

How To Keep Your Volunteer Commitment When Life Gets Overwhelming



When organizations are run by volunteers, it's not uncommon for some of those volunteers to disappear. One day they're working hard on association chapter business and the next...crickets.



Running a chapter, leaders need to understand that things happen; maybe something comes up at home or work that requires the time and attention the volunteer normally gives to the chapter. It would be unfair to think everyone can always maintain the right balance. But, at the same time, volunteers agree to responsibilities that ensure the chapter continues to operate and do so at a high level. When volunteers don't follow through, often everyone suffers.

Your responsibility is to give your volunteers what they need to maintain a sense of balance and keep working. There are things you can do and reminders you can provide that can help prevent feelings of overwhelm that accompany that feeling of having too much to get done.

These seven steps can make it easier for you and your volunteers to respond effectively, keep volunteering "feeling good" for chapter volunteers and ultimately avoid the crash, burn and disappear act.

7 ways to help keep chapter volunteers engaged, balanced and present



Recognize the signs of overwhelm. Knowing the emotional, cognitive, physical and behavioral signs of overwhelm (see below) makes it easier to check your own level of overwhelm; ask your board and committee members to do the same; and look for the potential for overwhelm in others. Everyone's sense of overwhelm is different but often it includes feeling burned out, unmotivated and stretched too thin across competing priorities, like balancing work and home with chapter responsibilities.

Set time and energy boundaries. Remind volunteers that it's important to know their limits and be honest about what they can accomplish. Maybe they'd be happy to help organize and attend the next chapter networking event, but they don't have the bandwidth to oversee the event's project management. Once they have that conversation with themselves, they can more easily set clear boundaries and expectations with their fellow volunteers.

Prioritize commitments. Once people know how much time and energy they can give to chapter tasks versus personal and work ones, it's important to determine the order they'll get it all done. Help your volunteers assess what's most important by providing deadlines and lists of tasks, goals and priorities and any flexibility in delivery dates. Flexibility around chapter tasks can help reduce the sense of overwhelm that can often come when a person seeing a long task list.

Ask for help. Connecting with fellow volunteer leaders or work colleagues can provide the support some volunteers need to get things done; remind volunteers that asking for help isn't a bad thing, even though our society often places a bit of shame on asking. Help can include leveraging their network, but it can also include utilizing available resources, like association management software platforms and task management tools.

Remember the why. Sometimes a reminder of why a person chooses to volunteer — to meet new people, increase their skills, give back to their community, etc. — might be all they need to reengage with the activity that was burning them out. Get the sense your volunteer seems stressed when they're reminded it's their turn to write this month's blog posts? Remind them of the positive impact that contribution has on chapter members. (And then ask how others could help!)

Don't forget self-care. Self-care is critical to avoid burnout; volunteers need to know how to keep their commitments from overwhelming their personal well-being. It's ok for volunteers to step away to take care of themselves, so they can return refreshed and renewed. There are a range of self-care strategies for maintaining mental and physical health, including rest, practicing mindfulness and meditation and simply walking outside for a few minutes.



Know your limits. Sometimes the best thing for both volunteer and chapter is for the volunteer to say “no, I can’t do that” rather than taking on a role or task and disappearing partway through, leaving you with, for example, an unfinished website or forgotten tax submission. You may need to find someone else to take on a task in the short term but in the longer term, hopefully that volunteer will remain engaged and active.

Signs of overwhelm

Feeling overwhelmed can creep up quietly like a mouse, or it can roar loudly like a lion. Here are some common emotional, mental, physical and behavioral signs that can signal a person is feeling overwhelmed.

Emotional signs

- Irritability or short temper: snapping at colleagues or family more than usual
- Anxiety or dread: feeling panicked about a to do list or upcoming deadlines
- Guilt: constantly feeling they’re not doing enough
- Low motivation: tasks feel impossible or pointless

Cognitive/mental

- Difficulty concentrating: the mind wanders a lot more than normal
- Memory issues: forgetting meetings, deadlines or tasks
- Decision fatigue: every decision feels weighty
- Overthinking: rehashing small tasks or conversations long after they’re over

Physical

- Fatigue: feeling tired, even after a good night’s sleep
- Headaches or muscle tension: especially in the neck, shoulders or back
- Changes in appetite: eating too much or too little
- Sleep problems: trouble falling asleep, waking up in the middle of the night or oversleeping

Behavioral

- Procrastination: putting things off because they feel too big to tackle
- Withdrawing: avoiding meetings, calls or social interactions
- Decline in performance: missing deadlines, making mistakes or producing lower-quality work
- Overworking: working longer hours to catch up



Managing if a volunteer still disappears

Acknowledge the importance of reducing the risk of overwhelm, and provide these tips and tools in multiple visible places: in meetings, on your website, your chapter newsletter, etc. Remind volunteers how much the chapter appreciates all the work they do, let them know they're not alone and share that the chapter is there to help. Invite your volunteers to share the stress reduction tips that work for them and how they navigate similar challenges and stay engaged and present.

For some people, however, there aren't any changes or strategies that will be enough to keep them in their volunteer role. They may just not have enough time or energy to devote currently, or honestly, they may be in the wrong chapter volunteer role, one that they don't have the skills for. Chapter leaders need to be understanding and let the volunteer know they won't stand in their way of stepping down.

Before they leave, ask them to summarize the work they've done and hand over what they've done to date; let them know they don't need to take the time to provide a narrative, that bullets will be fine. To save the next volunteer some stress, whether they're taking over a single task like a blog post or something bigger like overseeing your chapter website overhaul or stepping into a board role partway through a term, see if the person leaving can be available once the new person starts, to answer questions.

When people start to feel overwhelmed, they often shut down or act out, neither of which will help them or your chapter. Be proactive and address the idea of overwhelm before it becomes a major problem and you lose a great volunteer. Help your volunteers set the necessary boundaries and make changes before it all becomes too much to manage, so they can continue to help your chapter in all the ways they've committed to, while maintaining their health and sanity.

