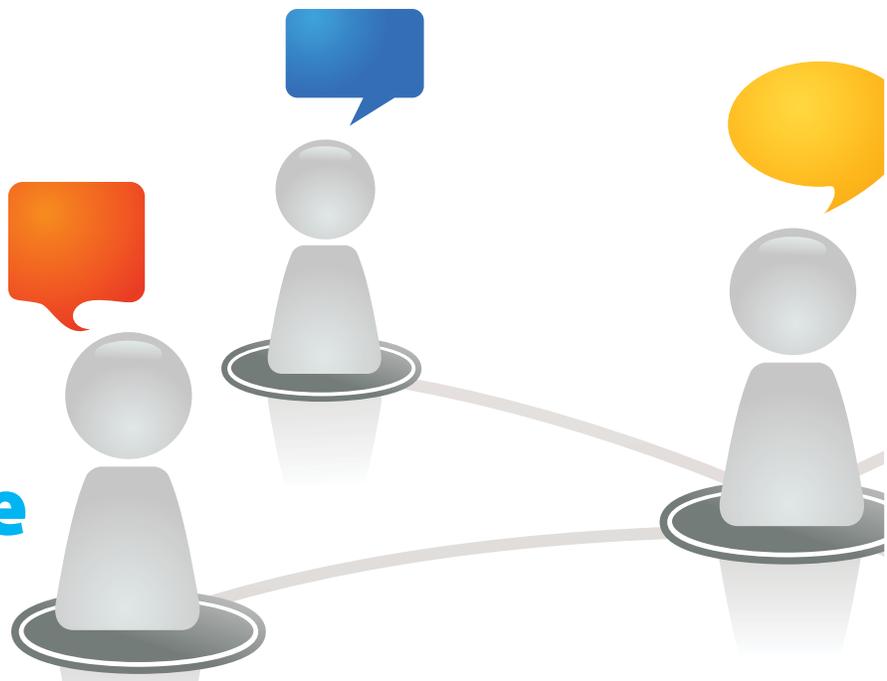


# A New Breed of Volunteer Calls for a New Volunteer Culture



By Thomas McKee

You could feel the energy as you entered the multipurpose room of the small elementary school that cool, fall evening and heard the greetings of a packed house of fully engaged, enthusiastic volunteers. It was 1979, a monthly PTA meeting, and I remember it well because I watched my wife Susie conduct the meeting as the president of our local PTA in Collinsville, Illinois. She and her team were amazing all school year as they orchestrated PTA meetings and events with oodles of passion, leadership, and volunteer involvement.

Perhaps some of you veteran PTA leaders are nodding your heads in fond remembrance and a bit of sadness. Yesterday's volunteer programs were designed for a different world, and they worked great—back then. PTA leaders who still operate like it is 1979 keep asking these questions:

- Where have all the volunteers gone?
- Where is all the passion and excitement?
- Why aren't people as committed as they used to be?
- How do I get volunteers engaged when they are so busy?

PTAs have always faced the challenge of competing for volunteer time. Your primary volunteer base is made up of parents of public school children, and parents are being pulled in many directions, as their children are more engaged than ever in multiple extracurricular activities that may have their own specialized parent groups. Parents with limited time have to pick and choose where they volunteer and may only get involved in the music parents group or sports boosters.

In addition, PTA leaders have to face the reality that volunteers do not act like they did in years past. Seismic shifts are shaking up the world of volunteer engagement, and we have a whole new breed of volunteer to involve.

## The new challenges of volunteer management

What are some of the factors that have caused shifts in volunteer engagement?

**Changed family dynamics.** Good-bye “Father Knows Best,” hello “Modern Family.” We have moved from the comforting simplicity of the nuclear family to single-parent and blended families created by high divorce rates, same-sex parent-partners, and grandparents who are raising their children's children.

**New modes of activism.** “Slacktivism” provides a convenient feel-good experience to those with the desire to give back to society without actually getting their hands dirty. Slacktivism includes signing internet petitions, wearing wristbands, or making small donations from a smartphone while sitting on the couch.

**Episodic volunteering.** Volunteer managers report that about 75 percent of their volunteers are episodic, dropping in and out of involvement by taking on only short-term projects. This figure is way up from the 25 percent it was 25 years ago.

