

Junk Hours

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I enjoy running very much and consider it a passion in my life. I have found that, when you immerse yourself in any sport or hobby, you begin to acquire the lingo and the gear associated that interest. Just ask my wife, Jen, and she'll tell you that I can't part with any old pair of running shoes (I can relate to Gollum, "my precious!").

There's a phrase in the running world called "junk miles." Good workouts have an intentionality and intensity that push your body to perform better. Junk miles are miles a runner runs that do little to increase fitness thresholds helping you run faster and longer.

There are days when I feel tired or lazy, and I'll run to appease a self-imposed guilt-complex telling myself, "At least I ran today." To be fair, "at least I ran today" is partially positive. Running is better than not running. But runners seeking to excel cannot live on junk miles alone.

Youth ministry is a passion we share and we have a desire to be excellent in serving adolescents, families, and others who serve adolescents and families-our volunteers. We have a responsibility to steward our volunteers' time to bring ever-increasing health to our ministry team and community. While we believe this to be true, I find that it's natural for youth workers who love adolescents, to invest most their time with students, giving volunteers leftover time and attention.

As a result, youth workers often treat leadership meetings as necessary evils, have volunteer conversations about task instead of character, and tell volunteers where to go but not what to be. Like running's junk miles, let's call these, "junk hours." Junk hours are better than no hours but cannot sustain a healthy, growing ministry. I believe that junk hours contribute to a high turnover rate, team disunity, role ambiguity, and lack of empowerment.

How might we avoid junk hours? Here are a few thoughts to get you thinking...

At least we had a leaders' meeting (But what did you rally around?)

It's easy to convince myself that people love just getting together for a meeting and that meetings will run themselves. In a healthy community, volunteers do enjoy being with each other. Reality proves that people's lives are full and any ministry meeting needs to be more than hanging out. Questions like, "What's up?" or "Do you have any questions?" won't inspire confidence in the parents who navigated schedules to make the meeting or the college student who has an exam the next day.

Come into meetings prepared. Make leaders' meetings a high priority by treating them with high investment.

- Prepare an agenda for the meeting so that you and others are clear on what the plan is for the meeting.
- Send your agenda out prior to the meeting to give your volunteers time to think about the topics you hope to address.
- Ask questions to volunteers ahead of time so they can share out of reflection rather than reacting to a pop-quiz.
- Commit to starting and ending on time. This communicates respect for everyone's time, honoring those who come on time and being true to your word about the length of the meeting. End meetings meeting on time with energy, rather than in exhaustion and ambiguity.

At least they did what I asked (But are they embracing where you're going?)

We all love volunteers who do what we ask. Let's be honest, we want to clone them. But volunteers, who do what we ask, often respond to requests rather than embrace the dream for the ministry. A volunteer's lack of ownership can come from youth pastors not giving them direction.

Consider the roles to which you ask your volunteers to commit:

- Are his/her role and your expectations clear?
- Are you taking time to understand and evaluate their roles, desires, and goals on a regular basis?
- Do you understand their context (i.e. Who are their families and what do they do outside of volunteering)?
- Can you see what they could become beyond what they're currently doing?
- Are you concerned about their spiritual health as much as their ministry task?

These types of questions add a deeper dimension to our shepherding that invests in our volunteers at a greater, holistic level.

At least I sent out an email (But what did you communicate?)

On my blog, I have an informal survey. My latest poll asked readers to finish the sentence, "Volunteers need youth pastors to...". Over ninety percent said that youth pastors need to "communicate more."

Some might say that it's the youth pastor's job to come up with the great ideas. Good leadership, however, includes others in the developing process. Ideas, then, are the product of multiple perspectives and an inclusive process that brings in people at the beginning of the journey rather than informing them at the end. I often hear volunteers say, "I don't know what's going on;" or "I'm not really sure what we're doing." Or I see it at gathering and retreats, where volunteers line the walls watching while the youth pastor takes center stage. These are symptoms of junk hours.

- Commit to communicating regularly with your volunteers. Weekly or semi-monthly emails can be a great way to keep everyone on pace. I've discovered that regular communication can be shorter (and easier to write and read) than long novels that go out sporadically.
- Prioritize calling and meeting with volunteers. Be present and available.
- Seek out feedback. Summarize the feedback and send it out to your volunteers so that they know you're listening. Communicate with your ears more than your mouth.

As least they're free (No, they're worth the investment!)

Some say that the best thing about volunteers is that they're free. I'd disagree and suggest that they're worth the investment. When I reflect on junk hours and realize that youth ministry requires high commitment to our volunteers, I'm challenged to evaluate how I use my own ministry hours, resources, and attention.

The path toward a healthy ministry will be converting junk hours to a disciplined investment in our volunteers. I believe that ultimately, this is every youth pastor's desire.

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