



VOLUNTEERISM

A Practical Guide for Non-Profit Organizations

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I. Introduction

“Volunteering is an expression of the individual’s involvement in their community. Participation, trust, solidarity and reciprocity, grounded in a shared understanding and a sense of common obligations, are mutually reinforcing values at the heart of governance and good citizenship. Volunteering is not a nostalgic relic of the past. It is our first line of defense against social atomization in a globalizing world. Today, maybe more than ever before, caring and sharing are a necessity, not a charitable act.”

- United Nations Volunteers, November 2000

According to the United Nations, volunteerism encompasses a wide range of activities undertaken:



1. Of free will



2. For the general public good and



3. Where monetary reward is not a principal motivating factor.

Often overlooked by policymakers, volunteer involvement is vital to the creation of a just and democratic society as it fosters social responsibility and civic engagement. It also promotes change and development by identifying and responding to community needs. In doing so, volunteerism plays an important role in strengthening communities at the local, national, regional and even international levels by providing both individuals and organizations the ability to contribute to society in an effective and cooperative manner.



II. Volunteering as a Relationship

The effectiveness of volunteerism's impact on the community is contingent upon the strength and vitality of the relationship between volunteers and the organizations engaging them, whether these are government entities or non-governmental civil society groups.

Voluntary organizations must recognize that volunteers are a vital human resource and thus commit to the appropriate infrastructure to support volunteers. The organization's practices should ensure effective involvement and provide a safe and supportive environment for volunteers' efforts. And while volunteering opportunities can be both formal and informal, there are a few basics that any organization must check off:



1. Outline and communicate the purpose, expected outcomes, qualifications, benefits and responsibilities of the volunteer position.



4. Foster an environment of belonging by providing opportunities for volunteers to share feedback.



2. Provide adequate training and orientation.



5. Recognize and reward volunteer efforts through training opportunities and/or greater responsibility within the organization.



3. Ensure access to staff support and other institutional resources for fulfilling responsibilities.



At the same time, volunteers are accountable to the organizational efforts they commit to. They must act with respect for the organization's beneficiaries and stakeholders, keeping in mind the cause they have chosen to contribute to. As general rules, they should:



1. Evaluate a position with reference to individual skills and interests before accepting it.



2. Undertake the required training to develop the skills needed to fulfill their role.



3. Be a team player i.e. be dependable, cooperative and professional.



4. Respect confidential information regarding the organization's programs, products and services.



5. Communicate transparently with supervisors and team leaders concerning all aspects of work including challenges and feedback.

III. Volunteerism's Three-Way Benefits:

When implemented under the right framework, volunteerism mutually benefits individuals, organizations, and communities at large. Besides the satisfaction that accrues from working for a good cause, as individuals, volunteers gain valuable opportunities for personal and professional development. They can discover new interests and talents, foster a professional network, and hone leadership and management skills essential to success in any career. Volunteering experiences help bolster a résumé but they also nourish individuals' sense of belonging and social well being.

For non-profit and civil society organizations in particular, volunteers play an important role by enabling these entities to serve their stakeholders more effectively. Volunteers are not meant to be “free help.” They complement the work of paid staff in a variety of ways, from providing administrative support to leading core initiatives. They also bring a fresh perspective vis à vis challenges and opportunities and can become permanent staff members in the future. Volunteers help promote a positive image of the organization within the community. By defining the scope of volunteers' work in line with their mission and values, organizations can better leverage their talents and efforts towards achieving institutional objectives.

Moreover, volunteerism benefits communities by encouraging civic participation in tackling local issues and promoting good governance practices. It is an avenue of genuine grassroots mobilization to resolve tangible socio-economic, political and environmental challenges, from implementing ecofriendly development projects to helping foster dialogue in a post-conflict society. In both developed and developing countries, volunteerism is a resource and vehicle for bringing skills, knowledge and expertise to enable voice and participation, accountability and responsiveness as key pillars of good governance complementing other development solutions and resources.



IV. Involving Volunteers: Who Does What?

Outlining a coherent strategy for volunteer recruitment, training, and supervision is key to ensuring productive volunteer involvement. An important element of such a strategy is defining the roles different members at each managerial level of an organization should play. Below is a general outline of the responsibilities of board members, executive management and team leaders in this regard. However, it is contingent upon the size and personnel structure of the particular organization.



