

Finding the Right Fits for Volunteers

By Jim Johnson, IOM, Lufkin/Angelina County Chamber of Commerce

At the final session for the 35th class of Leadership Lufkin, I had the opportunity to address the class about volunteer programs available through Lufkin/Angelina County Chamber of Commerce. The class was presented with a list of opportunities that ranged from our Diplomats Group to board member shadowing. Typically, with such a captive audience, I would cover all of our programs and conclude with “We Need Volunteers to be Successful.” Instead, I put a twist on an old expression – “a square peg won’t go into a round hole but a square peg always fits in a square hole.”

Normally, our Chamber uses a broad approach to locate volunteers. We ask for help, throw out our net, and hope to catch the best possible volunteer but few times do we get these results. Our programs might be impressive and worth their time to volunteer, but if they aren’t a good fit, the chance of longer term success is slim. Like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole – forced volunteerism isn’t going to fit either.

One way to assist in finding the right fit is the creation of a Volunteer Handbook. The purpose of this handbook is to introduce the Chamber to volunteers, to provide information that will better enable the Chamber, through its volunteers and staff to undertake our mission, to provide an orientation to Chamber volunteers, to enhance volunteer development opportunities and to improve volunteer and team effectiveness. An effective handbook should be tailored to fit your Chamber but some key things to consider:

Programs Overview

Whether by list or narrative, it is essential to include a current list of programs that need volunteers. Every committee is an opportunity for our members to connect in a small group setting with people that share a similar interest.

Committee Overview

Committees serve at the discretion and are responsible to the Board of Directors. Reporting to the Chamber Board of Directors occurs through their own reporting or by staff. Committees which are continuing in nature are termed “standing committees”, while those created for a limited period of time are called “task forces”. Each committee should ultimately know their purpose, timeline and role with the board.

Volunteer and Staff Partnership

An effective Volunteer Handbook should include how this relationship takes place within your organization. Committees are the backbone of the Chamber of Commerce by coordinating the activities of the Chamber, analyzing the concerns of the membership, and putting forward proposed solutions while professional staff manages the day-to-day operations and carries out the programs.

Conflicts of Interest

As we all do with our Board of Directors, it is important that our volunteer and committee meetings are aware of conflicts of interests. In order to make good decisions, it is important that

when a committee is making a decision and a member has a direct, specific and immediate interest in the matter, it is advisable to declare a conflict of interest and not participate in the discussion. Declaring a conflict of interest is not intended to hinder discussion but rather promote open discussion and fairness.

I let the class know that our goal is to find the square hole for their square peg. Our staff isn't there to try and force them into a role that doesn't fit or work. Our job is to find the volunteer opportunity that is the perfect fit. We will try each program till the right one is located and once we know which one works, our Volunteer Handbook will serve as an essential tool.