

# High-Capacity Volunteer Cohort: A How-To Guide

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We just kicked off our eighth iteration of the High-Capacity Volunteer (HCV) Cohort: a collaboration of great leaders from around the Summit who have committed to spend the next eight months in a deep dive into becoming better leaders. We meet one morning per month from January through August. It's a 90 minute gathering based on assigned reading and relevant topics. As a part of the eight month process, volunteers will complete a project of their choosing that will improve the guest services culture at their particular campus.

The HCV Cohort started in 2013 when our staff team moved to a central staffing model. In an attempt to realign our DNA and get everyone on the same page, our paid folks spent a year going back to the basics. Once that year was up, they suggested that we provide something similar for our top-tier vols. And thus, the Cohort was born.

Over the years I've told you that the Cohort has been one of the best investments of my central team's time. It's an opportunity to learn from some of the Summit's best leaders and put them in a room where their ideas spark more ideas. Some of you have asked for a play-by-play of how we prep. That, my friends, is what we're talking about today.

## 1. Define your win(s).

Before you book a meeting room, you need to articulate what you're trying to accomplish, both for the volunteers and for those who are going to approve your plan. We've laid out four goals for our Cohort:

- **Become a better leader.** (Don't just let *us* view you as a leader...*you* view yourself as an equipper of others.)
- **Collaborate with your Campus Pastor / Director.** (Step up and take on new roles. Use your strengths to complement your greater volunteer team.)

- **Raise up your replacement.** (Someone is going to be in your chair next year. You should have a voice in the process, and you should work *now* to invest in them and prepare them.)
- **Commit to the reading and discussion.** (This ain't a cake walk. You're expected to come prepared and hungry to learn.)

A couple of these are measurable. A couple are fluid. We review them at the beginning of our time together, come back to them throughout the year, and review them as we wrap up. Your type A vols will want to know where you're taking them, and will appreciate a plan.

## 2. Pick your reading.

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Our volunteers read a selection from a different book each month...about 100 pages of reading for each meeting. We've used a number of different titles each year, and [you can download this year's list here](#).

Our books intentionally have both a church- and non-church-focus. We read about guest services within the church and leadership principles in the business world. I believe that we can learn a lot from successful organizations, and I want to help point our volunteers to those examples. And yes, we've included some controversial books along the way (surprisingly, *most* of those were church-focused books!). Encouraging a volunteer to read a book doesn't mean we're signing off on every principle the book espouses...it means it's causing them to think about what *our* principles should be.

## 3. Set your agenda.

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Our 90 minutes together each month uses the assigned reading as a springboard for robust discussion. We use a mix of small-group questions, all-skate questions, and targeting teaching on the topic at hand. The tragedy of the Cohort would be if it only featured a talking head droning for an early-morning hour and a half.

We attempt to pair the reading with a real-time issue in our ministry area, or a practical tool that our volunteers may not have used to the fullest potential.

## 4. Start inviting.

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We actually begin the vetting process as the previous Cohort is wrapping up in August. Following the "raise up your replacement" goal above, we ask outgoing participants to submit the name of the person who should be in their seat. Associate Campus Pastors / Directors (our Guest Services leads at each campus) get the final say on who receives invitations. A few practical tips that have helped along the way:

- We have a rule of thumb that a campus gets spots to match their number of services. Two services on the weekend = two spots at the table. Four = four, etc. (This also *usually* correlates with campus size...larger campuses have more volunteer spots.)
- The earlier the invitation, the greater the chance of "yes." Our goal is to start inviting in October / November for a late January start.
- The higher the role, the more important they participate. Service leaders and team leaders are shoe-ins. However, ACP/Ds can nominate whomever they like, including a new volunteer who shows great potential.

## 5. Communicate. Communicate. Communicate.

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Our volunteers are busy. Many of them are heading into a full-time job late after our morning meetings. Most of them are missing key family time in order to do the reading. The more we help facilitate their schedule, the better off we are. We always push the following:

- A full list of meeting dates before they commit.
- A calendar request for all dates after they commit.
- A one-week-before-each-meeting email, reminding them of the meeting and reading assignment.
- A day-before-the-meeting email, hoping to alleviate any last-minute forgetfulness.
- A day-of meeting wrap-up email, including a completed agenda (with notes and links to things we talked about), and an abbreviated slide deck.

## 6. Get creative / be intentional.

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If you're considering a Cohort, don't limit yourself to a few bare tables and folding chairs. Provide light snacks and coffee and set up the room as if you're setting up for an event. Throughout the Cohort, we try to add special touches like a first-day commissioning prayer by their staff director, a graduation day ceremony, hand written notes, and personalized name tags and place cards. Oh, and that campus project I mentioned above? We execute that Shark Tank-style complete with great prizes.

The real question: *does the Cohort actually work?* Overwhelmingly, I'd say yes. Over the years we've seen good leaders become great leaders. We've seen ministry multiply as leaders begin to take on bigger roles and champion our guest services values to other volunteers. We've seen volunteers become staff members, join church plants, or help launch campuses. We've had volunteers take the principles they've learned and put them into practice to make their workplaces better.

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