



Team Recruitment Best Practices

FIRST® is a global robotics community that prepares young people for the future.



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Introduction

This guide was created by *FIRST*® Robotics Competition in collaboration with several *FIRST* Robotics Competition teams. Thank you to the teams who helped to provide feedback to help us create this guide!

This guide is intended to be a foundational resource for team recruitment for all *FIRST*® teams. Much of the information and examples provided within this guide are based on concepts from *FIRST* Robotics Competition teams but the concepts can be applied to any *FIRST* team.

Communication and clear expectations are key to effectively managing large organizations with dozens or even hundreds of members. Spending some time on the front-end writing down expectations for these groups can help avoid unnecessary headaches as your organization expands. This guide focuses on a wide range of ideas and best practices for team recruitment and retention. It is up to each team to decide what works best for their specific team. The way a school team recruits may be much different than how a community-based team would recruit.

Team Recruitment for *FIRST*® Robotics Teams

Lead Coaches and Mentors serve an important role in creating opportunities for their local community with both the students and mentors they recruit.

FIRST Robotics Competition teams are led by adult mentors and students in a variety of leadership positions. Every team's leadership structure may be different, depending on the size of the team and the experience of its members. Check out our [Team Organization Best Practices](#) resource for ideas on how to organize your team including details on leadership, handbooks, and team communication.

Student Recruitment

When recruiting students for a team, it is important to understand the population of the school or local community and focus recruiting efforts on attracting a broad range of students. Make sure recruiting efforts reach a cross-section of the school or community by targeting the entire school and welcoming individuals with different skills and experience. Include and encourage a wide range of individuals to help with recruiting. Students are more likely to be interested in participating if they see and hear from their peers.

Typical Recruitment methods:

- Hang posters in the school, at the local library, in businesses, and in sponsor organizations.
 - Check out the Recruitment Section of the [Team Management webpage](#) for flyer templates.
- Include promotional materials in school newsletters or on school websites.
- Hold a student assembly where there is a *FIRST* Robotics Competition video and/or demo.
- Put on a demonstration at a school or community event such as a club or activities fair.
- Give an overview of *FIRST* Robotics Competition in a series of classes where a variety of students are enrolled.
 - This is a great spot to have current students or mentors go to classes and speak about the team.

- Open House Events
- Outreach Events
 - Outreach events help make the community aware of your team and sometimes these events can be the reason a student joins your team.
- Word of Mouth
 - The strongest advocate for being on the team is the peers of the students already on your team.
 - Sometimes you will gain new students simply because they were on a different robotics program when they were younger.
- Utilize [FIRST stories](#)
- Use [FIRST videos](#)

Regardless of the medium of recruitment, these factors can be the biggest draw for students:

- **Feeling wanted:** Going up to a student and saying "Hey, I think you'd be a great fit for this team" or "Wow, we'd love to have you on our team" or "You seem like you'd be really good at this", can really give students a jolt of confidence and makes them feel valued. This can be extra effective when it's done by a teacher in the school, who the student may already know and look up to.
- **Fun vibes:** Students are being pulled in so many directions for their extra-curriculars. Not to mention their out-of-school commitments, or even just wanting to go home and doom scroll or play video games. There has to be a lure beyond "it's good on your resume" or even "building robots is rewarding". The team has to be fun and more importantly seem fun to outsiders.
- **Not too cliquey:** Social stigma is a massive thing for teenagers. A lot of students might think robotics sounds interesting, but if the team seems like a place they're going to be made fun of for being, it's going to keep a lot of students from joining. It's why it's really important to have a diverse team with students from all sorts of social circles and cliques. This is a hard cycle to break into, but once it starts spinning it works really well. If the team is just students from one social circle, it's going to be intimidating for others to break in and join. Furthermore, your word-of-mouth recruiting is going to attract the same types of people. But if you have a team with students from a variety of social circles, the team will web out in multiple directions.
- **The Excitement of High-Level Competition:** Some students aren't just looking for an after-school club; they are genuinely hungry for the fast-paced, high-stakes strategy of *FIRST* Robotics Competition matches, scouting, and game analysis.
- **Resume & Experience Builder:** Students are looking for ways to differentiate themselves and show involvement.

Student Retention

The first step is recruiting students, but the next more crucial step is how to retain students. No matter what you do as a team, you will likely have some students interested who end up not staying on the team for one reason or another. Some find that the time commitment (or the perceived time commitment) is more than they want. Some think that they will be building their own robot, not working on a team to build one and don't like the team aspect. Some were pressured to join the team by parents, and they didn't really want to participate to begin with.