Board Members/Top Management

- Create, lead and ensure a supportive environment and culture for volunteer involvement (policy focus).
- Develop a strategic plan that considers integrating volunteer involvement as a core function and resource to support achievement of the organization's mission.
- Develop a policy approach to human resource management that incorporates volunteer involvement standards.
- Identify and develop governance policies.



Executive/Middle Management

- Create and manage a supportive environment and culture for volunteer involvement (policy and delivery focus).
- Assist with strategic plan development and manage its operational strategies and goals.
- Lead to ensure effective management of volunteers and the integration of volunteer involvement standards and practices.
- Manage the implementation of governance policies.

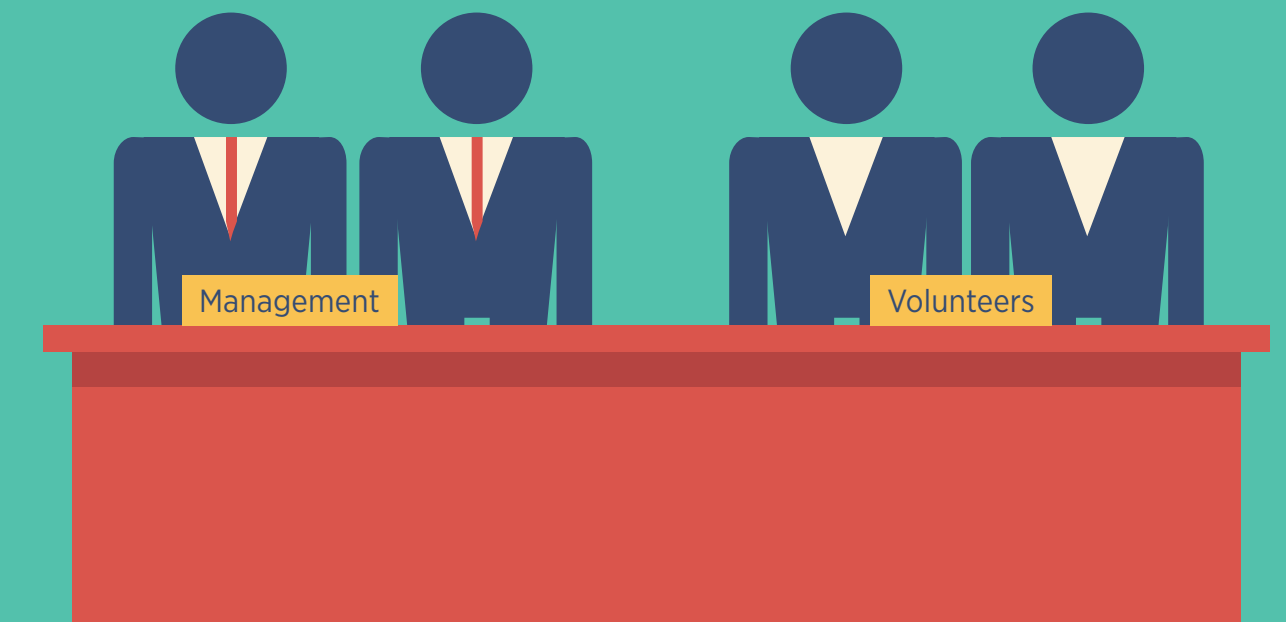
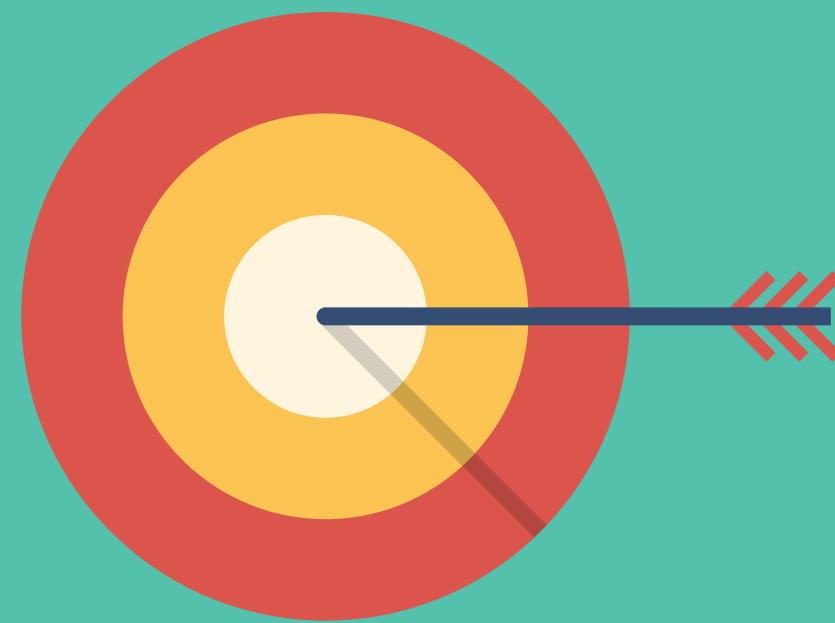


