



THE FIVE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS You Will Ever Ask About Volunteering

SOCIAL VENTURE PARTNERS WORKBOOK

Adapted from and thanks to
The Community Foundation Serving Boulder County
and SVP Boulder

When we began this project, SVP project managers in Seattle and Arizona noticed that SVP volunteers and nonprofits were experiencing difficulties working together because of a number of differences between them. To address this issue, SVP staff wanted to improve their training programs for SVP volunteers to set more accurate expectations and better prepare them to assist nonprofits.

In our search for helpful resources, we found that there are many management manuals to assist nonprofits in recruiting, training and recognizing volunteers. There are very few manuals geared for the volunteer's use. For this reason, we have developed the Self-Assessment Tool for Social Venture Partners. Designed specifically for volunteers from the private sector, this workbook will introduce you to some general differences SVP volunteers have experienced in the nonprofit environment, how to choose an appropriate volunteer assignment and how to make a worthwhile contribution.

We highly recommend that you take 30-45 minutes to read through and think about the information provided in this workbook. We believe that it will help you be more successful and feel more satisfied in your volunteer role with SVP investees!

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

Completing the workbook will help you clarify the role you wish to play as a volunteer and assist you in developing an effective relationship with the nonprofit you are assisting. The self-assessment tool was developed by listening to Seattle Social Venture Partners who have volunteered with different types of nonprofits. Although their assignments varied, several common themes emerged from their experiences. From these themes, we have identified five simple but critical questions for Social Venture Partners to ask before embarking on their volunteer experience. The five questions below are the key to beginning this powerful inquiry.

- What do I want to accomplish as a volunteer?
- How do I want to contribute?
- What will my volunteer experience be like?
- How will I know what the nonprofit needs?
- How do I maintain my energy and stay motivated?

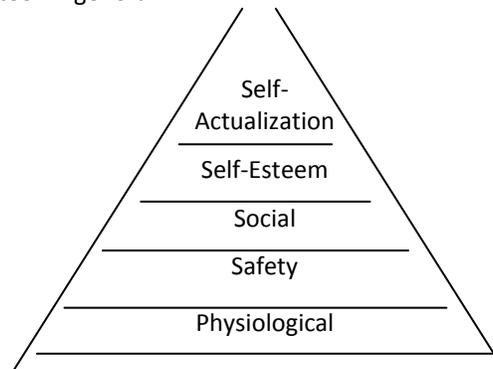
This workbook presents the five questions – with background and examples provided by previous Social Venture Partners – along with a number of worksheets designed to help you think through each of the important questions for your role as a volunteer. Either in a group or individually, we invite you to read each section carefully and complete the accompanying worksheets to begin planning a fulfilling and effective SVP volunteer experience.

Once you have completed the five sections, you will have the opportunity to make a volunteer commitment as the final step before embarking on your SVP assignment.

Question 1: What do I want to accomplish as a volunteer?

Many times a volunteer is recommended to a position by an SVP staff member. Nonetheless, it's your job to do some self-exploration first and know what you want so that your volunteer position fulfills your needs as well as those of the nonprofit. How do you do this? Know your skills and your interests, think about your incentives to be a volunteer, and communicate them loud and clear to the SVP staff.

To understand what motivates you in volunteering, it may help to recall some basic theories of motivation that are applicable both in paid and unpaid work. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a good place to start as a basic tool for understanding why people volunteer in general.



Generally, people who volunteer have met their physiological and safety needs and are now working on fulfilling the needs in the upper tiers of Maslow's pyramid. However, making the right volunteer job choice involves a deeper exploration of your personality and motivation.

Most of the SVP volunteers surveyed recounted very personal reasons for serving as volunteers for particular charities. One volunteer was a talented musician, and very passionate about the ability of music to bring people together. He worked with a nonprofit that fostered musical interest and ability in disadvantaged young people. Another recalled fond memories of her experiences in the outdoors and wanted to commit her volunteer time to an organization that promoted outdoor education.

One SVP volunteer suggests, *"Sit down and think about what life experiences have impacted you positively. Dig deep and think about what's important to you and how you can tap into that to seek a cause."*

As one Lead Partner observed, *"if the project does not line up with some core need the person has, the person does not do it."* Truly, unless a person is fully committed to the work, the chances for disappointment for both the volunteer and the nonprofit are greater. No matter what your passion, tapping into it can be the road to a successful volunteer experience.

With these SVP lessons in mind, it's time to do some questioning for yourself. What specific volunteer job description you end up with depends on the answers to a few simple questions. The first and perhaps most important question is knowing why you want to volunteer. The how and the what will spring from your answers to the following questions.

Why do you want to be a part of the Social Venture Partners program?