Some factors that can help lead to high retention include:



- **Fun Vibes:** If the team is a fun place to be, students will keep coming back!
- **Meeting Schedule:** Every team has a different meeting schedule for a variety of needs but the important thing is to keep the meeting schedule realistic. If your team has multiple meetings a week, you shouldn't require all students to come to every meeting. Develop a schedule that provides time off for team members to focus on other important aspects of life, including family, friends, and schoolwork.
- **Good Communication:** Students want to know what to do and having good communication can help students understand what the tasks are and have more ownership.
- **Community Aspect** - Being a member of a *FIRST* team where a student can find a group of friends that they feel comfortable with and getting to share fun & new experiences together can be a major reason students stay.
- **Off-Seasons:** Off-seasons are a great way to keep veterans actively engaged and gives rookies a low-stakes preview of what to expect during the high-pressure build season, ensuring a steady, balanced transition into the official competition year.
- **Training:** Ensuring that students have the opportunity to learn and try multiple aspects of a team can help them thrive. Some teams offer weekly training sessions to give rookies a chance to explore different subteams, offering both beginner and advanced tracks for some subteams. This is also a great way to keep veterans engaged as they can assist with these sessions, which gives older students great leadership opportunities while creating an approachable, collaborative environment for newcomers.
- **Making a Difference** – For some students, being able to volunteer at events to help others and/or run outreach events can be another reason students love being part of a *FIRST* team.

Some factors that can lead to students leaving the team include:

- **Too Cliquesy:** If the team is too cliquesy, students will be exhausted from trying to fit in. Being excluded is both draining and hurtful. Mentors and student leaders have a responsibility to make sure the team is inclusive and welcoming to all.
- **Burnout:** This program asks a lot of students, and often the commitment is too much. The perception of how much is required keeps students from opening the door, and the exhaustion and burnout pushes students back out the door. Any way to make the commitment lighter, while still being "the hardest fun you'll ever have" is crucial.
- **Not feeling valued, not having anything to do, not knowing how to contribute:** Students need to be engaged and feel like they're contributing.

Engaging Students

Being a team means that you work together toward a goal. Despite the fact that you are competing in a robotics competition, building a robot is not your only goal. You are also building teamwork, fun memories, and the ability to collaborate.

Here are some best practices that other *FIRST* Robotics Competition teams do to help engage new members:

- **Low-Stakes Exploration via Pre-Season Training:** Depending on your team structure, you can choose to either allow students to explore a variety of tracks before deciding which is best for them or you can use applications to help place students onto the right subteam.
 - Spend all of the pre-season doing training tracks for new students where students are placed in a subteam at the start of the school year to more quickly start learning.
 - Have a session each week, for each subteam—covering everything from rapid prototyping and electrical to marketing and outreach—where members are encouraged to rotate through a variety of areas if they have not found their “home”

- yet. This gives them a confident sense of where they actually want to focus before the pressure of build season hits.
- Consider using the [FIRST Robotics Competition Guided Experience](#) to help train new members. This pathway is a fun, flexible training designed for Lead Coaches, mentors, and youth team members (13+) to build essential skills for a successful season. With 12 interactive modules, hands-on activities, and downloadable resources, teams can choose a full training path or mix-and-match lessons to fit their needs. Perfect for pre-season prep, build season support, and onboarding new members.
 - **Immediate Hands-On Projects:** Giving students the chance to actually try something they haven't done before can really help engage students. This is also a great way for students to learn how to fail and that it is okay to fail. This can break down a lot of the fear of working on robots.
 - Host a mock Kickoff
 - See the [Kickoff Section](#) on the website for some resources & [FIRST Robotics Competition Guided Experience Module 6 - Lesson 3](#) which has more information on holding a mock Kickoff.
 - Depending on how much time you have, you can not only go through some of the early strategy conversations but can delve into rapid prototyping or even having them design, wire, and program real robots in a non-competitive environment. This gives students immediate ownership and invaluable early experience.
 - Build the previous season's KitBot and have them go through the exercise of iterating on the [KitBot](#).
 - **Peer-to-Peer Membership:** Have veteran members work with new members on their chosen interests - programming, CAD, manufacturing, build, or Outreach - or all of the above.
 - Use the off season to engage new members - take them to an off-season competition, allow them to drive a robot (this could be your existing robot or a KitBot), work on a pit crew, be a part of the media team
 - It's also important to get them involved in outreach. One tip is to pair them with a veteran member during the outreach events so they can learn from them.
 - If you don't have enough veteran members, you can also use Mentors
 - **Intentional Community & Team Bonding:** You can't have a strong team without strong connections. To break down the traditional walls between grades or subteams, host regular social bonding events like team game nights and bowling. It gives rookies a structured but relaxed environment to build genuine friendships and feel like they belong.
 - Another way to practice your Core Values and build an inclusive and fun environment is to host a Team-Building Party with your team. Use the [Team Activity: Host a Team Building Party](#) document to guide you through a brainstorming process that will help you plan a fun experience for your team!

Requirements

Some teams have requirements that teams must meet in order to stay on the team and/or travel to an event. Something like an attendance requirement ensures that the students are at least showing up, regardless of skill level. If your team is going to have any requirements that members must meet, it is recommended that you share those early and include them in a team handbook.

Some examples of requirements that teams may have:

- 80% attendance at required meetings (2x/wk in the fall, 4x/wk Jan-Apr).