Team Leaders

- Manage and lead volunteers within a supportive environment and culture for volunteer involvement (policy and delivery focus).
- Link volunteers' operational work to the organization's vision, mission and values.
- Actively supervise volunteer work and implement volunteer involvement standards.
- Ensure implementation of governance policies.

V. Organizational Standards for Volunteer Involvement

By adopting the standards and practices outlined in this section, organizations can demonstrate to all stakeholders—from donors to the community—that volunteers form a crucial pillar of institutional efforts. Moreover, they enable organizations to implement a well-run volunteer program that guarantees optimal contribution to achieving clear objectives.



Standard 1: Mission-Based Approach

- Adopt a statement declaring the vital role of volunteers in achieving the organization's mission.
- Incorporate volunteer involvement in the planning process.
- Allocate adequate budget and resources for volunteer involvement.
- Regularly evaluate volunteer work and goals.

Standard 2: Human Resources

- Provide staff with training to work effectively with volunteers.
- Solicit and welcome input from volunteers for the organization's planning and evaluation.
- Encourage volunteers to grow within the organization.
- Include volunteers as equal members of the team.

Standard 3: Program Planning and Policies

- Incorporate volunteers' roles and responsibilities within programmatic plans.
- Put in place governance and operational policies that are reviewed regularly and incorporate volunteer involvement practices.
- Communicate all policies and procedures to staff and volunteers.
- Ensure a consistent and equitable implementation of policies.

Standard 4: Program Administration

- Ensure staff coordinating volunteers have the appropriate level of education and experience to manage the program.
- Facilitate collaboration between the volunteer program and other departments and organizations for increased effectiveness.
- Provide frequent professional development opportunities to volunteer program staff.
- Periodically review the performance of volunteer program staff by using input from both staff and volunteers.



Standard 5: Volunteer Assignments

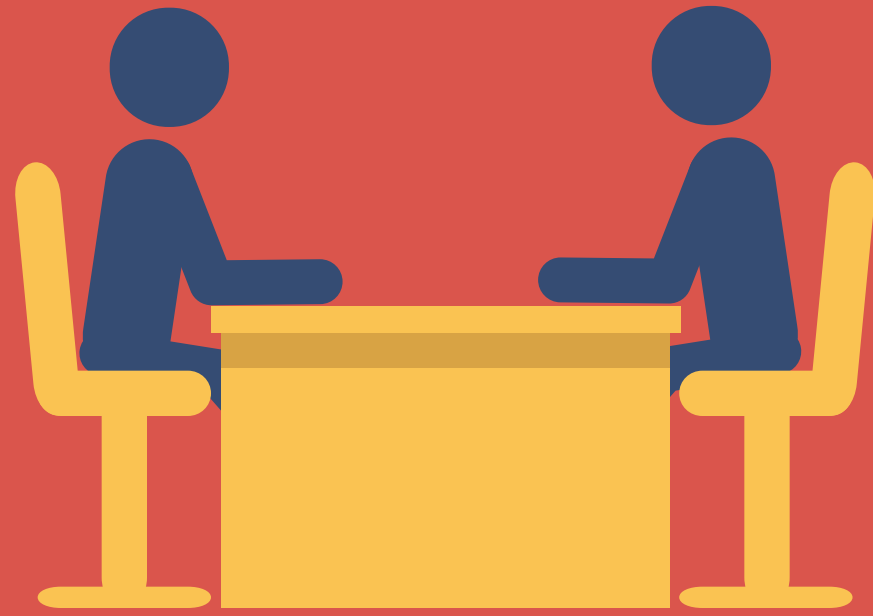
- Consult volunteers and staff when developing new assignments.
- Develop volunteer assignments to reflect the needs of the organization and of the volunteers.
- Review these assignments periodically with staff and volunteers to ensure relevance and value.
- Encourage and facilitate the involvement of volunteers with special needs or challenges.