What issues in society draw your interest and attention that you wish to affect positively?

What experiences have made a difference to you in your life that you want others to also experience?

Question 2: How do I want to contribute?

Now that you have identified why you want to volunteer, it is important to understand how you want to contribute to the nonprofit you serve to fulfill your needs and theirs at the same time. This is the nitty gritty part of determining what you would really like to do as a volunteer day to day. This part of the workbook is basic but crucial to bringing you closer to an appropriate volunteer assignment.

In the beginning, many volunteers have been heard asking, *“What can I do to help when I’ve never worked in a nonprofit before?”* To tackle this question, you must do the same thing you would when you are considering a new job or promotion: determine your transferable skills. Every volunteer has talents and skills they bring from other jobs or volunteer positions. The key is understanding how those skills will be used in a new setting. Start by writing down your skills – both technical and non-technical – and then brainstorm on how those skills might be needed at a nonprofit. You may also decide there are many skills you would like to learn through your volunteer experience. Write those down too. There will be many opportunities to learn and you will want to be ready for them.

It’s equally important to think about what you don’t know as a volunteer. In the case of SVP investees, it will almost always be the case that the non-profit has vastly greater expertise when it comes to program knowledge, how to help kids, understanding non-profit culture, etc. It’s important to “stick to your knitting.”

Of the SVP Partners surveyed, many of them pointed out that a volunteer position may or may not be related to your professional work skills. For one SVP volunteer, being a stay-at-home parent motivated her to want to use her professional skills as a volunteer. *“I am fulfilled by being with my children all week long, but when I’m doing volunteer work, I want to use the project management and technical skills I’ve gained from previous work I’ve done. So I work mostly on the strategic and management end of projects instead of directly with the clients we serve through the SVP project.”*

On the other hand, some volunteers want a different experience than what they experience in their work life. The Seattle SVP program found that volunteers enjoy positions in mentoring and working with individuals because they want to have children in their lives, and to make a “real difference” one person at a time. One SVP volunteer commented, *“I love kids. My daughter is grown up, so I have no opportunity to be around them. They are so enthusiastic – it’s fun to be around them.”*

Defining the “how” of your SVP volunteer experience can be a simple visioning exercise starting with the following questions:

What professional skills have you acquired?

Technical Skills

Non-Technical Skills

How might the skills you have listed above be used at a nonprofit?

What skills do you have that you would like to use as a volunteer?

What skills would you like to acquire through your volunteer experience?

What kind of people would you like to volunteer with? (Sometimes its as simple as determining what age group of people you want to interact with the most – young children, teens, adults or seniors.)

What kind of working relationship do you want to develop with the nonprofit’s clients, staff, and volunteers? (For example, you may want more frequent one-on-one contact with a nonprofit’s clients, but less frequent working or meeting time with nonprofit managers. Try to envision who you see yourself working with day to day.)

What types of work settings are most comfortable to you? (think of the times when you are most productive in your past work and volunteer experiences, for instance, were you alone or in groups, at home or in an office, on the phone or meeting face to face, etc.)

How far from home are you willing to drive, or do you prefer to work out of your home?

What blocks of time can you reasonably offer? (Here it might even be helpful for you to take an extra sheet of paper to create a weekly schedule of volunteer time you can reasonably offer for up to one year at a time.)

Question 3: What will my volunteer experience be like?

Nonprofits have many distinguishing features that can present a challenge or at least a few surprises to volunteers from the business world. True, many charities are adopting business practices and there is more interaction and blurring between the sectors than ever. But for many SVP volunteers, nonprofits have cultural differences that have caused them to adapt to meet the needs of this new environment.

Culture can be defined as the basic symbols and core values of an organization that collectively produce a certain feel or environment for its participants. According to organizational theorists, dimensions of culture include artifacts and creations, such as symbols, processes and procedures; basic values about how things ought to be and how people should behave; and assumptions on which people operate. Another integral part of organizational culture is leadership, or the ability of a person to direct and energize people to accomplish goals, and organizational structure. These concepts will be a critical part of understanding and preparing for the nonprofit where you will volunteer.

