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# Remember the Journey: The Importance of Understanding the Three Stages

Angela Parker | Georgia Nonprofit NOW, Winter 2013

**Strategies for crafting the volunteer experience, and delivering the meaning that volunteers crave, all begin by better understanding today's volunteer.**



At **Realized Worth**, we do that by breaking down the volunteer's journey into three stages: *Tourist*, *Traveler*, and *Guide*.

**Tourists** are the most common specimen, including newcomers and episodic volunteers.

**Travelers** have begun internalizing the mission, taking a more active role and finding a voice within the organization.

**Guides** are those who are stepping into leadership positions and recruiting more volunteers to your cause, even without being asked.

Here are three reasons why it's important for nonprofit leaders to understand the Volunteer Journey:

## 1. Not all volunteers are the same.

When we start out, we're like **tourists** who need to be given an experience: if nothing connects with us the first time we visit a new country, we may never go back. The same is true for new volunteers. Just one out of 20 will return after their first visit to a nonprofit. Nonprofits need to understand the stages so they can expect and appreciate volunteers at each stage. We call this "meeting the volunteer where they're at."

## 2. Everyone needs a chance to fall in love.

If your **tourist** is ready, something about the cause will connect with her and she'll come back. If not, that's got to be ok. Each time they return, their motivation for coming will gradually shift from extrinsic to intrinsic: this is the "falling in love" part. At some point, they'll realize that they keep coming back because they want to, for their own personal reasons. The giving back part is important, but if it's not connected to enlightened self-interest, "giving back" can become objectification. When the motivation becomes intrinsic, that's when tourists become **travelers**. And those volunteers who are the backbone of the organization, alongside the ED and the founder? Those are **guides**.

### 3. It's a journey for everyone.

When we keep the journey of the volunteer in mind, we become kinder and more understanding. Having worked on the nonprofit side of things for more than ten years, I know how easy it is to forget that we're in this to change hearts and minds—not to get hung up on numbers or methods. Remembering the journey, we're careful not to burn out our *guides*—those who show up week after week and recruit new volunteers—by having them stack chairs and sweep floors. Instead, we acknowledge their leadership with new opportunities for growth and education. The volunteer who complains about everything? When we remember the journey, we understand that he's a *traveler* beginning to “own” the cause: reward him with more responsibility and outlets for his strong opinions. The volunteer who it seems we can never count on? They just need an experience that allows them to fall in love.

No one shows up to a blind date with a pre-nup—they show up hoping to connect. That hope is your opportunity.

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