**Creative Network: Theatre – 21 November 2023**

*“How can we encourage new volunteers to support our theatres - and keep them?”*

After watching a short video from Aled Wyn Jones, Volunteer Manager at Sherman Theatre who gave lots of fantastic top tips for recruiting and looking after your volunteers (see the video link in the email), we heard a presentation on volunteering from Jess Plant of Creative Lives (presentation attached to the email).

We then spoke to Joy Sloan, a keen volunteer who helps out regularly in her local community. She told us about her unfortunate experience at her local theatre and we then split into breakout rooms to discuss Joy’s story.

**How not to look after your volunteers . . .**

Joy responded to a call for volunteers at her local theatre, and went along with a friend to get involved. They were both given sewing and painting tasks to do, to help get ready for the upcoming pantomime produced by the in-house amateur company. No instructions were given and they were left on their own to complete the tasks. They were both competent enough to carry it out alone, however but when they ran out of work and returned to ask the woman who gave them the task (a seasoned volunteer with the theatre for almost 30 years), they were met with a condescending, patronising tone implying they were like children in a primary school who needed their hands held.

Joy’s friend left and never returned, but as Joy had already promised to help backstage with costumes and make-up during the nine performances, she returned each night during the run. Again, she was given no training or instruction but managed to find out from the actors what was required. On the penultimate night, she noticed that other volunteers were leaving earlier than usual after the show, but she carried on tidying up and then went home.

The following evening, a fellow-volunteer said “I didn’t see you at the party last night” – it transpired that the theatre holds a ‘thank you’ party for volunteers each year, but nobody had told her about it. This, the lack of clear instruction and the general cliquish nature of the group discouraged her from ever returning (despite her having been a volunteer at other establishments for many years). The theatre lost out on a competent, enthusiastic and committed volunteer.

**So – what could they have done differently to retain Joy’s time and energy?**

*Suggestions from participants in the breakout room:*

* When a prospective new volunteer first arrives, give them a conducted tour of the theatre from top to bottom and explain who people are and what they do.
* During the welcome tour, explain the various tasks and roles that new members can do so they have time to think about what’s on offer before signing up for a particular task.
* Offer new volunteers the chance to shadow existing volunteers in various roles, to see which ones they like the look of.
* Send a welcome letter/email to all new volunteers, which includes contact information (who to contact by email/phone) and who will be their point of contact in the theatre itself.
* Once a new volunteer has signed up, send them a sheet detailing which tasks are available and ask them to indicate they ones they are interested in.
* Make it clear that all roles are important and play a crucial role in the theatre’s running.
* Ensure everyone in the theatre (volunteers and any staff) know how dispiriting it can be for new volunteers to encounter cliques – encourage inclusivity and warm welcomes.
* Consider setting up a ‘buddy’ system whereby a seasoned volunteer works alongside a new volunteer for the first month.
* Ensure all existing volunteers are made aware of the arrival of a new volunteer, are told their name and encouraged to introduce themselves.
* Ensure each volunteer has the appropriate skill/knowledge to complete the task they have been given, and encourage skill-sharing amongst your volunteers. Also ensure new volunteers are aware of your health and safety regulations so they feel safe.
* Encourage a spirit of gratitude amongst all volunteers – if somebody is in charge, make sure they regularly thank and praise people. If there is no hierarchy, everyone can thank and praise each other.
* Ensure social occasions (such as the ‘thank you’ party Joy was not invited to) are communicated to everyone via email/posters/word of mouth/text message etc. to make sure everyone has been informed.

*General tips generated by the group for recruiting and looking after volunteers:*

* Hold an open day or coffee morning at your theatre to attract new volunteers.
* Have a named person at your theatre who is responsible for responding to initial requests to volunteer.
* Offer welcome gifts for new members (ideally donated by a local business).
* Make sure everyone – and in particular seasoned volunteers – are open to new members bringing in new skills (such as digital / design etc.).
* Approach local sixth forms, colleges and universities to try and recruit new younger volunteers.
* Interact with the social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram) run by the above institutions to make them aware of your presence and opportunities.
* Approach other local groups and organisations, such as Men’s Shed, Women’s Institute, local uniformed groups, local craft groups (Quilters Guild, Embroiderer’s Guild etc.) to attract volunteers with existing skills.
* Treat volunteers as you would paid staff members – in both a positive and negative sense. Look after their wellbeing, ensure they are suitably engaged, reward and praise (not financially but with regular ‘thank yous’ and free tickets etc.). But also, expect them to behave in appropriate ways and take action if your code of conduct is not being adhered to.
* Hold ‘thank you’ parties and social events at least once a year (but ideally more often) to make your volunteers feel appreciated – and to allow volunteers who might be on different shifts/tasks to meet each other and interact.