

**Building Effective Teams that Support and Retain Volunteers:
A Case Study from Habitat for Humanity**

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Abstract

The construction of homes for Habitat for Humanity affiliates is accomplished primarily by volunteer teams working under the guidance of a paid professional construction manager. This article focuses upon the training, development, and retention of construction volunteers at a Habitat for Humanity affiliate, and the important part that the construction manager plays in their retention. A question that needed to be answered as part of a strategic planning event for a Habitat for Humanity affiliate was, "What motivates volunteers to return on a continuing basis to work at a Habitat for Humanity worksite?" This case study provides insights for ensuring a continuing workforce, e.g., practicing accepted leadership competencies that contribute to retaining volunteers.

Key Words:

Habit for Humanity, teams, volunteers, seniors, leadership

Introduction

When people hear about a Habitat for Humanity project, they often picture Jimmy and Roslyn Carter in construction clothes building a house. Most understand that the initial funds to purchase the materials utilized on a new project are provided by donors who see the value in building houses to help the less fortunate become home owners. In addition to donors, mortgage payments from existing Habitat for Humanity homeowners are used to pay for the materials needed on the new project. But where does the necessary volunteer labor come from, and how are these volunteers supported?

The most recent Jimmy Carter Work Project provides an illustration of how the planning, development, and building of a house occurs within

Habitat for Humanity. The project took place October 28 through November 2, 2007 (Habitat for Humanity, 2008). Assembling the labor and materials and organizing the project for the six day effort was done months in advance. "[It] brought together thousands of volunteers from all over the world to gather in South Central Los Angeles and San Pedro" (Habitat for Humanity, para.1). The project required a significant amount of organization, provided by team leaders who have perfected the skills to manage a building blitz. The Jimmy Carter Work project resulted in "30 new Habitat houses and the refurbishment [of] dozens of other houses" (Habitat for Humanity, para.1). These new houses now belong to limited-resource families.

While the Jimmy Carter Work Project provides a good illustration of Habitat for Humanity work, much of the building is typically done through the local community Habitat for Humanity organization, called an affiliate. These affiliates are separate from Habitat for Humanity International, but receive indirect support from the international parent organization. The international organization provides current, vibrant, and successful operations to support affiliates in many ways, including volunteer labor organization, mobilization, and sustainability. This article describes a study of volunteer team building at The Silicon Valley affiliate and the part that the construction site supervisor plays in the motivation and retention of volunteers.

The Silicon Valley affiliate was in the midst of strategic planning in which the author, as a construction site volunteer, was asked to participate. Emerging from the strategic planning process was a desire by the author to understand how volunteer retention of construction workers might be improved. A strong assumption inherent in the strategic planning effort and work of Habitat for Humanity is that building effective volunteer construction teams requires effective leadership. Because of the ongoing success at volunteer retention by one of the construction site supervisors, it was decided to attempt to understand and replicate his leadership and team building skills.

Volunteers and Volunteering

For purposes of this paper, the term “regular volunteer” describes a volunteer who returns to work repeatedly on the Habitat for Humanity affiliate construction site. A study by Silverberg, Ellis and Whitworth (cited in

Yoshioka, Brown & Ashcraft, 2007) suggested that approximately 50% of American adults volunteer their time in nonprofit organizations, with an estimated \$150 billion worth of services being provided annually. Habitat for Humanity relies on such volunteer efforts for constructing houses.

Habitat for Humanity Affiliates

A Habitat for Humanity affiliate plays a similar role to a commercial developer in that it raises the funds to purchase the land and the materials with which to build the house. The affiliate searches for the land, just as a developer would, but for the affiliate, it often requires partnering with a city to secure the land. In addition, the volunteer labor resources that appear for work at the construction site are usually a result of the affiliate’s public relations efforts and word-of-mouth recruitment by other volunteers who have found enrichment in performing construction or other helpful labor. The affiliate needs to resource this labor in such a way that the work can be sustained over a much longer period, perhaps 8 to 12 months for a typical project of three or four houses. A key element for success is a partnership and teamwork between the affiliate’s volunteer members and the construction site supervisor.

