

Volunteer Management

Asking People

It is important when trying to encourage volunteers to take on roles to ask them personally and directly. While it is of course important to use meetings, newsletters and e-mails to make general requests for volunteers and ask for help, it is more specifically effective and helpful to contemplate tasks and ask specific people. When doing this keep in mind not only the (sometimes urgent) need to have a task taken care, but also an appreciation for the person and how the task could actually also be a teaching situation for someone, to help them develop their potential.

So for example it is important to cultivate leaders and teachers in Shambhala. Someone might have the potential—but there clearly needs to be a path to develop that potential. Thus in order to become a Shambhala Training Director, we need to have coordinated five levels—in this way we become deeply immersed in the mandala of a Shambhala training weekend. So talking to someone about their path and then suggesting they consider developing themselves as a teacher, and that part of that one should coordinate 5 levels over a period of 2 years, can both set an appropriate expectation and ground for the individual, as well as provide some kind of regularity for the tasks at hand.

One can apply this manner of thinking of a persons skills and their path in many ways—whether it is developing finance skills, leadership skills—and this might include cooking for others, Ikebana practice, etc.

Low Boundaries for Participation

It is important to have low boundaries for participation—make tasks simple and inviting, and invite people to do them in a team. Sometimes the psychological barrier to actually taking on work for the centre is a large one, and many people feel that they are not qualified or untrained etc. Sometimes people also arrive with a shopping mentality—they just want to receive teachings and support etc, and do not really think about helping. Asking them to help with little tasks makes it easy for people to say yes, cross over the psychological barrier to being a helper, and actually begin to appreciate all the work that goes into a situation.

Program Credit

It is often skilful to use program credits to reward volunteers. However, one must be very careful with these since they can affect the basic fabric of volunteering for a centre. As much as possible, it would be good to have a basic policy that no one who cannot pay is turned away, and that we always offer people with fewer resources a chance to participate in a program in exchange for volunteering. Doing this has a twofold benefit: we do not turn anyone away, and more people have an interest in helping and also have a real, measurable commitment in terms of time. So, for example, if someone wants to attend a Shambhala Training program and does not have any money, then the program price can be converted into hours, at the rate of approximately 8 Euros per hour. Thus, for a 100 Euro program, someone who cannot pay should be asked to work for 12 hours at specific tasks, such as mailing, cleaning,

etc. Again one has to be careful so that all volunteers are not automatically given program credits.

Follow Their Passion

It is important when working with volunteers to trust and encourage their passions. Thus if someone comes to us with a plan or an idea about what they can do, it is important to appreciate their passion and discuss with them how their idea can be realised. Sometimes it is not possible or sensible to take someone up on their idea, but it might be possible to recognise the essence of their inspiration and suggest something else for them to do.

Equally, when people come with a passion for a large project, it is important to guide them and provide intelligent insight for their idea, and not cut them down or turn them off.

Individual passion and inspiration is the lifeblood of Shambhala, so it is tremendously important to nurture that. It is also important to help protect that passion by ensuring people do not get into painful situations (conflicts, overextending themselves, etc) where they can become wounded and close down.

Clear task description and Deadlines

A clear agreement on the task at hand and a reasonable deadline are important. This is important for the volunteer for a number of reasons:

- It means that other tasks that depend on this can be reasonably planned
- It helps the volunteer pace themselves
- It provides a sense of appreciation that the task at hand is serious.

Training/Mentoring

It is important to train and mentor volunteers, especially in how to see their tasks as practice. This is the ultimate training, and providing such training both in terms of view and example is the highest gift a mentor or leader can give to volunteers. Naturally, there are also formal opportunities for training in seeing tasks as practice, including all the Shambhala levels, etc. But reminding people of this and helping them to apply this to their own situation is very important.

Additionally, helping with the relative skills of the tasks—providing training, etc.—is very important.

Space to do it on their own terms

It is good to allow volunteers the time and/or the physical space to do things on their own terms. This helps them maintain their inspiration and helps to ensure things fit into their personal schedules. Some volunteers might go through high and low points in terms of their personal inspiration, and allowing them the time and the space to pace themselves can be very helpful.

Appreciation

It is very important to appreciate volunteers. This starts with and expressing happiness at seeing them and welcoming them when they come to do their task, and continues with creating a generally appreciative atmosphere during their work—paying attention to what they are doing, being interested in them, being available to answer questions.

Finally, it is important to thank people and honour them for their work through expressing thanks, writing letters, giving small gifts and so on.

Preparing the Ground.

Part of leadership is creating the ground for others. Setting the ground so that volunteers do not have to struggle to do their work is very important. This includes ensuring volunteers have a clear job description, the necessary materials for their work, money for needed purchases, a space to work, etc.

This also includes the general ground of organisation and the general mandala involved in the project at hand, whether it is a weekend program or renovating a centre. It is the task of leadership to ensure that this is well set up so that people can find their place in it without too much struggle. This also includes clear instructions for the work required.

Ask for Feedback

It is good to ask volunteers for feedback—how did things go, how did they find their task, the atmosphere, what could be done better in the future.

Atmosphere of Celebration—Working Together.

It is often more rewarding, and sometimes more effective, to create intense and celebratory situations of working together. This occurs naturally during a Shambhala Training weekend, but it can also be applied to other situations. So, for example, in preparation for a visit, rather than sharing out tasks among many people over many weeks, think carefully about what can be accomplished when, and then create a working weekend with many people, food and a celebratory atmosphere where many tasks can be accomplished at once. This usually saves time—many people are together, making coordination more natural, and numerous separate meetings do not have to be arranged. And it tends to be more fun! In such situations you can also arrange a teaching on how to see work as practice..

Old and Young

It is very, very important to not forget or neglect the young and old in recruiting volunteers, and indeed future leaders.

Young people are often fresh, innovative and have a lot of Lungta for their task, even though they might need more guidance.

Retired people are often a treasure trove of experience and have a lot of time and wisdom to contribute.