have always required a high percentage of volunteers. The list of things that need to be done to make a club or other organization run smoothly can easily exceed the capacity of one person or a small group of people.

Club volunteers are typically involved in;

1. Getting everyone on and off the trail safely.
2. Making sure that our special events go smoothly.
3. Keeping schedules and web sites up to date.
4. Operating and monitoring the communication structure whether it is a BBS, email or newsletters.
5. Setting up new systems by which the club will be able to add more services for its members.
6. Helping other club members out, whether it is by answering a tech question on the BBS or by connecting a tow strap to their rig and giving them a tug.
7. Leading the club and charting its growth.
8. Doing a lot more work than we would ever want to do by ourselves and they do it for free.
9. Staffing activities at our events.
10. Conducting most of the work that ever gets done by any organization.
11. Recruiting for our clubs, organizations and fund-raiser events.
12. Advocating for our sport.

Knowing the importance of volunteers and knowing that they have such a short lifespan forces us to ask the question, "What is the proper way to care for and feed a volunteer?"

For volunteer peers and their leaders it boils down to what we call "P.A.R."; PRAISE, APPRECIATION and RESPECT. Think of P.A.R. as the currency that you use to compensate volunteers. *The only limit to the P.A.R. that you give a volunteer should be the goodness of your heart and the sincerity of how you deliver it.*

Praise. A volunteer may not always need praise but he will always be glad to receive it. Praise should always be heartfelt and sincere. This is as simple as telling a volunteer that he has done a good job when you see that he has done a good job. The proper care and feeling of a volunteer demands heartfelt and sincere praise be given to the volunteer. To really make the volunteer feel noticed try praising him in front of his peers when it is applicable. Such a small gesture does wonders for the health of that volunteer.

Appreciation. Show your appreciation of a volunteer by never criticizing him in public or in front of other volunteers. Should the need to criticize a volunteer arise you need to be tactful and polite and you need to handle it *in private!* Never criticize a volunteer without, at the same time, letting him know that you appreciate him for the work that he has done for you and your organization. In other words, make it clear that it is not the person but that action that is being critiqued. Don't let it get personal. Criticizing volunteers without first making sure that they feel appreciated or doing so in public has been proven to shorten their life span dramatically and sometimes causes an immediate end to that person's volunteerism.

Respect. Volunteers usually need an extra measure of respect. In fact, as a volunteer don't they deserve it anyway? This is especially true when things don't go exactly right. Volunteers are human, too, and, as humans they can sometimes make mistakes or not meet your reasonable expectations (All of your expectations for volunteers are reasonable, aren't they?).

There may be times when a volunteer "spouts off" or "blows off some steam." This might become evident in something they say or something that they do. When this happens try to give them a little bit of extra room. Odds are their frustration stems more from the fact that they may have missed their mark than it does that they actually did or didn't do something right. No volunteer, especially one in any kind of motorsports, like to "lose face" in front of others. We are a proud lot.

If you have a volunteer that needs to blow off some steam, it helps to step away from the volunteer and give him time to reflect on what has happened. It has been observed that handling a volunteer in this manner is typically the fastest way to bring him around.

In most clubs everyone who does anything for the club is a volunteer. Even if you don't volunteer to help a club out you should still think of yourself as a "volunteer" in your clubs' "Volunteer Appreciation Program" by seeking ways to show the volunteers in your club the extra measure of consideration that their work on your behalf calls for.

Rewarding volunteers is a responsibility that *every person* who benefits from their work shares equally. Showing P.A.R. to volunteers isn't just what volunteer leaders should do it is what we *all* should do.

After all, without volunteers, what would become of your group?

- *Dan Strà is the Founder of the JonFund 4X4 Club and a very active volunteer in the 4X4 community on a local, regional and national level. He can be reached at jonfund@jonfund.com*
- *Del Albright, BlueRibbon Coalition Ambassador and Environmental Affairs Coordinator for the Calif. Assoc. of 4WD Clubs. Visit BlueRibbon at www.sharetrails.org.*