

ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS FROM DIVERSE AND IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

8 Strategies for Creating a More Inclusive Volunteer Program

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many organizations struggle to engage volunteers who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the communities they serve. In response to this issue, the Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA) recently embarked on a research study which resulted in a set of 8 strategies for creating a more inclusive volunteer program within nonprofit and government organizations. These strategies serve as a starting point for volunteer engagement leaders seeking concrete next steps for better engaging volunteers from diverse and immigrant communities.

Below is a summary of the 8 strategies, and the full report is available on MAVA's website at www.mavanetwork.org.

STRATEGY #1: Shift Your Language

The word "volunteerism" is often used to describe formal volunteering — donating time to an organization or other entity in a supervised setting. Informal volunteerism, on the other hand, is when people help one another as friends and neighbors. This type of volunteerism is prevalent in diverse communities, though people don't often refer to it as volunteering. According to one community volunteer who is an immigrant from Cameroon, "we are more comfortable with the word 'help'."

When working with immigrant and diverse communities, consider using words beyond "volunteer." "Help" is one good option, but other broader terms — like "support," "benefit," or "give," are also possibilities. Please note — this doesn't mean you should eliminate the word "volunteer" from your vocabulary. Use the word "volunteer", but also use other words — ones that are more universally understood — to speak to a person's sense of community.

Admittedly, this is the easiest of the 8 strategies to implement. It's also the least likely to be successful when adopted on its own. Our recommendation is to adopt this strategy alongside one or more of the other strategies to increase your chances for success.

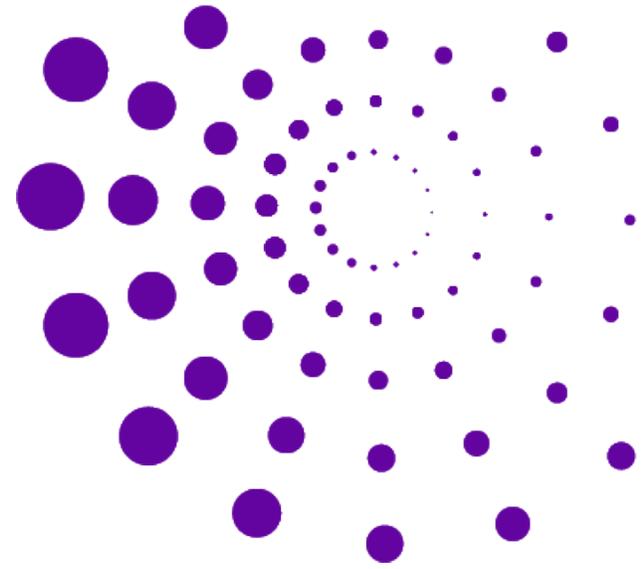
STRATEGY #2: Build Relationships

No conversation about engaging diverse populations can take place without discussion of relationship-building. It is central to any successful outreach effort. Many people across cultures say they would volunteer if they were asked, but they aren't asked. Building relationships is the first step toward making that ask.

All communities are different. You need to identify the specific communities you're hoping to engage and build relationships in each of those communities. There are no shortcuts, and it is hard work. Be prepared for that.

What helps is authenticity. Be sure you can articulate why you want to engage a particular community — to yourself, to your organization, and to the community. Many ethnically diverse communities have had the unfortunate experience of being approached so someone can "check a box." They've been asked their opinion, only to see no action or change happen in response. This means you may need to work extra hard to build trust and show that you have an authentic interest in their opinions, skills, and contributions.

Some ideas for building relationships include attending cultural events or celebrations, reaching out to culturally-specific organizations, hosting a community open house, partnering with places of worship, and having a booth at your local farmer's market.



STRATEGY #3: Understand the Importance of Socio-Economic Status

When engaging communities of color it is essential to consider socio-economic status and make adjustments that accommodate volunteers from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

There are steps you can take to make it a little easier for those in or near poverty to volunteer with your organization or government:

Child Care – Providing free child care at volunteer events or gatherings may be the factor that allows a parent to attend. Also consider making volunteer events family-friendly.

