

Questions for Repair Café Organizers to Consider

Janet Henderson, co-ordinator of the Repair Café in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, has generously shared this document which sets out a number of questions that have come up in her Repair Café experience to date. While you needn't have to answer all these questions for your visitors, it can be helpful before your event to be aware of them and give some thought to possible answers.

Why do you want to have a Repair Café?

- To reduce waste and keep things out of the landfill?
- To reduce the number of new things that need to be made, and the use of fossil fuels?
- To exhibit a different way of being in the world, a new giving culture?
- To opt out of the consumer society?
- To help people who have fewer personal choices and resources?
- To have fun doing something useful and satisfying?
- To enjoy the company of others working toward the same ends?
- To develop relationships with others?
- To be innovative and creative?
- To practice and learn useful skills?
- To give people with skills that are no longer valued a place to practice them and feel useful again?
- To pass on skills to a younger generation before they are lost?
- Because you believe that we have a responsibility to be good stewards?
- Because of a personal ethic of frugality?
- Because you enjoy being frugal?
- To prepare for transition to a time when there is less wealth and fewer, easily available or affordable goods, and where we will have to make-do with less?
- Or, other reason(s)?

Giving, Charity:

The whole business of giving is often confused with charity. Doing things for others is a natural part of life. But some people react to giving by judging the recipients as unworthy. How does your group feel about “entitlements” and those who receive them? Who is of value? Is judging someone unworthy a result of classism or racism? Do you want to repair items for people of all classes and income levels? What about an obviously wealthy person who could afford to pay someone for the repair?

How do you feel about charity? Do you see charity as “good”? Do you see charity as patronizing, giving from a privileged position to those of a lesser position? Do you want to hold the Repair Café as a charitable endeavor or as an egalitarian event? What are the implications of both?

There are different kinds of giving:

- Christian giving (mandated by God or a belief that giving is “good”)
- reciprocal giving (giving in order to get something in return)
- giving from personal generosity
- giving with a mission in mind (to make a difference)
- giving back (class guilt?)
- giving because you can.

What is your motivation and does it make a difference what your motivation is?

Sponsorship:

Are you going to have sponsors? Are you going to advertise them in your publicity and at the event? If so, you are in effect endorsing them. What guidelines will you have to decide which types of organizations to accept as sponsors? Will you accept businesses, only non-profits, local groups only, groups working toward sustainability and resilience, if political groups only those whose politics you agree with?

Approach:

What terminology will you use? What will you call the people who bring items to be repaired? Visitors? Customers? Guests? Have you thought of the different connotations of each word? What will you call your volunteers who do repairs? Repair people? Volunteers? Fixers? Coaches? Advisors? Assistants? Have you thought of the implications between a fixer and a coach, for example?

Are your repair volunteers going to simply fix visitors' items or are they going to coach visitors' to fix items themselves? Or will you do what the visitor prefers? When fixers are working on items, will you encourage visitors to remain with their item, perhaps learn for future repairs?

Is your Repair Café going to be a one-time event or are you going to hold them regularly? Keep in mind both the organizational work needed and the value of having the Repair Café at on a regular basis in terms of building familiarity.

If you hold Repair Cafés often, what can you do to prevent burn-out on the part of volunteers? How many volunteers will you have, in what roles? How will roles be determined and decisions be made? How will you engage and support volunteers? How will you manage promotion and organizational tasks?

How will you find new volunteers? Will you have a questionnaire for them to fill out, listing previous paid and volunteer experience, interests, contact info, what they want to do at the Repair Café, etc.?

Will you make sure your volunteers are sufficiently skilled or will you assume volunteers know what they're doing? Will you hold mini-workshops to teach volunteers about safety issues or other skills?

What are you going to do to make sure volunteers feel welcomed and appreciated and valued for themselves and for their work?

Are you going to have volunteer get-togethers in between Repair Café events, such as a potluck so volunteers can get to know each better, or restaurant dinner together after an event, or meetings to decide on changes to policies or coaching sessions in various repair skills?

Will you have a disclaimer saying that neither Repair Café organizers nor fixers are responsible for damage to persons or property resulting from repairs undertaken at the Repair Café? If so, will you require visitors to sign it, or will the notice be posted prominently? Do you think something more is needed to protect you from possible litigation if there is damage to an article or a person as a result of what occurs at your Repair Café? If so, what will this be (event insurance?) and how will you get it? Partner with another organization that has insurance?

Are you going to have procedures decided on in advance, perhaps written down, or are you going to wing it? If you will have procedures, which do you think are important?

Are you going to have a protocol for the way volunteers should treat visitors? If so, what components do you think are important? Being welcoming? Keeping an eye out to make sure visitors feel comfortable, know what to do, etc.? Besides how to greet visitors and keep them involved during the repair process, etc., other possibilities include what to say when you are unable to repair an item or when a

visitor is difficult or obnoxious, or when a volunteer perceives that a visitor is violating a rule or intent of the Repair Café in some way.

Are you going to have a set maximum number of items that any one guest can bring on any one day? How many? What is your approach to visitors bringing multiple items?

How will you address issues of safety and quality? Do you need to ensure that all repaired items will be safe for the visitor to use at home (e.g. electrical items, have them reviewed by a seasoned electrical repair person)?

How are you going to employ collaboration so that volunteers are encouraged to ask each other when they have a knotty problem? Are you going to have a fall-back process when a volunteer thinks an item is unrepairable, such as having the volunteer take the item to a repair coordinator to have them look at it?

Are you going to add any other activities to your Repair Café? The choices are endless, including live music; drinks and snacks an information table with books on repairs; an information table with information about other local events and organizations; a “free—take what you want” table [Really, Really Free Table]; chair massage; advice on other matters [depending on the knowledge base of your volunteers]; child care during the event; a formal apprenticeship program or informally teaching young people to make repairs; classes/workshops on various repair skills; having a tool library, etc. etc.

Data Collection, Photography, Privacy:

Are you going to ask for (or estimate) demographic information from the visitors? Are you going to ask for contact information? If yes, for what purpose? In order to know the populations who are visiting your Repair Café, or in order to get grants or sponsorships, or to create a mailing list to send info on future events, or for some other reason? Or do you not want to be “intrusive”?

Are you going to take photos of the people at the Repair Café? Are you going to tell them what the photo is for and ask if using their photo is OK in promotional materials before even taking their picture? Are you going to have them sign a release and/or post a policy prominently at the event?

Do any of your volunteers mind having their names or photos used in publicity or articles written about the Repair Café?