Standard 6: Recruitment

- Ensure recruitment messages are realistic and clear about volunteer assignments and expectations.
- Identify populations who are already in direct or indirect contact with the organization such as: alumni of programs, clients, friends of current volunteers, people in the organization's neighborhood.
- Use social media, word of mouth, email, website, and other methods for effective recruitment outreach.
- Base the selection of volunteers on actual requirements and pre-determined screening measures.





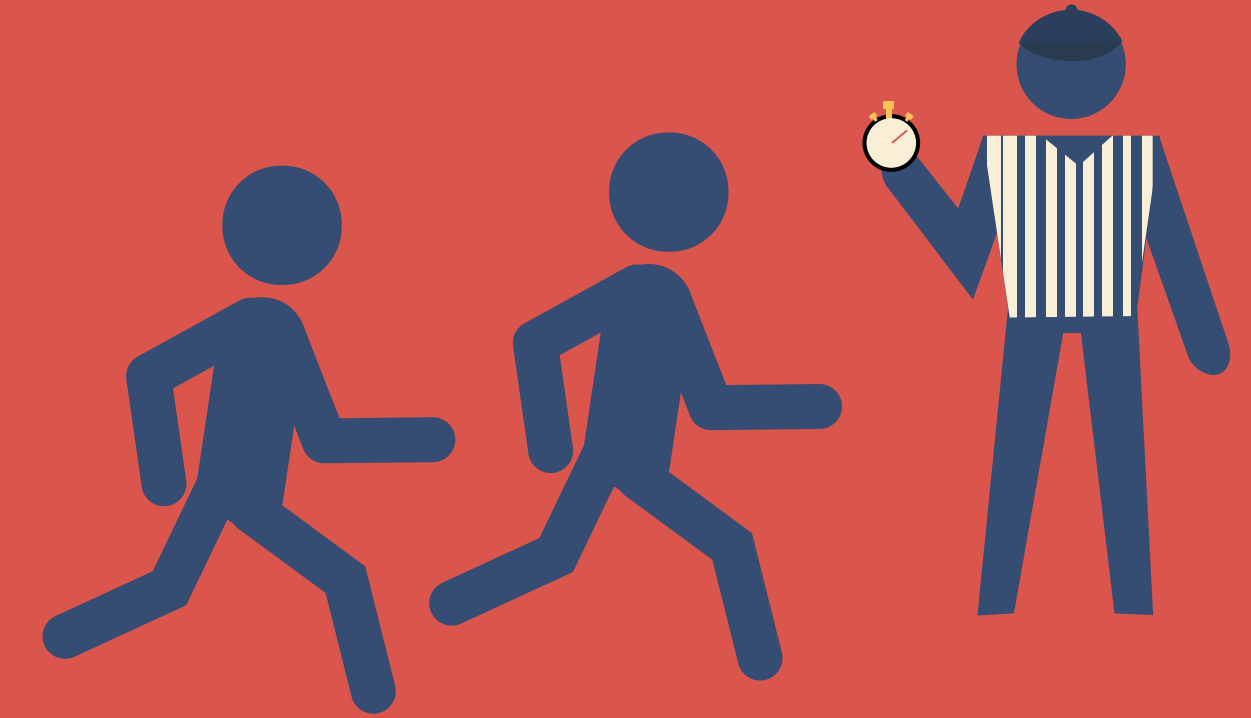
Standard 7: Screening

- Ensure screening is continuous throughout the volunteer's involvement with the organization.
- Adopt and communicate to staff and volunteers clear policies relating to screening practices.
- Assess all volunteer assignments for level of risk.
- Use appropriate screening according to the level of risk of the assignment, including formal interviews, reference checks, criminal history record checks, and ongoing monitoring.



Standard 8: Orientation and Training

- Provide volunteers with information on the history, mission and structure of the organization.
- Familiarize volunteers with the policies and procedures specific to their volunteer assignments.
- Provide adequate training to enable volunteers to perform their assignments without putting themselves or others at risk.
- Provide volunteers with ongoing training opportunities to upgrade their skills and adapt to changes in the organization.



Standard 9: Supervision

- Assign and introduce volunteers to their supervisors at the start of their assignments.
- Evaluate performance on a regular basis.
- Use random spot checks with volunteers and clients to verify volunteer performance.
- Create and encourage use of effective mechanisms for volunteers to provide input about the organization's efforts.