The engagement of volunteers usually begins with the affiliate’s office staff members, who receive expressions of interest from individuals wishing to volunteer for a Habitat for Humanity project. This can be by phone calls from local citizens, churches, community groups, and schools. How these calls are received, scheduled and nurtured are all very important to the scheduling of work at the construction site.

Because any prospective homeowner is required to put in 500 hours of “sweat equity” to a Habitat project, volunteers have an opportunity to work directly alongside the new homeowner. This is one example of unique experience that a Habitat volunteer may receive.

The most significant influence of continuity of construction volunteers falls on the shoulders of the construction site supervisor, a paid Habitat for Humanity affiliate contractor. S/he must show leadership, particularly in the way to form teams and train, motivate and reward the volunteers.

Similar to other organizations, Habitat for Humanity – Silicon Valley prepared a strategic plan using the tools that are commonly used by other organizations. These included a discussion and agreement on the organization’s mission and vision, and an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats which needed to be identified and understood for strategic formation. As the strategic planning process for the affiliate unfolded, it became apparent that an increased understanding of how best to recruit and retain volunteers was necessary. Also required was a greater understanding of the role of the construction site supervisor, and the volunteers’ perceptions of what they needed from the site supervisor in order to continue.

Purpose and Methods

This article addresses the following questions:

1. How are leadership attributes practiced by the construction site supervisor?

2. To what extent do construction site supervisors practice leadership as recommended in the literature?

3. How do the team building attributes influence volunteer retention?

4. What are the most important leadership factors that influence volunteers to return on a continuing basis?

A mixed methodological approach was used (Creswell, 1994) and is recommended when a variety of data sources are available and contextually rich information possible. For this paper, the data sources included: (1) a comparison of leadership characteristics attributed to the Habitat for Humanity affiliates and recommendations found in the literature, (2) site visits to three Habitat for Humanity affiliate construction sites, and (3) a questionnaire administered to affiliate volunteers that asked a variety of questions related to their experience as a volunteer and reasons for maintaining volunteer commitment.

Participation in the strategic planning process inspired the author to research information on the training and retention of construction site volunteers, a critical labor resource. The first action taken was to determine what type of leadership attributes would motivate volunteers to continue their volunteer work on a long term basis. To identify this, an on-line literature search was conducted using university library databases and in the personal management library belonging to the author.

Secondly, part of strategic planning usually involves a method of reviewing the successful practices of similar organizations. Because the San Francisco Bay area is unique in demographics and housing construction,

a visit was planned to two nearby affiliates to see as case studies. The visits could add to the information about leadership practices that may result in greater volunteer motivation. These sites were selected because there was sufficient word-of-mouth information about them to believe their construction site supervisors were successful in working with volunteers. Impressions were received of the affiliate supervisor and her/his relationship with the volunteers.

Lastly, it was determined that feedback from the volunteers themselves would be helpful in selecting new construction site supervisors and training them to work successfully with volunteers. A survey was conducted with questions based upon the literature review and conversations with the regular volunteers over a period of 10 years. The method for selecting a convenience sample of volunteers from which to solicit the surveys was determined by two basic criteria: (1) who was at the construction site during an active project, and (2) who has been a returning volunteer.

The Literature

To investigate this area of the strategic planning process, the author undertook a brief but focused literature review, with the objective of understanding relationships between leadership qualities and volunteer motivation. Writers on the role of effective leaders and their relationships to team building posit a variety of ideas about the description of an effective leader that could be applied to leadership in commercial as well as volunteer organizations. Attributes particularly germane to volunteer work include: Develops a vision for the future

(Hammer & Champy, 2001); Develops strategies to create an environment that is conducive to change (Kouzes & Posner, 2002); Is supportive to the people, (O'Toole, 1999); Is an obstacle remover (O'Toole, 1999); Has or seeks out the authority to obtain the needed resources (Hammer & Champy, 2001); Is intellectually curious (Hammer & Champy, 2001); Models and creates an environment of trust, (Kouzes & Posner, 2002); Is persuasive and seeks support for the vision, (Hammer & Champy, 2001); Delegates authority (Bateman & Snell, 2007); Is open to new idea (Bateman & Snell, 2007); Produces useful change that customers want (Hammer & Champy, 2001); and, Recognizes contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