**Social networking.** Nothing has changed the nature of volunteering like social networking on the internet, which facilitates virtual communications and more passive forms of involvement among people who may never get to know each other on a face-to-face basis.

These four seismic shifts are not going away. The new breed of volunteer calls for a new volunteer culture.

## Assess your PTA's volunteer culture

To find out if your PTA is ready and able to integrate the new breed of volunteer into your ranks, ask yourself the following questions.

### Question One: Are you emphasizing the constants?

Too many times we focus on all of the changes and get discouraged. Richard Nelson Bowles, author of *What Color Is Your Parachute*, said this about change, “I have always argued that change becomes stressful and overwhelming only when you've lost any sense of the constancy of your life. You need firm ground to stand on. From there, you can deal with that change.”

Before we get stressed out about the seismic shifts in volunteerism, let us stop a minute and reaffirm our constants. These constants become our foundation.

The first constant is passion. Parents are passionate about their children, and PTA offers opportunities to fulfill their passion. That is your starting point.

The second constant is your mission. For 116 years, PTA has promoted the education, health, and safety of children, youth, and families. PTA has this long-term, constant advantage over other groups that are trying to recruit parents. Emphasize early and often what you are doing today to enhance the education, health and safety of our children and families.





**Question Two: Do you depend on announcements to get volunteers?**

Too often, PTA leaders rely on general announcements to recruit volunteers. If you have ever said, “We are looking for volunteers. Anyone interested, please see me,” you already know that it does not work very well.

Twenty-first century volunteers do not raise their hands. The new breed of volunteer wants to be asked personally to get involved, and they want to decide for themselves what tasks they want to take on.

**Question Three: Are you asking for a “date” or “marriage”?**

You eventually want volunteers to become a regular part of your PTA team, but you need to go slow. I advocate what I call the dating method of recruitment. It looks something like this:

**First Date:** Offer a volunteer several small tasks to choose from, such as serving ice cream at an event or working at the registration desk. Work alongside the volunteer at the event and talk about the larger vision of your PTA and why what they are doing that day is important. Try hard to break up the cliques that often plague volunteer groups that have been together for a while by introducing the new person around and making the person feel welcome and needed.

After all, you want a second date.

**Future Dates:** A second date may not be task-oriented at all. Arrange to meet for coffee. As you talk about PTA, tap into the volunteer’s passion for her or his child’s education and future and solicit their suggestions for ways PTA can help.

Begin to get this new volunteer involved in other events. It may take three or four more dates before you ask for a commitment to be a regular volunteer, but through this careful cultivation, you should be able to get a volunteer as eager to work for your PTA as you are.

**Question Four: Are you taking advantage of social networks to communicate?**

E-mail is old school. Are you still stuck in the 20th century, or are you using Web 2.0 technology such as wikis, YouTube, Facebook, blogs, and Twitter to communicate quickly to your volunteers? According to a recent national survey by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, 82 percent of social media users are more likely to be active in a volunteer group, and 85 percent of Twitter users are group participants.

Social media is a huge topic, so here are just a few quick tips on how you can take advantage of social media to better communicate with your volunteers, other members of your PTA community, and interested individuals and organizations around your state.

- **Facebook:** Start a Facebook fan page or group page. Fan pages are generally better for a long-term relationship with your association members, while group pages are generally better for hosting a quick, active discussion and attracting attention.
- **Twitter:** During a project, upload and tweet photos for those who could not join in that day to help make them feel part of the group and encourage their future attendance.
- **YouTube:** Create a video about your project or event. Share the video through the project’s Facebook page and via Twitter.
- **Wikis:** Eliminate the need for frequent meetings and numerous e-mails by using a wiki. A wiki is a website whose users can add to, modify, or delete content. Wikis are most useful for planning events by centralizing information and updates in one location. To learn how to use a wiki, go to “Wikis in Plain English” ([Youtube.com/watch?v=-dnL00TdmLY](http://Youtube.com/watch?v=-dnL00TdmLY)) and view the four-minute YouTube video.

Share these four questions with your committees, boards, and state organizations. As you discuss each question, make plans to create a new-breed volunteer culture and recapture the excitement of engaged volunteers working toward a common goal.

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