

Learning Service
Guidelines #2

A Volunteer's Charter



A guide to be being
a valuable volunteer

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Learning Service: A Volunteer's Charter

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Hey there!

So, you have signed up to give your time to an organization you believe in – we love your attitude! This guide was designed to help people like you who are taking part in a volunteer trip, service learning project, voluntourism experience, or longer-term placement to maximize the positive impact your experience can have on yourself, the group you are working with, and the world.

Note: If you have not yet signed up for a volunteer experience and are in the process of considering if/how you should do so, we suggest you read the **“Learning Service: Tips and Tricks for Learning Before Helping”** first, as that tool is aimed at helping you identify ways you can maximize the learning needed before you can best give your time. Then, if you do decide to spend time volunteering, come back and read this document, as it is aimed at those people who have already signed up to volunteer, or are out in a service placement and trying to figure out the best ways to have a positive impact.

All the steps in this charter are aimed at adjusting and aligning attitudes, expectations, and goals to ensure your volunteering experience is valuable for both you and the organization you're spending time with. By following these steps, you should be able to:

- Identify a mismatch of expectations in terms of skills or accountability and quickly remove yourself from any potentially harmful volunteer placement
- Align your skills and actions with the needs of a responsible organization, ensuring your good intentions are equaled by positive outcomes
- Spread this idea and attitude to others who might not have considered the range of both positive and negative impacts which could come from service placements

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First there was “volunteering”. Then there was a movement called “Service Learning”, which identified the need to learn while we serve. To “serve” effectively we have to learn first so we're advocating for volunteer experiences with a “learning first” approach. We call this “Learning Service” (see what we've done?).

Volunteering at home is less complicated. You know the culture and the community and you are more likely to have transferable skills. Find a group that is well respected amongst your peers, give your time, and see the results! If the group is dishonest or the projects fail, you will be there to witness the results. You can change your actions and let other people know about your experience.

Even though international volunteer travel is rooted in the same good intentions, when we go abroad to volunteer, a lot of those self-checking mechanisms fall apart. We don't usually understand the culture as well, we rarely stay long enough to see the long-term impacts, and are less likely to realize if our efforts are being ineffective or actually causing harm. Plus, it costs a lot of money to go abroad! So when we do go, it is even more disappointing to find our efforts were wasted than if we had been committing our time to a project around the corner from our home.

Unfortunately the trend of encouraging SERVICE abroad before we encourage LEARNING abroad has led to many misguided actions and damaging results. It's time for a change!

But wait... I came to help OTHERS, not ME, you say.

We understand! We felt the same way, but then we realized that only by learning and improving ourselves can we successfully help others. If we commit to learning first we'll be more likely to harness our good intentions for great impact, and this charter is designed to help you do just that!

Six Steps to Learning Service

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No matter if it is ten kilometers from our home or ten thousand, to be of service in a meaningful way we need to learn about the place we are in, the current issues and resources in the area, the culture, the players working to make change, what support they are looking for, and the history of what initiatives have already taken place. More importantly, we need to do this **BEFORE** we dive in to 'serve'. Once we understand the ecosystem of change around us, we can try to match our skills and experience to the solutions already in motion and the problems we now better understand.

1 Adopt a 'learning attitude'.

Rather than entering a new situation with fixed ideas of what you are going to do and how you are going to help, try to extract a lesson from all aspects of the experience; especially the difficult parts! Being a sponge for new insights often means realizing that your original plan or attitude needs to be completely revamped. Though that can be frustrating, acknowledging your own limitations, dealing with the unexpected, and overcoming disappointment are lessons we can all use throughout our lives.

2 Ensure that both you and the organization's management have the same expectations

Once your skills have been matched with the needs of the organization, agree on your 'job description' and get to know the office culture, hours, dress code etc. Setting expectations to ensure that both parties understand the limitations of the placement will allow you to be more realistic, both about what you can learn and how you can add value. Remember that sustainable change usually takes a long time. Aligning your actions to help support long-term changes, which might not all be visible before the completion of your work, will usually produce better overall results than aiming for the satisfaction of short-term projects.

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Foster a culture of sharing and highlight the two-way exchange.



As you find ways to add value to the organizations or movements you are a part of, try to remember that you are not the only one investing time in these relationships. Your host organization is investing in you by supporting your learning, so take the time to acknowledge that. The best placements are ones where a culture of sharing and exchange is nurtured by all.

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Do the work that helps most, not just the work that is most interesting

For your contribution to an organization to be most valuable, ensure that what you are doing helps support its vision in the best way you are able to contribute. Though direct delivery work “in the field” sounds exciting, consider that your skills might not be best matched to that work. You may add the most value by simply editing documents in your native language or performing other administrative tasks. When analyzing your impact, consider the costs incurred for you to fulfill your role, eg. translation or transportation costs. Also consider the impression having a short-term volunteer in a higher level position might give to beneficiaries or co-workers. Be flexible: remember that the needs and conditions may change and that you cannot be the central concern of the organization’s management, or else they will not be focusing on their mission.

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Your attitude is contagious: bring a positive one!



The energy a person brings with them is contagious. It spreads through a family, an organization, and a community. Sometimes the best thing you can bring into an organization (or even a room!) is your positivity, your willingness to work hard, and your care for those around you. The impact of your attitude can spread further and faster than those infectious diseases your family is worried you might catch on your travels, so do not cause the spread of the whining disease! When comparing other work to Learning Service opportunities, many say that the highs are higher and the lows are lower so it is best if you know this going in!

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Remember that “Learning Service” is a life-long commitment.

Hopefully, if you have committed to giving your talents where they can best be used, you should be able to provide useful support to your partner organization during your placement. At the very least you should have the opportunity to make new friends, learn valuable lessons, and perhaps create an opportunity for cultural exchange. However, the positive impact from your experience does not need to end when you leave your role. Learning Service provides opportunities to practice improving our impact every day and throughout our lives. Weaving the principles of learning first, caring about those around us, and voting responsibly with our time and money, allows us to turn a short-term impact into a lifelong one.

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About PEPY Tours

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PEPY Tours is a different kind of travel company. Fueled by the belief that travel should be fun, educational, and beneficial to local communities, they create travel experiences that integrate sightseeing and cultural immersion with learning opportunities and off-the-beaten-track adventures, all the while raising money to support community development initiatives in the countries in which we travel.

An integral part of its mission is encouraging participants to live, travel, and give more responsibly, as well as realize their potential to be the change they want to see in the world. PEPY Tours believes that before we can make changes in our communities, countries, or indeed the world, we must first make those changes in ourselves. That is why all PEPY Tours trips blend personal development with lessons, discussions, and explorations of foreign aid, responsible travel, and global citizenship.

Spread the word!

Around the world right now there are millions of people volunteering, some of whom you probably know. Could they use this list of reminders around how to shift attitudes and actions towards more positive Learning Service opportunities? Scale up your own positive impact by sharing this tool: Tweet it, share it with your Facebook Friends, print it, discuss it, and help us start a dialogue!

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