Likewise, many have written on the attributes of effective teambuilding. The following provide examples of this type of work. Attributes germane to effective teams in volunteer organizations include: Does not assume that a team will be built without continued practice (Osland, Kolb, Rudin & Turner, 2007); Creates clear team goals and priorities (Osland, Kolb, Rudin & Turner, 2007); Defines functions to be carried out (Osland, Kolb, Rudin & Turner, 2007); Establishes procedures for team functions (Osland, Kolb, Rudin & Turner, 2007); Understands the team's interpersonal relationships building on respect for one another (Osland, Kolb, Rudin & Turner, 2007); Creates a climate of trust, (Pierce & Newstrom, 2003); Facilitates possible interdependence, (Kouzes & Posner, 2002); and, Encourages face-to-face communications, (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

Table 1
Successful Construction Site Supervisor's Practice of Attributes

<u>Leadership Attributes and Practices</u>		
Attributes	References	Practices
1. Vision	(Hammer & Champy, 2001, p. 107)	Communicates a sense of vision to the volunteers
2. Change	(Kouzes & Posner 2002, pp. 186-187)	Open to change and suggestions of the volunteers
3. Supportive	(O'Toole, 1999, p. 205)	Mentors and supports the volunteer staff members
4. Removes obstacles	(p. 240)	Removes impediments to volunteer efforts
5. Obtains resources	(Hammer & Champy, 2001, pp. 108, 230)	Successfully negotiates a chain of supply
6. Intellectually curious	(pp. 109)	Seeks ways to make ongoing improvements
7. Trustworthy	(Kouzes & Posner 2002, pp. 244-247)	Models trustworthiness and dependability
8. Persuasive	(Hammer & Champy, 2001, pp. 107-108)	Convinces volunteers to buy into project goals
9. Delegates	(Bateman & Snell, 2007, pp. 267-269)	Trains regular volunteers to be team leaders
10. Open to new ideas	(p. 94)	Open to useful, new ideas from the volunteers
11. Produces useful change	(Hammer & Champy, 2001, p. 132)	Responsive to the needs of the homeowner
12. Shows appreciation	(Kouzes & Posner 2002, pp. 372-374)	Shows recognition in a number of ways
<u>Team Building Attributes and Practices</u>		
Attributes	References	Practices
13. Practices teamwork	(Osland, Kolb, Rudin & Turner, 2007, p. 266)	Knows the importance of continued practice
14. Establishes team goals	(p. 266)	Team goals prioritized each day
15. Defines roles	(p. 266)	Team leaders roles clearly defined
16. Determines procedures	(p. 266)	Defines team procedures to be used
17. Respectful	(p. 266)	Models respect for one another
18. Team trust	(Pierce & Newstrom, 2003, p. 50)	Models trust for one another
19. Interdependence	(Kouzes & Posner 2002, pp. 244-247)	Facilitates interdependence team building
20. Supports face-to-face dealings	(pp. 244-247)	Helps volunteers work with each other to enhance team identity

Boyd (2004) identified leadership competencies for volunteer administrators similar to those shown in the above literature review, and used in the survey. He identified areas such as: vision, planning, collaborating, sharing leadership, evaluating, training, being open to change, trusting and recognizing volunteers. This similarity serves to validate some of the choices of the construction site supervisor's required attributes. Similarly, Safrit, Wykle, and Gliem (2004) explored leadership practices of Ohio AmeriCorps program directors and coordinators who managed volunteer-based programs. They discovered strong leadership practices in the areas of: challenging the process (i.e., status quo); inspiring a shared vision; enabling others to act; modeling the way; and, encouraging the heart.

Visits to Habitat for Humanity Affiliates

The author worked at two other local affiliates to experience the effects of some of the practices first-hand. Informed by the literature, the author's experience in management, and work as a Habitat for Humanity volunteer, a variety of leadership attributes were seen being put into practice by the construction site supervisors.

The practices outlined in Table 1 suggest ways that the construction site supervisor performs her/his leadership and team building duties in a construction site setting. These practices are unique to Habitat for Humanity organizations as compared to commercial or other volunteer organizations. While these visits did not provide a systematic process for objectively collecting the data, it did provide enough of an impression for some subjective comparison of practices.

