

To Lead is to Serve by Shar McBee, Chapter Two

Be Welcoming

The second step is to be welcoming.

Small cheer and great welcome makes a merry feast.
William Shakespeare

To feel welcome is wonderful, isn't it? On the other hand, was there ever a time when you enjoyed feeling unwelcome?

Everyone wants to be recognized and greeted, to feel a part of the whole. To welcome another human being is a sign of respect and a great service.

In the fourth grade, I changed schools in the middle of the spring semester. Neither the new teacher nor the students welcomed me with open arms. I felt like an outsider and changed from someone who loved school to someone who didn't. The result was that my grades plummeted. It was a relief when the semester came to a close.

All summer long I dreaded going back to school. When the first day of class arrived that fall, I was a very timid ten year old opening the classroom door and looking around at a room full of strangers.

Then a miracle happened.

A little girl smiled and waved and said, "Sit next to me." Her one gesture of welcome turned everything around for me. School was OK after all.

Welcoming is a powerful tool, yet it is so simple and obvious that it is often overlooked. Before we can attract new volunteers, we must keep the ones we have by continually welcoming them.

To Attract & Keep Volunteers—Be Welcoming

At a luncheon sponsored by the Network of Volunteer Leaders, I sat across the table from a man who had conducted a survey to find out why volunteers continue to serve. He queried volunteers at a hospital, a social services organization, and a courthouse. The survey concluded that the most significant reason volunteers endured was that they received continuous recognition and appreciation from their immediate supervisor. The key word is "continuous." Welcoming includes reaching out to people on a regular basis.

Businessman Lex Brodie thinks that non-profit organizations would benefit from treating everyone like a customer. When I heard him say that, I recalled going

to a non-profit with the intention of volunteering. People were moving about and talking to each other, but no one acknowledged that I was there. I waited ten minutes, then walked out. I didn't want to volunteer for an organization that didn't even notice me.

Brodie used to serve on the Hawaii Board of Education. After his election, he spent ten months visiting every school in the state. There are 239 schools in Hawaii and he sometimes visited one school several times, conversing with the principal, vice principal, teachers, staff, students, and parents. He said, "At many schools, I was the first member of the Board of Education these educators had ever seen on their campuses."

Begin today to get to know the volunteers in your organization to whom you have never spoken.

To keep volunteers, show interest in them and in their work by making each one feel acknowledged and warmly welcomed on a regular basis.

To attract volunteers, create a definite plan to make every new person feel welcome and special.

Flourish with First Impressions

We only have one chance to make a first impression. Because first impressions are lasting, the way we welcome volunteers the first time will have a long-term effect.

Have you ever entered an office, been ignored by the receptionist, and watched someone else get a big smile from the same person? Did you feel like an outsider?

Or have you ever been ignored by the receptionist and then been greeted by the salesperson like a long lost friend? This is disingenuous, not welcoming. Everyone deserves a warm greeting the moment they enter the door. Whether they are entering your establishment for the first time or the tenth time, they want to be recognized with respect.

Joy Lewis, who is an officer in her political party, says she often discovers the best workers when they are standing alone. "If they have come to an event, it means they are interested. But if they don't know anyone, it is hard for them to get involved."

She recalls, "Once I saw a young man leaning against a wall at a pot luck. I introduced myself and it turned out he had just moved to this city and was looking for a way to become active. He became very involved with our organization after that.

Introductions are Significant

Introducing volunteers to others is an easy way to make them feel included and appreciated. It is hard to be enthusiastic about an organization when you are treated like an outsider. Introducing people to others makes them feel welcomed and a part of the group.

A true welcome includes proper introductions. When introducing two people, apply the principle of To Lead Is To Serve. The person making the introductions can serve the people being introduced by giving enough information about each one that a comfortable conversation can follow. It is not enough just to say the two names and walk away. Too often in busy organizations the person making the introduction hurries through it so she can get back to the “real” work. If the goal of the organization is to succeed, making people feel welcome is the work.

A good introduction is a sign of respect. No matter what you think or feel about a person, she deserves your respect. When a person receives a respectful welcome, she will almost always want to keep volunteering.

Introductions benefit everyone. A young friend of mine recently began college in her hometown. She had wanted to go away to school but for financial reasons had to enroll in the local university. She knew many of the students from high school, but instead of hanging out with them, she decided to try to meet people from out of town. She thought this would be more like going away to school. Every time she saw a student sitting alone, she introduced herself. Inevitably, she became the unofficial hostess of the first-year class, making lots of new friends and meeting people from far away. In this way, welcoming others helped her to get over her own disappointment about not going away to college.