SVP volunteers noted five basic differences in the cultural environment at various nonprofits:

Collaborative Leadership Styles

Because many nonprofits depend heavily on external groups such as boards of directors, community volunteers, and publicly elected officials, they often emphasize relationships and the group process when carrying out their missions. As one volunteer puts it, *“When a nonprofit is paying their volunteers in goodwill, they need to pay more attention to building friendships and sharing the vision and mission with them. Sometimes we’ll spend meetings just getting to know each other, because that process of building trust is the foundation for all we do.”*

Generally, these leadership styles use more open communication across stakeholder groups and more encouraging and sympathetic relations with staff and volunteers. With this expectation, it's critical to understand your own leadership style and how to cooperate with leadership at the nonprofit you serve. An SVP volunteer recounted her troubles in the beginning of her assignment because her leadership style clashed with the nonprofit's culture. *"I got into trouble in the beginning because my leadership style is very directive. I found that I had to slow down and build relationships much more so than in my previous work experience."*

Nonprofit's Bottom Line: Relationships and Community

As nonprofits lack the "bottom-line" found in business, they must use other measurements of success. Indeed, there are many quantitative measurements used by nonprofits to determine effectiveness, such as number of people served and achievement of fundraising goals. However, often paramount to budgets and client roles are the relationships the nonprofit has with its staff, volunteers, board of directors, and the community at large.

One SVP volunteer recounts his frustration that a meeting of volunteers and staff did not accomplish the objective that he had hoped for. At the end of the meeting, he expressed his frustration to the executive director, who to his surprise was very enthusiastic about the outcome. When asked why, the director replied that he had been wanting this particular group of people to be more engaged and comfortable with one another, and through the process of the meeting he determined that they had reached that stage. To him, the relationship building process was extremely important to accomplishing future objectives as a team.

Although many nonprofits are attempting to note more measurable objectives to determine their success, knowing their predisposition toward people and their interactions is crucial. It's all about benefiting their constituents!

A Different Pace

Time and again, SVP Volunteers spoke of the different pace of their nonprofit. Partially due to the need for leaders to get buy-in of external and internal stakeholders, the dependence on volunteers, and the scarcity of resources to support projects, nonprofits have to operate at a slower pace than many businesses.

One SVP volunteer said, *"Many of the nonprofit staff have so much responsibility and so few resources, it just takes longer to get things done. I learned to set my expectations a little differently in order to avoid getting frustrated."*

Another volunteer suggests, *"It's helpful to know that progress takes time. I learned to avoid being bogged down by day to day details and to look at the outcomes over a longer period of time."*

The Prevalence of Multiple Constituencies

As community-based organizations, nonprofits often have more of a political environment than business. Although politics are found wherever there are people, the public nature of nonprofit organizations can make politics a powerful force. Many SVP volunteers told of projects that were created, changed or scrapped due to influences beyond their control.

As one volunteer describes her project, *"There were multiple hierarchies and official and unofficial people with veto power over our work. This made the work more complex and time-consuming than I originally expected."*

Open and Personal Communication Style

Along the same lines as the leadership styles often found in nonprofits, communication is also more open and personal than in the business world. Due to the community-mindedness of nonprofits, and in some cases the lack of advanced technology, SVP volunteers noted the desire for more personal, face-to-face communications during their assignments. While e-mail and phone calls were used for meetings, many nonprofits preferred talking with people in person over a conference call.

One volunteer recounted the dismay she caused in the beginning of her project because of the sheer amount of email she produced in coordinating staff and other volunteers. Nonprofit staff simply was not used to using email

as the primary communication method. This same volunteer also found that the nonprofit staff's email were much longer and included more personal messages than her communications, which were much shorter. During her project, both learned to adapt to each other's styles.

Understanding these differences is the first step to beginning a fruitful relationship with an investee. No matter what the situation, respect for an investee and its staff are critical. Both you and the nonprofit staff have something to learn from each other. By completing the following questions, you will have a better understanding of yourself in relation to these differences:

What characterizes your personal leadership style? (For example, are you more directive or do you encourage greater participation by team members before taking action?)

With what leadership styles in others are you most comfortable?

What characterizes your personal communication style? (How have you communicated with other volunteers or colleagues in the past – do you prefer meeting face to face, through email, or the phone? When you converse with people, are you typically more quiet or more vocal than others in the group? When there is a disagreement, how do you typically react?)

With what communication styles in others are you most comfortable?

Question 4: How will I know what the nonprofit needs?

Once you've got a volunteer assignment, much of your knowledge will be gleaned through formal training programs that the SVP program and the nonprofit will provide to you. Take advantage of these orientation and warm-up sessions to become more knowledgeable about the mission of the organization you are serving and the responsibilities you will have.

To get a clear idea up front of the issue you will be addressing, the goal of the project, and your responsibilities, be sure to ask for those answers early on. Of course, sometimes the issue at a nonprofit is that they are so busy helping others, they don't have time to address their own needs. That's okay, as long as the staff has made a commitment to determine the organization's needs and to translate that to you. That may take time, but it will be time well spent when you embark on a relevant and necessary project. It's kind of like defining a "job description."

Many SVP volunteers couldn't emphasize more strongly the importance of building and maintaining trust of the nonprofits where they worked so that they could learn more fully what problems and needs the nonprofit had. That trust begins with building a positive and lasting relationship with the executive director and other staff members.