The limits of these impressions are that they are not quantitatively verified; however, the impressions are formed on the work site by an experienced volunteer.

The Habitat for Humanity Home Affiliate

During the strategic planning, it became apparent that the Silicon Valley affiliate needed to understand the skills of a successful construction site supervisor. The construction site supervisor with the longest and best retention record at the Silicon Valley affiliate was identified.

Personal experience by the author over a 10-year period has shown the supervisor to initiate the following activities:

- Starts a day's work with a briefing to the volunteers.
- Divides the work so that there are clearly defined packages of work, and inexperienced workers are often put with an experienced volunteer.
- Mentors the new workers in a friendly manner. There is no such thing as a "stupid question".
- Makes a quality check as the day goes on. If a work process needs to be adjusted, it is done in a friendly manner.
- Seems to always be available for a question.
- Partners regular volunteers with a new volunteer to help the new person learn a construction skill.
- Uses the coffee breaks and lunch times to build community.
- At the end of the day, always says "Thanks" to the volunteers that have worked.

Table 2
Benchmarking - Construction Site Supervisor's Practices

<u>Construction Site Supervisor Practices</u>	<u>Leadership</u>		
	<u>Benchmark Site 1</u>	<u>Benchmark Site 2</u>	<u>Home Affiliate</u>
1. Communicates a sense of vision to the volunteers	Seen	Seen	Seen
2. Open to change and suggestions of the volunteers	Seen	Seen	Seen
3. Mentors and supports the volunteer staff members	Seen	Seen	Seen
4. Removes impediments to volunteer efforts	Seen	Seen	Seen
5. Successfully negotiates a chain of supply	Seen	Seen	Seen
6. Seeks ways to make ongoing improvements	Not seen	Seen	Seen
7. Models trustworthiness and dependability	Seen	Seen	Seen
8. Convinces volunteers to buy into project goals	Seen	Seen	Seen
9. Trains regular volunteers to be team leaders	Seen	Seen	Seen
10. Open to useful, new ideas from the volunteers	Seen	Seen	Seen
11. Responsive to the needs of the homeowner	Not available	Not seen	Seen
12. Shows recognition in a number of ways	Seen	Seen	Seen
<u>Construction Site Supervisor Practices</u>	<u>Team Building</u>		
	<u>Benchmark Site 1</u>	<u>Benchmark Site 2</u>	<u>Home Affiliate</u>
13. Knows the importance of continued team practice	Seen	Seen	Seen
14. Team goals prioritized each day	Seen	Seen	Seen
15. Team leader's roles clearly defined	Seen	Seen	Seen
16. Clearly defines team procedures to be used	Seen	Seen	Seen
17. Models respect for one another	Seen	Seen	Seen
18. Helps the volunteers develop trust for one another	Seen	Seen	Seen
19. Facilitates interdependent team building	Seen	Seen	Seen
20. Helps volunteers work with each other to enhance team identity	Seen	Seen	Seen

Note: The above column remarks indicates that the author saw, or did not see, these practices at the affiliate's construction site during a one day visit. In some cases, there was no opportunity to see the practice because of the limited time of the visit. Not having seen the attribute practiced, does not imply that the construction site supervisor did not practice the attribute. In one of the affiliates, one of the options was not available.

The visits to all three affiliates provided an impression of a correspondence to the leadership and team building practices. The construction site supervisor's attributes were identified and experienced by the author at each site, and they correspond to what is addressed in the leadership literature (Table 2).

Survey of Construction Volunteers

To further understand what is important to volunteers, a survey was conducted with a non-probability, convenience sample of 47 volunteers from four different Habitat for Humanity sites. The survey was composed of Likert-type items that measured the importance of various construction volunteer issues. The survey asked if the respondent Strongly Agreed (5), Agreed (4), Neither Agreed nor Disagreed (3), Disagree (2) or Strongly Disagreed (1) with the statements. For purposes of understanding, the highest mean average score was 4.3 and the lowest was 3.0 (Figure 1). The statements that had a score of 3.8 or greater were the following:

- The Habitat for Humanity volunteer experience is greatly enhanced by the camaraderie of the construction team (4.3).
- It is important to me that the Construction Site Supervisor knows all aspects of the construction trade (4.2).
- I value learning new building skills from another team member (4.1). Habitat for Humanity's goal of "...eliminating... poverty housing..." greatly influences my participation as a volunteer (Habitat for Humanity, 2007) (3.9).
- Having the Construction Site Supervisor or team leader regularly check my work improves the quality of

the project and helps me learn new skills (3.8).

