

Volunteer Management in the SCA

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One of the responsibilities of holding an office in the SCA is the proper care and feeding of volunteers. By managing your volunteers appropriately, you engender a sense of joy and fun, and encourage those volunteers to excel. This reduces the need for turnover, and allows others to grow from within the group. Additionally, in an all-volunteer organization, learning to manage people so that they keep coming back is so very important to retention, which the Society Seneschal, among others, has recognized as an ongoing project for the Society. This article will discuss ways to manage volunteers as a volunteer yourself, handle volunteers dealing with explosions of life, and will give a few resources.

The SCA is a volunteer organization. Full-stop. Everyone, from the members of the Board of Directors, to the royals of the twenty kingdoms, to the gentle with their bare AoA, is a volunteer. As a volunteer yourself, please remember that when managing your volunteers, that they have lives outside the SCA. Volunteers can and will walk away as their life demands. This is not meant to scare away other volunteers, but rather to serve as a caveat to the permanency of your volunteers. Commitment is treasured. Create a cause and a passion and a sense of fun for your volunteers to participate in - for here's where your volunteers will want to stick around.

Communicate clearly and often. In many ways, being visible and active helps keep volunteers motivated and excited. Consider sending emails, posting on your group's message board, or a quick message using the social media site of your choice. Spreading a wide net of communication means that your volunteers know that you are active and willing to answer questions and to address concerns. Be prompt with your answers to questions. Even if you don't know the answer immediately, a response of "I'm not sure, but I'll keep looking," is still an acceptable response. If something makes you angry, step away for no less than twenty-four hours before crafting a response. Wait another eight hours (at least) before sending it. Showing patience and grace is key.

For new volunteers, be excited when a person is ready to take on the mantle of an office or joins in on a project. Encourage them. Check in on them outside of reporting or event planning time. Suggest they join (and ask questions) on the various unofficial groups (heralds, A&S activities, etc.) Invite them, specifically, to events such as retreats, A&S nights, or to fighter practice. Keep things fun. Consider gifting inexpensive items that may help them on their path.¹ Open lines of communication are one of the best ways to keep the excitement up and volunteers interested in doing their job.

¹ For example, one of the things I gave to brand new heralds as a newcomer's gift from their Principal Herald were mini-packs of Crayola Pipsqueak markers, which were purchased at Dollar General for \$1.50 a pack, which both helped them in designing their heraldry, but came in handy at consult tables. If you are an A&S Minister, items such as string, beads, extra fabric, paint, or items to make more stuff with may help.

Mid-level SCAdians often look for a place within the Society to learn more things. If they're looking for new things to learn, have a conversation with them. Encourage them to take on positions that are well-suited for them or ones you could see them growing into, especially if you are in a position (e.g. Regional, Kingdom, or Society level) to do so. Even as group officers, this is a perfect time to get mid-level SCAdians involved in the process of being a group officer if they haven't. Consider taking them on (if they're amenable) as a deputy, with consent of your senior officer.

SCAdians who have been around a while are often self-directed. People who have held your job before you will be your eyes and ears, as well as your resources. Lean on them as much as you can for help.

Thanking your deputies, both publicly and privately, is so very important. As you are not the Crown, you cannot directly award AoAs or awards as such. However, being prompt with writing award recommendations to the Crown can help your deputies feel recognized for their time. Write thank you notes, messages on Facebook, or an email. Tell them that they matter to you. Thank your deputies and those who pitch in and help out consistently.

Don't try to control every part, however small, of the activity or your deputies or the people you directly lead. Much like in a professional work environment, people do better when they're given the responsibilities and *support* to do their jobs. They thrive. Let your SCAdians do the same. Check in with them at events, talk with them, but let them do their work.

Most volunteers (new, old, and in between) are content to do the job, and want to do it well. On the flip side, however, sometimes volunteers are struggling to do their jobs well. Burnout occurs. Modern life gets messy. Attacks of life happen. If those things happen to one of your volunteers, talk with them first. Make sure their modern lives are okay. Talk with them, either by phone call or a meeting at an event. Let them know that while they have made a commitment to serve, their modern life takes precedence over the SCA. If they need to take a break, allow them to do so and to step away with grace. After all, a broken vessel cannot serve. Supporting your volunteers when their modern lives are less than stellar helps them feel cared about, and they're more apt to come back after their life returns to more normal circumstances.

However, there are times when burnout happens, sometimes, and can sometimes manifest in less than positive directions². If the undesirable behavior or action continues after you've initially talked with your deputy or volunteer, then it's time to start setting an action plan in place. Be fair, compassionate, but also firm. Start small (a warning, if the officer is just not doing their

² **The following section is more for those officers/volunteers who have hiring/firing capabilities. (Event Stewards, Territorial Baronages, Principality or Kingdom Officers, etc.)** Again, most volunteers excel at their jobs and do a tremendous job of keeping the SCA in their part of the Knowne World running.

job; or perhaps a conversation to see what the real issues are if they just seem “off” and unlike themselves) before going to a thermonuclear detonation (replacement or further sanctions). Document everything. Email your deputy to remind them of their commitment and of your conversation. Again, be firm, but fair. Firing a deputy right away can scare potential deputies from filling in.

Lastly, if the deputy still is not doing their job, remove them from office, replace them (if you can get the blessing of the previous deputy, this will go a long way), and while not indicating the reason for the changeover, publicly thank the previous deputy for their service and welcome the new one.

Example: A volunteer has an attack of life and cannot do their job with any frequency, but promises that they’ll get around to it as soon as they can. A month passes, and still their job is not getting done. As a result, it is affecting the ability for your group to get the bigger job complete. After a meeting via phone call or in person, where it is discussed that the job needs to be done by the volunteer, the rest of the boundaries and expectations for the job/position are laid out in detail. Follow this up with an email detailing the issue and the detailed plan as soon as possible. Check in with the volunteer by checking in on their activities. In the event that the job is still not getting done, you may wish to speak with the deputy again by phone or in person, and put together an action plan (the activity needs to be completed by a particular date, or else replacement will occur) will need to be put together. Again, an email should be sent to them detailing what the action plan is, and what needs to happen. Lastly, if the deputy still is not doing their job, remove them from office, replace them quickly, and while not indicating the reason for the changeover, publicly thank the previous deputy for their service and welcome the new one.

Want more resources on volunteer management? Check out how other non-profits manage their volunteers. Sources like idealist.org, nonprofithub.org, and even the United Way have their best practices listed. While not everything will apply to the SCA, it is a good base to start with.

In closing, the SCA is a much more welcome and friendly place when our officers do what they can to make their own environment welcoming and friendly, and when your volunteers are happy with their work within the Society, it shows.