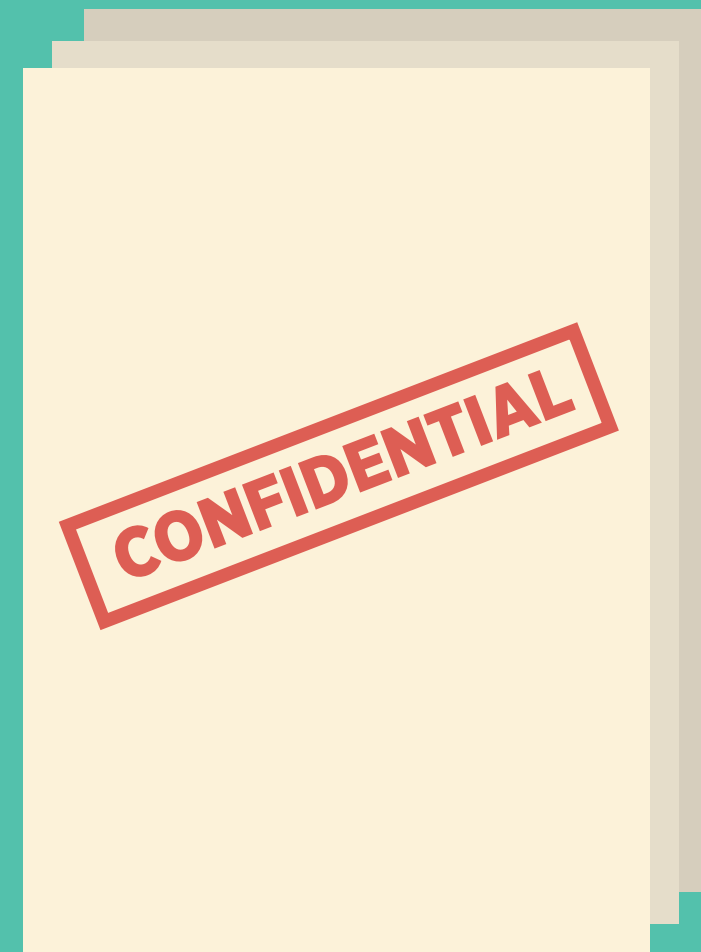
Standard 10: Recognition

- Ensure top management recognizes volunteer efforts.
- Deliver formal methods of recognition consistently.
- Deliver informal methods of recognition in a timely and appropriate manner.



Standard 11: Record Management

- Keep records for each volunteer by using a confidential, secure system respecting the privacy of personal information.
- Share statistical information about the volunteer program with staff and volunteers.
- Disseminate testimonials, after securing appropriate agreements, about volunteers' experiences within the organization to promote volunteer involvement.