These results serve to emphasize the need for the construction site supervisor to develop the volunteers' camaraderie and to inspire their focus on a common vision of helping that segment of society that may never own a home without a hand-up. At the same time, the volunteer is able to learn new skills in a hands-on trade. This combination of a sense of purpose, the camaraderie of a team, and obtaining new skills is a developmental triad which can also bring a feeling of self-worth to the individual volunteer.

The survey findings have limitations because of the sample frame and size; however, the author feels the volunteers surveyed were representative of those volunteers who show up on a regular basis. The survey was given to those who do return time and again to work on the work site because their responses are considered the most valuable for this study. One result that was surprising was the low score of 3.0 for the regular volunteer's interest in becoming a team leader. This may be explained by the fact that many of the regulars are retired from industry with only an interest in working in a craft, instead of being a leader.

As a comparison to the regulars, another survey (Figure 2) was administered to 20 purposefully-selected non-regular volunteers. The area of surprise was the number of items appearing 3.8 or above was twice those in the regular volunteer survey results (eight vs. four). Perhaps this might be explained by the importance of some of the issues diminishing as a person spends more time on the construction site with a team, and gains construction skills.

Figure 1. Measured scores for Regular Volunteers (n = 47).

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Mean Score</u>
1. Habitat for Humanity's statement "...Habitat's goal of further eliminating inadequate and poverty housing..." (Statement of Purpose, December 2007, p.3) greatly influences my participation as a volunteer.	3.9
2. It is important to me that the Construction Site Supervisor knows all aspects of the construction trade.	4.3
3. The day's build objectives needs to be clearly stated to me before we begin work.	3.5
4. I value learning new building skills from another team member.	4.1
5. I would like to become a team leader (one who knows a skill well and can lead other volunteers to do the work).	3.0
6. I feel that it is important for the coffee and lunch breaks to be clearly announced by the Construction Site Supervisor.	3.3
7. I believe that it is important to have a regularly scheduled coffee break.	3.4
8. The Habitat for Humanity volunteer experience is greatly enhanced by the camaraderie of the construction team.	4.4
9. It is important to have the construction site supervisor train me.	3.3
10. Having the Construction Site Supervisor or team leader regularly check my work, improves the quality of the project and helps me to learn new skills.	3.8
11. Having the affiliate's Executive Director visit the construction site and speak to the volunteers emphasizes the importance of the volunteers' continued involvement.	3.1
12. Having the affiliate's Board of Directors occasionally visit the construction site, and speak to the volunteers, helps validate the volunteers' contribution.	3.0
13. Having periodic celebration/recognition breakfast or lunch for the regular volunteers, helps the volunteers know they are appreciated.	3.6
14. Having the Construction Site Supervisor say "Thank you" at the end of the day's work <u>is a must</u> .	3.1

Leadership Comparison to the Survey Results

Table 1 shows how the leadership and team building attributes of the successful construction site supervisors were practiced. The literature on leadership attributes suggests that the construction site supervisor focuses on being supportive to volunteers by: helping them develop and learn new skills, working to create an experience that is not stymied by lack of materials or tools, being collaborative

in the conduct of the daily task, and rewarding volunteers for a job well done. These attributes are paramount to the success of the Habitat for Humanity affiliate project. One attribute that stands out as different from that of a commercial firm is the practice of recognition of the volunteer. This may be in the form of appreciation dinners, coffee breaks, Habitat for Humanity tee shirts or a mere "Thank you" at the end of the work day. Respectful recognition is important.

Figure 2. Measured Scores for Non-regular Volunteers (n = 20).