One volunteer recalled that the real nature of the nonprofit's problems wasn't clear until several months into the project, at which point they had to reassess what they were doing and change course. He said, "*Nonprofits can be hesitant to share their difficult issues with you until you prove you're there to help and in it for the long haul. Once I made that clear, the answers came much more freely and we could begin addressing the problems together.*" As in this example, establishing trust with nonprofits will be the key to knowing what the assignment really calls for.

Once you've begun the project, as in any work situation it is subject to change at any time. Being flexible and keeping the lines of communication open can prevent projects from heading the wrong direction and wasting valuable time. Be sure to ask for constant feedback on your performance and how the volunteer project may be changing. If you've built that trusting relationship, then the rest should follow. But like any good relationship, it takes time, work and attention to keep it healthy.

If you've conducted the essential project needs assessment, before beginning the bulk of the work you should be able to answer the following questions:

What is the issue we are addressing through this project?

What are the goals and objectives of the project?

What is my role and responsibility in this project?

What does my volunteer job description look like?

How will my performance be assessed throughout the project?

Question 5: How do I maintain my energy & stay motivated?

Once you have progressed in your volunteer assignment, you will need to bring with you a few essential tools for maintaining your motivation and desire to succeed with your project. Good volunteer managers will present you with plenty of feel good ammunition to keep you energized, but much of the staying motivated part will have to come from you and your volunteer team, if applicable.

Many of the volunteers surveyed told of some critical or frustrating point in their project that sapped their energy. One volunteer said that she felt frustrated when tasks weren't accomplished at the same pace she was accustomed to at work. The SVP team she was working with had jumped into a large project, and when it wasn't progressing very quickly, the team experienced a slight drop in morale. This example leads us to an important lesson in volunteering.

Seek Out Small Victories

Set yourself up for small victories – especially in the beginning of your project. Incremental accomplishments early on are a great way to boost your confidence and prove your effectiveness to the nonprofit you serve. This strategy is not only in accordance with the slower pace of many nonprofits, but is a powerful motivational tool for you. It also works to build trust you will want to have with your Executive Director and other team members.

Connect with the Larger Purpose

Another motivation-stealer is the tendency to get bogged down in the minutia of your volunteer project. Whether it's a political snafu, some necessary but tedious busy work, or getting stuck at step 99 of 999 steps to reach your goal, these daily challenges can make you forget why you're volunteering in the first place. You can avoid this trap by making a concerted effort to step back and see the big picture as often as possible. One SVP volunteer said, *"I go to events where the kids present to us on their progress. When I can interact with them, I am reminded why I love my volunteer work."* Other volunteers have found they feel more connected and purposeful when serving on the SVP committees. Said one volunteer of participating on SVP's strategic end, *"It was a powerful experience for me to understand SVP and the underlying reason for the work we do. After that it was easy to commit because the plan made sense."*

Communication is Your Lifeline

Probably one of the simplest and yet most overlooked motivational booster is constant communication with your SVP teammates. Attending update meetings and sharing your progress with others is a way to create a built-in volunteer support group. Conversations between and among SVP teams can serve as an idea bank, a steering committee, and a cheerleading squad depending on your needs and the stage of your project. As one volunteer noted, *"We set up weekly meetings to keep on task. I noticed that if I miss meetings, I feel less motivated."*

These three lessons are a good start to understanding methods to boost your motivation. By completing the following questions, you will plan for ways to maintain your enthusiasm and drive during your volunteer assignment.

What are the objectives related to your assignment that you feel you can accomplish relatively easily and early on?

What activities and events are set up for you to be reminded of the mission of the nonprofit and your role within that mission?

How will you keep in contact with other volunteers on your project? Are there regular meetings scheduled? Is there an email list or other venues available to maintain communications? How about with other SVP volunteers doing similar projects at other investees?

Summary

Through your participation in Social Venture Partners, you have made a substantial commitment of your time and resources to improve your community. By completing this workbook you are preparing for a successful and hopefully satisfying volunteer experience. Now that you know the many differences previous volunteers have encountered in the culture and structure of the organization they served, you can anticipate the changes that both you and the nonprofit may go through during your time together. Your answers to the five questions will be a useful guide to a volunteer assignment appropriate for you and the tools you need to succeed.

After you prepare with this self-assessment tool, don't be afraid to get out there and try some things. Sometimes the best teacher is experience. If you're unsure what you'd like to do, sample a lot of volunteer positions and organizations before you make a significant time commitment to one.

Congratulations for accepting this worthy challenge, and best wishes to you in your volunteer endeavors!

Further Reading

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