Transportation Stipends – Providing a transportation stipend may make it easier for a person in poverty to access volunteer opportunities, particularly if they are far from their home.

Food – Food is often seen as a “nice to have” at meetings or events but it is much more of a necessity for lower-income volunteers. Be sure to provide food that meets any dietary restrictions of the population you’re trying to engage.

Outings – Many nonprofits are given free tickets to sporting events, theater productions, and other outings to distribute to their volunteers. These are very meaningful for volunteers who couldn’t otherwise afford such an outing.

In addition to these amenities, whenever possible hold events in the community you would like to reach. Go to them. It makes volunteering just a little bit easier.

STRATEGY #4: Embrace Skill-Based Opportunities

Skill-based volunteers are people who bring a specialized skill set – often one they typically would be paid to perform – to your organization or government.

Skill-based volunteer opportunities are particularly attractive to recent immigrants who are not yet able to work in the United States or looking to build their resumes. Several government volunteer managers who were part of this initiative reported great success with engaging immigrant volunteers by developing and advertising skill-based volunteer positions. In fact, these volunteer managers found online recruitment to be very effective – perhaps an exception to the rule that relationships must come first.

STRATEGY #5: Recruit from Those Who Use Your Services

Reciprocity is an important concept in communities of color. Many immigrants come from a more communal society than American culture. Neighbors helping one another is not just a nice thing to do – it’s a way of life. And it’s a natural human feeling to desire to give back to someone (or something) that gives to you.

But many organizations do not encourage reciprocity from those who use their services. There are several reasons for that. Organizations that serve low-income families may assume their clients do not have extra time to give. Others figure that if a client wants to help, they’ll simply apply to be a volunteer. But this isn’t always the case. Someone who has received services may wonder if they’re needed or wanted as a volunteer. How do you make sure they feel welcome? Ask them to help.

STRATEGY #6: Partner to Engage Groups of Youth

Many young people from communities of color are second or third generation immigrants. They were born in the United States and have grown up in the American school system. They are comfortable with the concept of volunteerism and are accustomed to doing service projects.

A great way to engage diverse youth is to partner with already-existing groups on one-time volunteer projects. Sports teams, service clubs, and many other groups have a service component that involves volunteering in the community. Reach out to the leaders of these groups to let them know you have projects available. Once the youth are on-site, educate them about your organization's work and how they're contributing.

STRATEGY #7: Remove Barriers

Immigrant and diverse populations face a variety of barriers to volunteering, including the following:

Background checks - Many organizations require volunteers to pass a background check, but some companies cannot run background checks on people who are not citizens. Are there alternative ways of running background checks at your government or nonprofit, or are there volunteer roles that do not require a background check?

Flexibility - For a person who is low-income and/or from a communal society, meeting strict requirements around attendance or timeliness is not always possible. Make it okay for volunteers to have other priorities.

Exclusive Policies - Consider reviewing all your volunteer policies with an eye for exclusive rules and language. Are there policies that may hinder people of color, immigrants, or low-income individuals from volunteering with your organization? If so, assess why they are in place and how they might be changed to be more inclusive.

STRATEGY #8: Create an Inclusive Organizational Culture

Creating an environment where volunteers of all ethnicities and backgrounds feel welcome and included is key to retaining diverse volunteers.

How do you go about influencing this type of change within your organization, especially if you are not a top decision-maker? It can be difficult, but there are steps you can take.

Work to educate everyone within your organization about the importance of engaging volunteers of diverse backgrounds and experiences, along with why it is a priority. Help people to understand how vital it is to engage volunteers who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the community you serve, and collaborate with them as partners in making it happen.

Gain support from organizational leaders and ask them to communicate the message of inclusion. Discuss your goals for diversifying the volunteer pool with leaders at your organization, and ask for their help in creating a stronger culture of inclusion to support your efforts.

Build a culture of inclusion within your own department. If you are a volunteer engagement professional, be intentional about making your own program more welcoming. Start with yourself and your own department, and build from there.

For more information on MAVA and our Inclusive Volunteerism Initiative, visit mavanetwork.org or contact Lisa Joyslin at ljoyslin@mavanetwork.org.