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Mean Score</u>
1. Habitat for Humanity's statement "...Habitat's goal of further eliminating inadequate and poverty housing..." (Statement of Purpose, December 2007, p.3) greatly influences my participation as a volunteer.	4.3
2. It is important to me that the Construction Site Supervisor knows all aspects of the construction trade.	4.4
3. The day's build objectives needs to be clearly stated to me before we begin work.	3.9
4. I value learning new building skills from another team member.	3.9
5. I would like to become a team leader (one who knows a skill well and can lead other volunteers to do the work).	2.8
6. I feel that it is important for the coffee and lunch breaks to be clearly announced by the Construction Site Supervisor.	3.2
7. I believe that it is important to have a regularly scheduled coffee break.	2.5
8. The Habitat for Humanity volunteer experience is greatly enhanced by the camaraderie of the construction team.	4.2
9. It is important to have the construction site supervisor train me.	3.5
10. Having the Construction Site Supervisor or team leader regularly check my work, improves the quality of the project and helps me to learn new skills.	4.0
11. Having the affiliate's Executive Director visit the construction site and speak to the volunteers emphasizes the importance of the volunteers' continued involvement.	3.6
12. Having the affiliate's Board of Directors occasionally visit the construction site, and speak to the volunteers, helps validate the volunteers' contribution.	3.9
13. Having periodic celebration/recognition breakfast or lunch for the regular volunteers, helps the volunteers know they are appreciated.	3.7
14. Having the Construction Site Supervisor say "Thank you" at the end of the day's work <u>is a must</u> .	4.0

Whereas in the commercial work place, the continuing paycheck is a significant incentive, continuation of the volunteer's work is a result of the construction site supervisor practicing leadership and team building attributes as supported in the literature review. Volunteers will lose interest if the construction site supervisor does not practice most attributes consistently. The training of the volunteers and the recognition of a job well done is critical;

if not handled well, the volunteers will not return.

Based on these findings, the author suggests that because construction site supervisors more commonly come from the commercial world, there must be a careful screening before hiring to determine the suitability of a candidate to lead volunteer teams, and the affiliate must provide a mode of training which prepares the newly hired construction site supervisor to work successfully with volunteers. The critical

need for training managers of volunteers was emphasized by Seevers, Baca and Leeuwen (2005) who cited a “desire for more practical, hands-on approaches to training” (p.6).

Additionally, there could be a probationary period, wherein the affiliate’s director receives feedback from the construction site about how the new construction site supervisor is handling the volunteers. Proper selection and training of the construction site supervisor is even more critical as the affiliate grows and has a need to construct on multiple construction sites involving different construction site supervisors. Screening the candidates for the position might entail developing written job descriptions which become part of any advertisement, detailing the uniqueness of leading volunteers and noting the different demands placed upon the construction site supervisor. Carefully checking the backgrounds of the candidates to detect any possible volunteer experiences that might bridge to the realities of leading volunteers will help select the right person.

Conclusions

Using information from the literature review, the author has defined attributes that appeared to be germane to a successful affiliate project. What can be drawn from the literature review is that to form a good team with loyalty from team members, the leader (construction site supervisor) must first possess certain attributes and team building skills.

The impressions of the three affiliates’ construction site supervisors revealed similarities in terms of providing a vision, identifying objectives (strategic planning), having technical competence and providing training.

Although each had unique leadership strategies, the site supervisors at each of the affiliates visited practiced the leadership and team building skills that correspond to the necessary attributes for volunteer retention.

Finally, the survey of 47 regular construction site volunteers indicated the importance of the camaraderie of the team, and how significant it was to have a group of people that the volunteer relates to in a positive manner, relying on the construction site supervisor’s knowledge in the work and ability to train and monitor the volunteers’ work, in a friendly and helpful manner. The small survey of 20 non-regular volunteers served to support the most important responses for the regular volunteers.

These findings may be helpful to other volunteer organizations, especially in regards to the attributes which the team leader must possess, even if they have to be taught to the leader. It cannot be assumed that leaders in a volunteer organization possess this awareness naturally. As in the Habitat for Humanity setting, the area of rewards will undoubtedly be unique to other volunteer efforts, and also be in contrast to any commercial organization’s treatment of rewards.

The construction site supervisor must possess additional competencies to retain volunteers. This may be particularly pertinent for construction site supervisors who have only worked commercially. Managing volunteer workers is not the same as managing paid workers. Further study needs to be continued on ways to better motivate volunteers to continue their work on a returning basis.

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