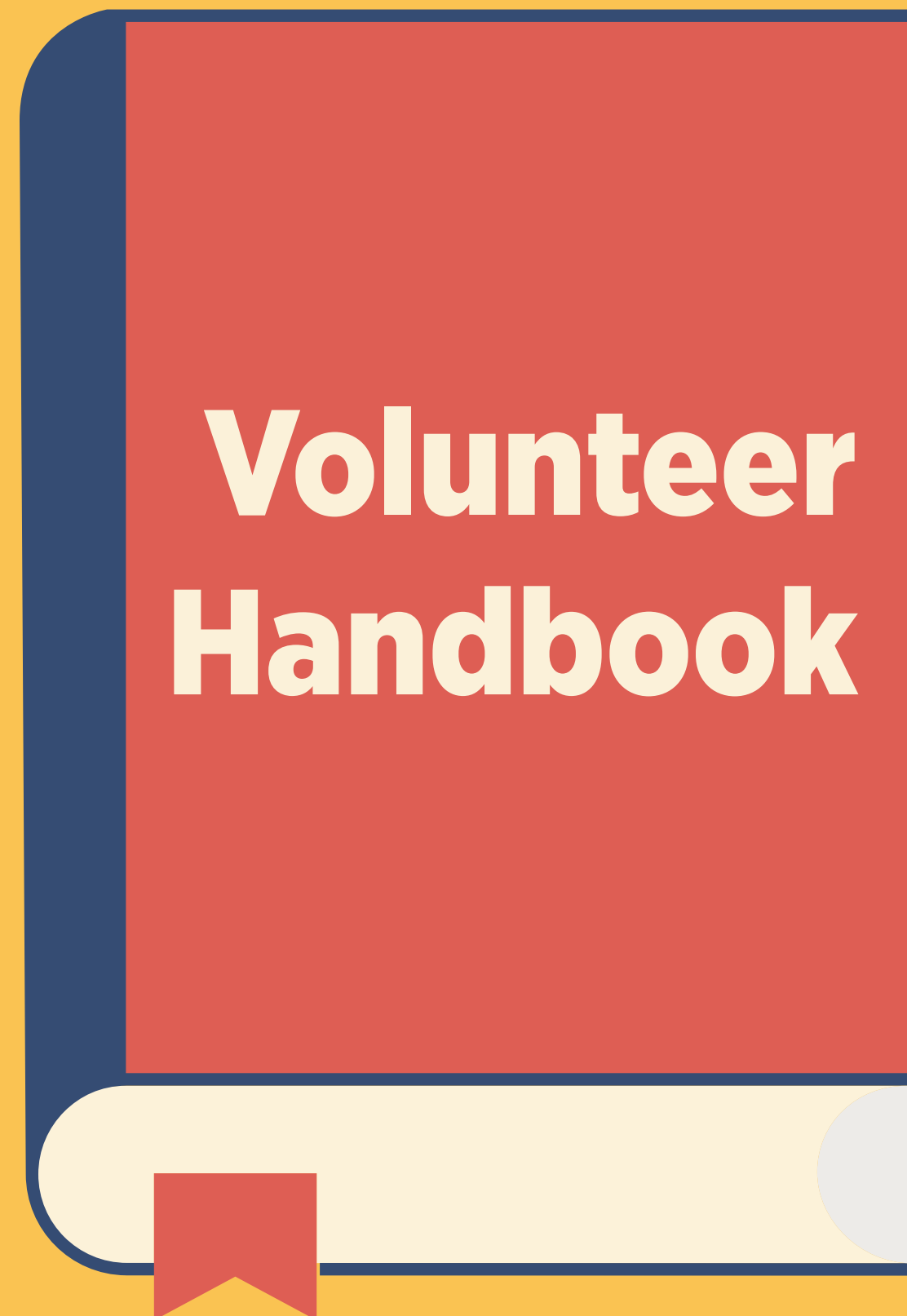
Standard 12: Evaluation

- Communicate evaluation procedures clearly to volunteers during orientation.
- Establish and annually review performance standards for the volunteer program.
- Assess the achievement of performance goals on an annual basis.
- Ensure that evaluation tools take volunteers' input into consideration.



VI. Developing a Volunteer Handbook

In order to minimize risks of miscommunication, under-performing expectations, or overstepping boundaries, your organization might find it helpful to develop a document that can be shared and signed off on by volunteers once they join. A volunteer handbook serves three major purposes: relaying crucial organizational information, establishing clear expectations, and emphasizing the importance of volunteers within your organization. By sharing this information with your volunteers upfront, you are both welcoming them to your organization and ensuring that they fully understand their roles and responsibilities.



Each organization should find out, through research, what type of information its volunteers want and need to know. However, below are some standard categories that are usually included by most non-profits:



Welcome Letter:

The welcome letter is an opportunity for your organization to create an inviting environment for your volunteers and to explain their critical role in the fulfillment of your mission.



Organizational Information:

In order for volunteers to feel like they are an important part of your organization, they need to know something about it. In this section, you will describe the history, mission, and vision of your organization, where you've been, who you are, and what you're planning to do next. The goal of this section is to encourage your volunteers to take ownership of your mission, vision, and goals.



Volunteer Information:

In this section, explain how volunteers fit into your organization and how they can help further your mission. It's also important for everyone to have the same, shared expectations about the volunteer process.



Policies and Procedures:

This is your opportunity to advise incoming volunteers on how to work appropriately and effectively in your organization. It can include information on eligibility requirements, code of conduct, training and orientation, attendance policy, reimbursement policy, confidentiality policy, etc.



Signed Volunteer Agreement/Acknowledgement of Receipt of Handbook:

The purpose of this section is to ensure accountability. A signed agreement or acknowledgement legitimizes the process of going over the handbook, makes it more likely that volunteers will take the handbook seriously, and gives you written proof that all parties understand expectations.



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