

Keeping Volunteers Keeping Volunteers

Michael Lee Zwiars *The Leader*, June/July 1991.

The definitive volunteer, like Mother Theresa, needs no thanks and will run many miles without support. The rest of us will go the distance on the memory of a handshake of recognition or vote of confidence from an adult and a hug or thank you from a child. But, when the going gets tough and we haven't been given a boost recently, our thoughts may turn to getting out or taking a break.

With meetings and fund raisers, group committee members can easily log from 150 to 250 hours of volunteer time in a year. A typical youth leader will put in 14 to 25 hours a month just for meetings and planning. Add 54 hours for a weekend camp, multiply this by a season that runs for eight or 10 months, and you're looking at 200 to 500 volunteer hours a year. And that's a typical volunteer year. Many dedicated Scouters will log more than 1,000 hours annually.

Volunteers have always been a valuable commodity, and Scouting has always been able to attract them. But changes in the structure of our society are putting increasing pressures on individuals and making it more difficult for them to be regular volunteers. Society is increasingly mobile, and we lose volunteers as families relocate. Many Canadian workers are forced to go on the road, leaving fewer volunteers at home. Our demand for services at all times of day and night have placed increasing numbers of people on rotating shifts, and again, there are fewer available bodies to volunteer.

Scouting is also in intense competition with other organizations, many of them going to great lengths to entice and keep volunteers. Volunteer coordinators orchestrate the work of large teams of people. Volunteers are wined and dined, presented awards, and generally treated with a great deal of respect.

How can Scouting deal with all of these factors to keep our volunteers?

1. Accept whatever time or services volunteers have to offer. Most parents are willing to provide transportation to a special event, help with a fund raiser, or attend an outing as an adult supervisor. But they may not want to commit themselves to any more because they are concerned that work might take them away at the last minute (or they are afraid they'll be saddled with the whole job!). Gratefully accept their tentative and short term commitments, and thank them for what they can do.

2. Encourage volunteers to come up with creative solutions to the problems caused by changing work schedules. In our troop, the leaders could no longer afford an extra night a month for the Court of Honour, so we held it on the first troop meeting night of each month. In exchange, patrol leaders and assistants met with their members on another night.

We also shortened every second camp by leaving on Saturday morning rather than Friday night. Because

one Scouter I know worked every Saturday afternoon, he held early morning hikes (starting at 6 a.m.) instead of camps. Another Scouting friend often has to cancel meetings at a moment's notice, but his Scouts know how to hold their own patrol meetings at a member's home.

3. Keep track of volunteers. When Scouters move to other parts of the country we need to take the time to send a letter of introduction to the Scout council in their new locale. This way, we will be less likely to lose them in the transfer.

4. Spread out the work. Many hands make light work. Volunteers abound; all we have to do is ask them. Overworked Scouters who, in addition to holding exciting weekly programs, are expected to coordinate field trips and camps, service projects, and fund raisers may soon tire and quit. By involving a variety of people, you can free section leaders to do their important work with their young members. We had three leaders in our troop last year. No one was able to attend all our meetings but, between us, we usually fielded two adults for every troop night.

5. Recognize the contribution of our volunteers. So often, it takes little more than a card, note, phone call, or handshake to keep a volunteer going. Recognition is the key word. Leaders can have youth members make a thank you card or poster for members of the group committee. An awards night or leader appreciation evening is a nice way to end the year.

You don't need to organize elaborate events or spend large sums of money to be effective. Annual service pins and long service awards are available through your regional office. The Scout Shop sells an amazing array of awards, rewards, and memorabilia. Use them to recognize the contributions of your volunteers.

6. Finally, recognize the special contribution Scouting makes to its members. No matter what your abilities or status in life, Scouting offers you the opportunity to grow as an individual. At all levels - section, group, district, region, province, and national--there is room for an amazing variety of contributions and growth experiences.

Scouting has a lot to offer. Believe it and then convince others of it. Your enthusiasm for the movement will bring in more volunteers than any elaborate sales campaign or awards scheme. Scouting is an important school of citizenship for young people and adults alike. Invite a friend to be a part of it.