



KMAC Profile: Recruiting Strong Volunteer Leaders

“Participation – you never know where it will lead.”

~ John Webster, Headmaster

San Antonio Academy

When asked what makes a good leader, John Webster is straight to the point. “A good leader is someone who is respected enough that people want to follow him/her.” By that definition, John Webster is an *extraordinary* leader; one who – simply put – inspires loyalty and trust. He is the quintessential headmaster; the kind of man you don’t want to disappoint.

In the eight years I worked as an independent contractor for [San Antonio Academy](#), I found the people he recruited as volunteer leaders for The Academy rose to the challenge; they wanted to make him proud, they wanted to make a difference for their community, they wanted to live up to the words of The Academy’s motto: “Be honest. Be kind. Be the best you can be.®”



As Headmaster for San Antonio Academy for 26 years, Webster has recruited his fair share of volunteer leaders – from special event chairpersons to board members to capital campaign and annual fund leaders. He is so successful, many times in my coaching and consulting work, I hold him up as an example of someone who really knows how to recruit, groom and cultivate great leaders and volunteers.

“When I see parents who have leadership potential, I try to get them involved in a volunteer opportunity,” Webster said. “Many times, it leads to other leadership opportunities, such as work on the board.”

When he begins the process of recruiting a family for a volunteer leadership role, such as chairperson of the [Fall Family Fair](#) or the [Spring Thing](#) fundraising events, Webster plays to his strengths as an effective leader who has earned the respect of his community.

“My goal is to take the relationship to the next level.”

Webster calls the parents to the school for a meeting, assuring them that everything is fine with their son, and then he explains his mission.

“I am asking you a favor, and I am asking out of respect,” he tells the family.

Once they are sitting down face-to-face, Webster discusses the work he is asking the parents to do, and details the specifics of the work, the commitment and the expectations. “Job descriptions are essential,” Webster says. “There is no wrong answer when the prospective volunteer says ‘yes’ or ‘no,’” Webster explains. “What is important is the relationship. If the volunteer feels pressure and accepts when he or she should say no, the relationship suffers.”

Webster feels strongly that he needs to make that request himself. “I want to show respect for them, show them how critical their role is, show them my support and make them feel special as a way to ultimately strengthen the relationship. If I send someone else, it diminishes the importance of what I am asking.”



There is no doubt the leaders he recruits have their work cut out for them.

In the case of the Fall Family Fair, the chairmen lead numerous committees and guide approximately 70 volunteers

to organize an event for 1,300 people, so the impact those chairmen have on The Academy's community is significant. In her key role as Events Director, Mary Shrader partners with the volunteers, giving them the affirmation that their hard work is appreciated. "People know they're working with staffers who care, are well organized, and want to see them succeed." Webster said. Over the years, the events have been very successful, despite the fact that Webster and his staff do not set a specific fiscal benchmark.

"I don't want to set quasi or unattainable goals. The volunteer needs to feel affirmed."

The Academy has been doing things a little differently in the past couple of years; the vice chairman of the Fall Family Fair is the 'chairman' in waiting.

"It builds a tradition of volunteerism, and it affirms their work," Webster explains.



Typically, the Fall Family Fair – held each October on the school grounds – nets \$90,000 to \$100,000. The Spring Thing – an adults-only evening held off-site each March – makes \$75,000 to \$90,000. The most recent Annual Fund Drive brought in \$684,000 this year. But, money is not the bottom line in Webster's recruiting efforts.

"It is not about money; it is about the quality of relationships," Webster insists. "If you have the relationship, you will get the dollars. You don't have to chase the dollars."



Still, he is proud of the participation he gets from the families in the San Antonio Academy community.

“We have 100% parent participation in the Annual Fund. Fewer than 2% of private schools in the United States can say that,” Webster says.

He also has a thriving Board of Trustees, 90% of whom are parents of current students.

“The level of participation we have from the families in our community affirms to me how many wonderful people we have, and says to me that we are all here for the same reason.”

Webster believes at the heart of effective volunteerism is an emphasis on strengthening the relationship between the parent and The Academy.

“It is the sense of family that brings our community together. These are people who are willing to give their heart, soul, talent and resources to our community.”

“Volunteers are the only human beings on the face of the earth who reflect this nation's compassion, unselfish caring, patience, and just plain love for one another.”

~ Erma Bombeck
