



Working with volunteers

One of our richest resources in the local congregation is the gifted assembly of volunteers who “do” the work of ministry. How can we maximize their effectiveness, celebrate their contributions and minimize their friction? I suggest a few practical principles that have proved useful in a variety of settings in which I’ve been privileged to serve:

1. Encourage and affirm coworkers often.

According to communication experts, we average four critical (negative) comments for every positive comment we offer. People who study morale in working environments report that folks accept criticism and work on self-improvement more often when also encouraged and affirmed for what they are doing well.

2. Avoid taking on the anxiety of other people.

When people present their struggles, we can better respond to their concerns by not becoming infected with their anxiety. Otherwise, their struggles become our issues and projects. When we are not burdened by our own anxiety, we are freer to respond to the angst and stress in someone else’s life.

3. Pay attention to change in a person or a congregation.

Awareness of change can help us identify how much energy someone is expending on discomfort and stress. Change raises our emotional temperature and throws us off balance so that we react to a new idea or an event more from our own discomfort than from the potential merit of the suggested change. Stressed persons cannot absorb as much, so they miss part of what we’re trying to say or do.

4. Respond to the emotion behind a present-ing emotion.

When someone responds intensely to a situation, another emotion is usually responsible. For example, behind much “present-ing” anger are the emotions of fear or pain —

Resources

Better Boundaries (Jann Black and Greg Enns)

Extraordinary Leadership (Roberta Gilbert)

The Anxious Organization (Jeffrey Hunter)

and sometimes a perceived sense of having one’s opinion or feelings neglected. Acknowledging someone’s distress and/or challenge of a change as valid often diffuses intense confrontations.

5. Listen to feelings without taking responsibility for them.

We do not create other people’s feelings — they do. Therefore, we are not accountable for them. Apart from physical pain, all our emotions come from our thoughts about a given event and our interpretation of their meaning.

6. Avoid receiving second-hand information.

When someone discusses an issue involving a third person, try to bring that person responsibly into the conversation to avoid second-hand information and to enhance communication and clarity with primary sources. “Triangling” is rarely useful, and quickly becomes gossip.

7. Turn anxious situations into learning opportunities.

Many of our emotionally-laden exchanges with people can be attributed to stressful conversations past that color our perception of and response to a conversation in the present moment. Avoid reacting to present issues — or persons — out of past unpleasant encounters. Reduce unnecessary stress by asking, “What about this issue or event may be connected to distasteful memories that are affecting how I respond to it?”

8. Affirm the right of others to challenge your ideas.

Remember that individual suggestions, ideas and plans are useful but not perfect, and are therefore open to criticism. Rejection of ideas does not signify the measure of personal

worth or rejection of the person, however. The Holy Spirit works through every person in the church, and all ideas can be improved on.

9. Allow time for the absorption of new ideas or changes.

Everyone internalizes an idea in a different way and at their own pace. People who feel pushed or rushed often believe they are being forced to agree with something without having their own opinion respected. They often describe such pressured deadlines as an invasion of their boundaries as a person.

10. Practice — and encourage — the ownership of ideas.

Speak in the first person (“I”) and invite others to speak for themselves as well, allowing for different thoughts, feelings and perceptions. That way, people will feel valued. It’s the difference between speaking with authority — for myself — and speaking for others, which is controlling.

11. Watch for signs of overfunctioning or underfunctioning.

Either of these work styles is usually a reaction to someone else’s behavior, so that we compensate for an imbalance of responsibility in a relationship. Giving more than our fair share on a project may quietly declare lack of trust in others doing the job well. Allowing other people to do most of the work may be a way of disowning ownership and investment in a project.

12. Foster an atmosphere of responsibility.

Holding persons accountable for work and deadlines without blaming or shaming them can foster a responsible atmosphere and avoid reactions from others that distract them from the main issue. For example, if people are busy reacting to how I introduced a question, they may lose sight of the primary goal and spend their energy focusing on me rather than the subject. **BT**