

From the Desk of David Lantz

Building a Volunteer Ministry: A Lesson from The Little Red Hen

Americans are in a hurry. In our fast-paced society, we are on the go to be on time for the next event, the next meeting, the next project. But, as much as we're in a hurry, we also long to connect with others – to experience a sense of belonging. In spite of our busyness, we are willing to volunteer our time in order to achieve that sense of belonging. But before we are willing to exchange our time and effort to achieve the satisfaction of belonging, we want to know that our efforts will be used wisely.

Have you experienced this as you seek to recruit and sustain volunteers in your church? For those in a leadership position, the effort required to maintain a vibrant volunteer ministry can seem virtually impossible. It is for this reason that many church leaders adopt the “I’ll do it myself” mentality. Unfortunately, that path will not only stifle the growth of your church – it will lead to burnout of your leadership core group.

If Jesus decided it was better to train twelve disciples to create a volunteer organization when he could have done it all himself – and done it better – maybe there’s a lesson for us as church leaders.

Many churches struggle to provide balance between presenting sermons and programs which attract seekers/new members and spiritually nourishing the existing flock. Key to resolving this tension is successfully integrating new volunteers with the existing core of "old faithful" members. No doubt, the motivation for volunteering varies. There are some who truly wish to express God’s agape love through the act of service. Others want to meet people and increase opportunities for fellowship. Still others wish to volunteer for more personal reasons, be it to exercise a spiritual gift God has revealed they have, or to increase their scope of business contacts.

Whatever their reason for volunteering, they generally expect that certain things are “understood”:

1. They expect to be given a specific, defined task – not an open-ended, loosely defined job where they have to “figure out” what it is they’re doing.
2. People want to know there is someone “in charge” with a big-picture plan.
3. They want to know what small piece of the plan they can accomplish.
4. And, they want to know how what they do helps to achieve the big picture.

Perhaps you’ve put together a five-year plan for your church. You’ve written out a list of jobs people could do and how they will benefit the ministries of your church. Your Board of Elders has drawn up a list of ministries and your congregation has even completed a time and talent survey. But, you’ve heard a report from your elder in charge of personnel which indicates that staff are being overworked and are suffering burnout. For some reason, people aren’t volunteering.

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Asking is only half the battle. James 4:3 says “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss.” Therefore, we must ask people to volunteer, and we must ask in a way that will make it easy for them to want to say yes when we do ask. To apply the precept of James 4:3, I believe there are five specific steps which church leaders can follow to build and sustain a vibrant volunteer organization.

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1. Discern Where God is Already Working

Let's say you have identified ten key ministries your church is promoting. Which ones are bursting at the seams? Which ones have only the “frozen chosen” involved? After you've answered this question, those in leadership need to be honest with themselves. Chances are that the vibrant ministries are the ones which have a core group of interested lay people who have taken ownership of and feel called to that ministry. The ministries with few participants stay alive only because one or two people – either church staff or large donors to the church – want them to exist. It may be that God is at work in ministries of the former type, not the later precisely because one person's EGO has Edged God Out. In fact, the second half of James 4:3 is precisely on point to this topic. It says: “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, *that ye may consume [it] upon your lusts.*” To honestly evaluate the effectiveness of a ministry, church leaders must ask who is in control. God is active where the Holy Spirit is in control. He is not active where human egos run the show.

Therefore, begin to implement your volunteer model in those areas of church life where God is already active.

2. Begin Building your Volunteer Ministry with the End in Mind

What do you want to accomplish? You may think this is obvious. If it is, good: It should be easy to reduce the goal of this ministry to a mission statement which your core group can agree to – one which your ministry team can be accountable for producing measurable results. This last point may meet with resistance from some quarters in your church, but are we not called to be good stewards of God's resources? If Jesus felt the rich man in the parable of the talents was justified in requiring a return on his investment – and that God expects the same with the spiritual gifts He bestows on the church – why should a ministry have a problem with being held accountable?

Beginning with the end in mind is critical to establishing a vibrant volunteer ministry. Let me give an example using an Aesop-type story with which many are familiar: The story of the Little Red Hen. One day, she set out to bake bread. She asked many of the other farm animals to help her, but none wished to volunteer. So, along with her little chicks, she ended up doing all the work. When she finished, however, all the other farm animals wished to join her in eating the bread, even though they hadn't helped to make the bread.