- Require a certain number of productive hours to travel, letter, etc (students clock in and out)
- Academics come first – students must maintain grades of C or higher
- Conduct expectations are framed around Gracious Professionalism, initiative, and maintaining a positive team environment.
- Requirements only for those that wish to hold leadership roles (such as # of meetings, years on the team, & outreach events)
- Requirements only for those to travel to an event

Mentor Recruitment

In addition to students, the other big need is having additional mentors to support the team. Check out the Team Roles section within the [FIRST Robotics Competition Mentor Guide](#) for ideas on what types of Mentors your team may need. Every adult must become familiar with the [FIRST Youth Protection Program \(YPP\)](#) and all mentors are required to obtain Youth Protection Clearance.

Anyone can be a mentor, and some mentors may be able to give more time than others. Always start by identifying the help you need and the time commitment that assistance will require. Mentors can contribute based on their availability—whether that means managing a core subteam or providing specialized support on an as-needed basis. Some teams don't need technical help; they need support for administrative work, marketing, trip planning, driving to events, fundraising, etc. Or they might need help developing a Business Plan or learning about college and career preparation.

Make sure recruiting efforts reach a cross-section of the community. Team members may be more comfortable if there are mentors on the team with backgrounds and interests similar to their own. Students can also learn a great deal from individuals with varied life, work, and learning experiences.

Potential groups to ask to Mentor:

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|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| • School Employees | • Someone a parent knows |
| • Co-workers of an existing mentor | • Local Industry professionals |
| • <i>FIRST</i> Alumni | • Sponsors |
| • Parents | • Retired industry professionals |

Mentor Retention

Mentors stick around because they enjoy the atmosphere of the team. The camaraderie, the feeling of making an impact, and thrill of competitions. For many mentors being a mentor gives them access to opportunities to lead, build friendships, build technical knowledge, and build management, communication, and organizational skills. For some there's a lot of professional development as they become better engineers/PMs/programmers. Valuable skills gained through mentoring often lead mentors to greater success in their lives and careers outside of *FIRST*.

Managing mentors can sometimes be more challenging than managing students. It's important to set clear expectations for how mentors are expected to work with students, from Youth Protection to defining the boundary between student work and adult work which varies team to team. In addition, it's important to have clear roles and expectations for mentors so they know what to expect (this can be through a coaches handbook and/or clear leadership pathways). It's also important to meet regularly with the mentors to keep track of project status, what is working well, and what projects may need more help.

Finally, it's important to treat mentors well and thank them regularly for their time. The most meaningful thank you's typically come from students and their parents to show that the mentor has made a difference in their lives.

Engaging Mentors

Similar to students, this one comes down to ownership. As opposed to saying "hey come on out and help with whatever you can?", giving a new mentor a specific task/area/responsibility that they can feel ownership over makes them feel like their time is valued and that it makes sense for them to be there. Some teams also pair new mentors with specific projects to allow new mentors to focus on their strengths—whether advising a specific mechanism or shadowing veteran coaches—without being overwhelmed by general team operations or logistics.

It's important that mentors use empathy when interacting with students and listen to their points of view. Consider asking new mentors to take some of the *FIRST* created mentor trainings like [FIRST Mentors: Working with Youth training](#). See other available training courses under Training on the [Team Management webpage](#).

Recruiting Additional Help

In addition to mentors and students, many teams also recruit others to help with planning, meal prep, etc. Mentors have a lot that they are doing as volunteers, so it's important to ask for help from others. This group can be assigned in the Team's Dashboard as **Team Volunteer** which is an optional role for an individual (18+) who regularly volunteers with and support the team, but they are not a mentor or one of the Lead Coaches. Official Team Volunteers are required to obtain Youth Protection Clearance. Team Volunteers may help chaperone and/or support the team in other ways.

Note: a parent who occasionally helps by dropping off a meal or helping load a trailer does not need to be assigned as a Team Volunteer. That role is intended for volunteers who regularly help support the team.

Many times, this group is made up of parents of active students on the team but sometimes parents stick around after their child has graduated as they love being part of the program. Some teams require parents to help on the team whereas others may not have hard requirements. Parent groups are most effective when they work in partnership with team leadership. Regular communication helps ensure they are supporting the team's priorities rather than operating independently. Typical tasks can include running monthly parent meetings, coordinating a field build weekend, assisting with off-season prep, and recruiting parents to lead in smaller tasks like end-of-year party planning, etc.

There are always parents who are looking to help out and many of them are used to supporting these efforts with their kids' other activities (e.g. sports, dance, camps, etc.). For example, team meals during meetings can be entirely handed over to the parents to coordinate. The key is to find tasks that they can take on independently. Some ideas for this group to help with include, but is not limited to:

- Booking hotels
- Team apparel
- Sponsor recruitment / relations
- Meals during the season

- Meals at events

Additional Resources

- [**FIRST Team Management Resources**](#) - A collection of resources to help teams with some of the aspects of running a team such as organizing your team, fundraising, and more.
- [**FIRST Robotics Competition Guided Experience Module 1: Intro to FIRST Robotics Competition**](#) – This module helps participants learn more about *FIRST* Robotics Competition teams, games, competitions, resources, and more.