Volunteer Armies Can Deliver Quality Too: Achieving a Successful Result in Open Source, Standards Organizations, and Other Volunteer Projects

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What is a Volunteer Army?

- Unpaid (at least by the army they support)
- Consensus vs. Hierarchical Decision Making
- Formal vs. Informal Processes/Procedures
The Tips on Delivering Quality

• Tip #1: Respect your volunteer army
• Tip #2: Always have a list of tasks needing volunteers
• Tip #3: Don’t be afraid to jump in
• Tip #4: Begin decision making with a strawman
• Tip #5: Work within the system, then propose change
• Tip #6: Focus on the need, not the name
• Tip #7: Expect respect
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Tip #1: Respect your volunteer army

A “Thank You” goes a long way.

• Give details on what was great!

Actively listen to feedback

• Document and follow up on input.
• It’s not necessary to change your vision:
  − Stray conversations can be captured for later.

Celebrate your milestones

• Even when everyone is virtual, find a way to celebrate the milestones.
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Tip #2: Always have a list of tasks needing volunteers

• This could be:
  - Wiki page
  - Bug database
  - Kanban
  - Even a phone call

• Include scope of task, time required, technical expertise required.
Getting newcomers actively involved…

• …Provides them with the skills and experience to make bigger contributions

And

• Makes them feel part of the volunteer army
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Tip #3: Don’t be afraid to jump in

When a leader jumps in, it encourages others to follow.

Jumping in may be the only way to actively participate.

• Ensure you look out for others that may also want to participate.
Jumping in: Some Case Studies

- Technical Standards writing
- Smart uses of Reply All
- Stop-gap validation
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Remember “Stone Soup?”
Eventually, the whole village was fed…
Tip #4: Begin decision making with a strawman

People can make changes.

People can add or remove pieces.

You retain influence in the overall direction and ensure momentum is maintained.
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One open source project had a solid requirements definition process…

Define requirements

Prioritize requirements

Put requirements in Wiki

I didn’t try to change this, I just tried to understand it.
Then, we could add...

- Define requirements
- Prioritize requirements
- Put requirements in Wiki
- Breakdown of larger tasks
- Create and track schedule
- Release criteria
- Community input
- Developer input
When I didn’t work within the familiar system...

- It’s not one-click.
- It doesn’t fit into my workflow.
- I won’t use it.
- It doesn’t meet my needs.
Tip #5: Work within the system, then propose change

When you don’t…

At best, your message is misunderstood, and you feel undervalued.

At worst, your message is offensive, leaving you and the team feeling undervalued.

Better to leverage what exists and move towards new solutions together.
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My first project: Create a Product Requirements Document

But, ...
- Project was over halfway done.
- Features and requirements were already nailed down.
- People would not attend meetings to discuss or follow up on action items from meetings.
The team didn’t need a PRD.

The team needed to convey to other leaders that we had a stable, mature process.
Tip #6: Focus on the need, not the name

This statement…
Where is our Product Requirements Document?
Where is our GANTT chart?
Where are our Release Criteria?

… becomes THIS:
How do we track our feature ideas so we know what we want to implement and by when?
How do we know what we will deliver and by when?
How do we know if a release is “good enough” to be labeled as “stable?”
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Sometimes, a volunteer army can be dominated by a few individuals…

• This is a **good thing** when…
  - … people feel their voices are heard, but…
  - … not everyone has bandwidth to do the work.

• This is not a good thing when …
  - … people want to be doing more work or sharing more ideas, but…
  - … some members of the team are dominating the discussions or opportunities.
Tip #7: Expect respect

When you sense that you aren’t receiving the reception for your ideas you want, you can:

• Jump in

• Confront the issue

• Tolerate the situation

• Leave