The Little Red Hen had one simple goal which can be summarized as follows: I Want To Eat. All of her actions were centered around accomplishing this specific, quantifiable and achievable goal.

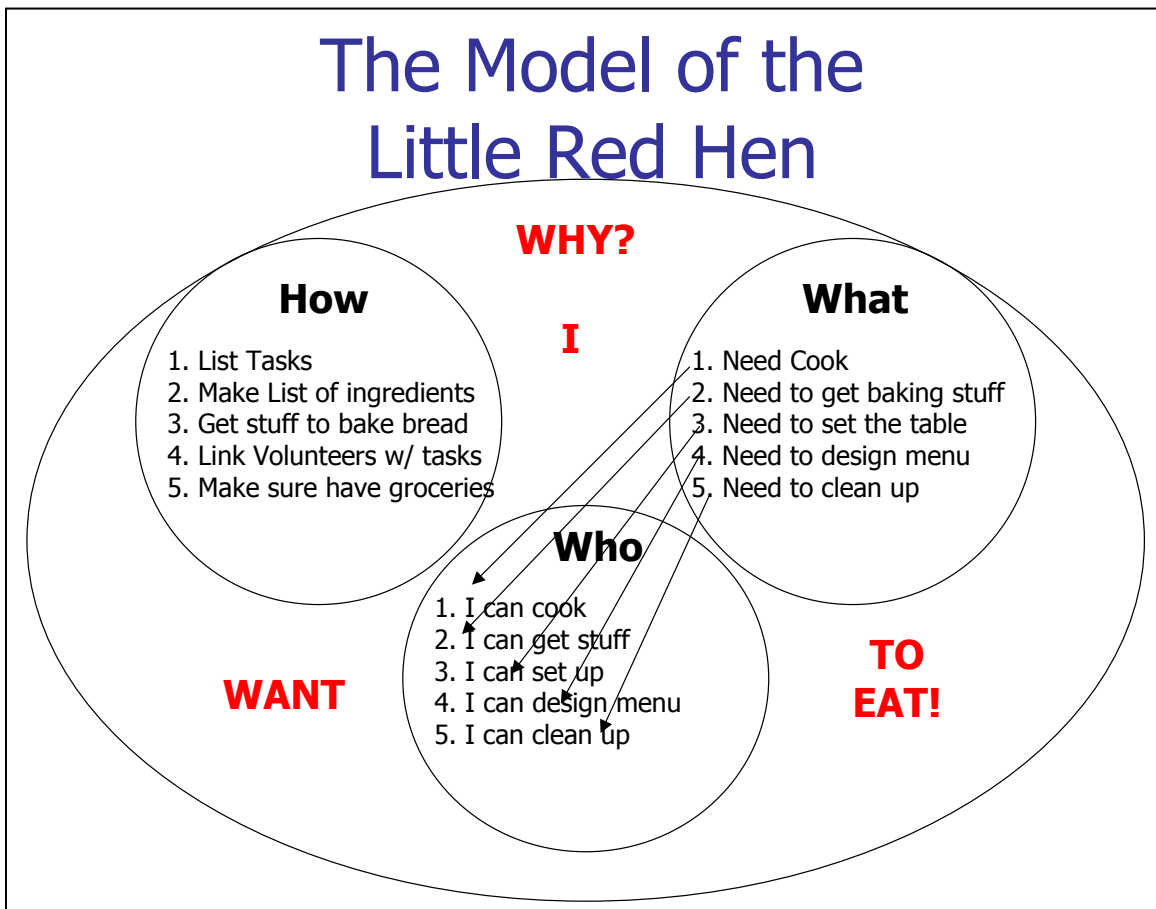
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3. Picture the Process of Recruiting and Supporting Volunteers as Looking Like an Electric Norelco Razor.

If you've ever seen an electric Norelco Razor, you know that there are three circular rotating razors encompassed by a triangular-shaped head with rounded edges. Taking our story of the Little Red Hen a step further, the overarching vision of "I want to eat" answers the question "**why** am I engaged in this activity?" The triangle of the razor encompassing the three circular blades represents the "why" of our ministry.