It is said that one lake, by itself, gradually dries up. But when two lakes join they replenish each other. It is the same in an organization. People working together can refresh and vitalize each other. Friendly introductions help to create an atmosphere of warmth in which volunteers feel comfortable with one another.

There are many ways that you can incorporate introductions into your organization. At special events, officers and board members can make it a point to give a warm greeting and say hello personally to everyone in attendance. On a daily basis, one person can be assigned the duty of hosting and welcoming in the office or reception area. Create a list of staff and regular volunteers so that the host can make sure that new people meet everyone. The list can include some special interest or fact about each person in the organization. The host can introduce new people to others with similar interests.

Triple Your Attendance

When I first served on the board of directors of DOVIA, the Directors of Volunteers in Austin, Texas, our president's goal was to increase our membership. Attendance had been lagging at the meetings, so we did two things:

1. We asked each board member to say hello to everyone at every meeting and spend extra time with people the board member did not know.
2. We created "Greeters." These were five people who agreed to talk to every person at every meeting. The five wore badges saying, "Greeter," then each one recruited someone else to be a Greeter at the next meeting.

With this plan, everyone in attendance was assured of being welcomed by at least two people, a board member and a greeter. DOVIA met once a month and we initiated this welcoming policy at a June meeting. By August, we had tripled the attendance. Three times as many people were now attending our meetings!

None of this required extra time or extra money. The board members and the greeters were at the meetings anyway. Instead of talking to each other and old friends, they were reaching out to everyone.

An ex-president of DOVIA was at that August gathering. It had been awhile since she had attended one of our events and she was surprised to see so many people in attendance. She pulled me aside and whispered, "What happened to DOVIA?!"

People feel happiest when they feel they belong. Welcoming is a simple act that can create a major impact in any organization. However, it doesn't happen without forethought.

I have been the keynote speaker at over one thousand events and conventions. The board of directors and officers will typically be introduced at these proceedings and I like to watch where the board members are seated. Are they sitting together or are they mixed in among the general membership? Ninety percent of the time, when they are introduced, the board members are sitting together.

It is a natural tendency to gravitate toward the familiar. That's why it is crucial to make a plan in advance to welcome everyone—new attendees as well as old. By consciously foregoing the familiar and seating themselves among those with whom they aren't normally in contact, board members and leaders can create a strong sense of welcome.

Many groups become adept at welcoming new faces and forget their faithful supporters. Remember to welcome the people who have been around a long time, too. They really count. They are the ones who will support your organization when the chips are down. It is amazing how a warm welcome from the executive director can breathe new life into a seasoned volunteer.

Telephone Smiles

On the telephone, a welcoming attitude can make or break a connection. The person who answers the telephone is more important than the CEO because that person creates the caller's entire perception of the organization.

To train everyone to have a welcoming attitude on the telephone, simply call a meeting of everyone who answers the phone. Ask them to consider these questions:

How do they like to be received when they call an organization?

How do they react when a receptionist is not helpful?

How do they feel when someone pays attention to them?

A great discussion can ensue from these questions. Use the answers to create guidelines for telephone protocol.

You Can Do a Lot with a Little

One small expression of welcome can have a long-term benefit. In the opening story of this chapter, a little girl welcomed me to the fifth grade by saying, "Sit next to me." Her four words meant everything, changing my whole experience of the new school. As a leader, you can change a volunteer's whole experience of volunteering for your organization with a few words of welcome.

When Jimmy Carter was running for President of the United States, he attended a dinner party in California. The hostess had arranged for guests to change seats after each course so that everyone would have the opportunity to sit next to Carter. It worked out that every guest except one woman sat next to him. At the end of the evening, the candidate made it a point to speak to this woman saying, "I'm sorry there wasn't one more course."

She said, "At that moment he won my support." During that election year she worked long hours for his campaign.

One quick step to double your chances of success: Be welcoming!

Gems to Remember

- Everyone wants to be included. — Shar's new school.
- Welcoming includes reaching out to people on a regular basis. — The school board member who visited every school.
- The way we welcome volunteers the first time will have a long-term effect. — Being ignored by a receptionist.
- Discover good volunteers when they are standing alone. — The political party's pot luck dinner.
- A true welcome includes proper introductions. — The young college woman who didn't go away to school.
- Triple your attendance with welcoming. — DOVIA and the greeters.
- It is a natural tendency to gravitate toward the familiar. — Board members sitting together.

Exercise for Success

1. How can your organization be more welcoming?
2. Is there a "Welcome" sign on the door or the desk?
3. Do people receive a warm, genuine smile when they walk through the door?
4. Ask yourself:
 - How can I be more welcoming?
 - When I have felt welcomed, what created that experience for me?