



# Orientation: Making Volunteers Feel at Home

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You'll find a discussion on how to do an orientation session for new volunteers in the SHIP Volunteer Program Management Manual, so I won't cover that material in this article. Instead I want to focus on why orientation sessions are crucial to motivating new volunteers.

It's sometimes hard for paid staff to understand why a good orientation is so important for successfully engaging volunteers. What makes it hard is that staff know too much to relate to how the volunteer is feeling.

Imagine for a moment that you're in the following situation:

- You've just moved to a new town and you've been invited to a party at a neighbor's house.
- You won't know anyone else who will be at the party because the neighbor who invited you had a last minute work commitment that prevented her from attending, but you were told it was a friendly neighborhood.
- You'd like to make a good impression since these are, after all, your new neighbors.

Imagine you walked in the door of the house where the party is being held and no one came over to talk to you; no one seemed to pay any attention to you; no one introduced you to anyone else or explained what was going on. Even the hosts of the party ignored you.

How would you feel? How long would you stay at the party? How likely would you be to attend the next party?

Human nature makes first contact with strange situations and new people a delicate moment. We're cautious. We're uncertain. We have doubts and fears. We're nervous about making a mistake or doing the wrong thing because we don't know how things work or what proper behavior may be expected in this setting.

And we're really judgmental about how we get treated.

Orientation is the process of making new volunteers feel welcome – like they are a part of the team and that they are comfortable in their new situation. It is the time when volunteers will make up their minds about whether the organization they have become affiliated with really meant what it said when inviting them to volunteer.

Many organizations short-change orientation because they view it mainly as an opportunity to indoctrinate new volunteers. While that is, indeed, part of what you want to accomplish in an orientation session, it isn't really the most important goal. After all, we can educate the volunteers along the full course of their time of involvement. We only have one chance to make a good first impression.

In planning an orientation session, you need to ask yourselves, "What do we want the volunteer to know?" However, you should also think about two other questions:

1. What will the volunteer want to know?
2. How do we want the volunteer to feel?



The first question has some tricky aspects. You'd think you could learn the answers by simply asking the new volunteers what they would like to learn, but that doesn't always work. Part of this is because the new volunteers "don't know what they don't know." They simply lack the context to understand the new situation enough to identify in advance where they are ignorant.

It's also tricky because there may be some questions the volunteers want answered but don't want to directly ask. These could be as simple as "Where are the restrooms?" or as complex as "Will I be working in dangerous parts of town?" I sometimes suggest that in thinking through this you ask yourself, "What do I wish to have known when I was new so that I would have felt comfortable and not concerned about doing something stupid?"


The second question is easier to answer. We know from studies of volunteer behavior that new volunteers want to immediately see signs that they are welcome and viewed as valuable members of the team.

There are lots of ways to accomplish this:

- Ask a senior member of the organization to give an official welcome and thank you.
- Allow new volunteers to introduce themselves; give them a standing ovation.
- Have other staff and volunteers attend, extending a personal welcome.
- Give the newcomers symbols of joining the team, such as business cards.
- Offer them food, a long-established cultural symbol of welcome.

You can do these things in a formal orientation session for all new volunteers or as part of a training session. You can do them in a simple, individual meeting with a new volunteer. You can also do them – although not as effectively – in a phone call or email exchange.

Perhaps the best way of understanding the importance of orientation is simply to consider its basic definition: Orientation is the process of learning one's direction and bearing in the world; a person without orientation is, to put it simply, "lost."

New volunteers who feel "lost" after their first real exposure to an organization will swiftly become "lost" in a much more direct sense. 

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### **How to get a copy of the SHIP Volunteer Program Management manual**

Printed copies of the SHIP Volunteer Program Management manual are available from the SHIP Center. Email your request to [info@shiptacenter.org](mailto:info@shiptacenter.org) or call 877-839-2675. Electronic copies are also available in the SHIP Resource Library at [www.shiptacenter.org](http://www.shiptacenter.org).