Each of the three separate blades represent questions which must be asked - and answered - in creating our volunteer ministry. Again, staying with the story of the Little Red Hen, the questions are:

1. What specific tasks need to be performed (i.e., harvest the wheat, knead the dough, bake the bread, etc.)
2. Who has the specific gifts required to accomplish the various tasks.
3. How will we coordinate and facilitate the people with the requisite gifts to perform the specific tasks we've identified?



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It is this "how" phase where most church organizations drop the ball. Ecc. 8:6 says:

For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, though a man's trouble is heavy upon him.

It isn't enough for a leader to have a vision of what the ministry will accomplish. He must either think through and explain the procedures required to accomplish the vision, or have the humility to allow someone else who does have that ability to accomplish this key part of the program.

4. Ask for Help - And Ask Wisely

It is one thing to have a need for a volunteer. It is an entirely different matter for an individual to have the desire to volunteer his or her time and talents. At each stage of making the bread, the Little Red Hen walked up to the group of animals and asked a general question: Who would like to help with (whatever step in the process she was at). In our churches, how often we follow this same pattern by putting an announcement in the church bulletin, the newsletter, the website, etc. saying something like "anyone wishing to volunteer, please call Jane Doe." In other words, we have not because we ask amiss.

If we have tried to force ministry to occur where God is not already active, no amount of asking will help. If, however, we are working where God is already active, asking wisely will produce the volunteers we need - volunteers with passion and commitment. While there are no specific methods which work in all situations, a few principles are key:

- a. Ask directly, person to person. Generally speaking, a specific personal appeal for help is more effective than a general solicitation.
- b. Ask for what someone can reasonably do. For example, if you know that someone has spare money to give, but not spare time, ask if they can contribute financially.
- c. Bear in mind that in some cases, people will choose whether or not to volunteer based on the individual who is asking. Therefore, be sensitive to interpersonal dynamics.

5. Finally, Use Well Defined Projects to Build a Sense of Team

Are you asking volunteers to commit to a ministry opportunity which is open-ended and will go on indefinitely? If so, be sure an esprit de corps already exists. If this is not the case, your efforts will fail for lack of a firm foundation of personal commitment.

To build that foundation, choose a project which has a defined beginning and ending. Take, for example, the building of an addition to your church. Be it a playground for a church school, a youth shelter house or some other structure, these are examples of short-term projects which, through the use of volunteers instead of professional contractors, you can build that sense of team. Anyone who has ever been on a mission trip to help a group of people build a church or hospital understands this concept. Apply it to your church, and watch how God will honor the building up of the Body of Christ for future service.

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Conclusion

At one point in my career, I became the director of a statewide not-for-profit organization. One of my responsibilities was to develop a network of county chapter organizations. I knew that if my efforts were to be successful, I would have to be sure that I was working in tune with what God wanted, and in the way He wanted to proceed. Unlike a local church, where members of a congregation know each other, my job required me to recruit volunteers whom I would have no way of knowing who they would be. My responsibility was to communicate the opportunity for involvement in the ministry of the organization. I would have to trust God to touch the hearts of people to prompt them into volunteering.

If you do a study of some of the greatest "volunteers" in the Bible - people like Moses, Samuel, Gideon and Paul - you'll discover they all had one thing in common. Each man was specifically called to service by God Himself. From this fact, I draw the following conclusion:

If God is working in a given ministry area, then He - and He alone - will be the one who calls volunteers into service. I am to communicate the need, facilitate the response, and then rely on God to lead people to become involved.

When you look at the picture of our Norelco razor model of volunteer recruitment and support, you'll note a striking similarity to another shape: The shape of a heart. That picture serves to remind us that what we're doing isn't our ministry, it's God's.

And when God dwells in the heart of a believer who wishes to be used for His service, great things happen.



David Lantz provides project management consulting services to not-for-profit organizations. An Adjunct Professor of Business Management for the University of Phoenix and Indiana Tech, he writes on the use of Business Technology and Christian Leadership. His latest publication is the e-book, **Finding Community: Creating Connections on the Frontier of Online Ministry.**

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