Volunteers in Community Action

By

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Partnerships in Education and Research

Community Ventures
FUNDED IN PART BY THE WESTERN REGION UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE RESEARCH AND EDUCATION PROGRAM
THIS COUNTRY WAS FOUNDED BY VOLUNTEER LEADERS SOLVING PROBLEMS. THROUGH THE YEARS COUNTLESS COMMUNITIES HAVE BENEFITED FROM VOLUNTARY ACTION, INVOLVING VOLUNTEERS IN COMMUNITY EFFORTS HAS PROVEN TO BE EFFECTIVE, EFFICIENT, AND ENJOYABLE. VOLUNTEERS ARE BROADLY DEFINED AS INDIVIDUALS WHO RECEIVE NO MONETARY REWARD FOR HELPING OTHERS.

“Our challenge, then, is to engage each citizen, school and business, church and synagogue, service organization and civic group. For this is what I mean when I talk of a ‘thousand points of light’ — that vast galaxy of people and institutions working together to solve problems in their own back yard.”

“From now on in America, any definition of a successful life must include serving others.”

President George Bush
June 22, 1989
WHY PEOPLE VOLUNTEER

Motivations that prompt volunteers to devote their time and energy to a cause or organization are as varied as the spectrum of individuals involved. Awareness of the reasons why particular individuals volunteer can prove advantageous and satisfying to both the volunteers and the organization.

Altruism. Belief in a specific cause may be one element in deciding to volunteer, but it is rarely the only one.

Self-interest. Perceived benefits might include social visibility, professional recognition or association with a prestigious organization. Individuals may want to increase their knowledge and skills in a particular subject or area.

Social outlet. The desire to meet people with similar interests or to fill free time with worthwhile activities may motivate youths, the elderly, homemakers, and newcomers in the community.

Training and job experience. Students, independently or through intern programs, find volunteer positions useful in building a record of experience while they are still enrolled in school. Women not employed outside the home often volunteer to stay in touch with the working world or to test the waters before entering or re-entering the job market. A volunteer seeking a job may find a paid position using contacts made through a volunteer program.

Obligation. Someone who has benefited from the work of an organization in the past may feel obliged to respond to a call for volunteers to participate in an upcoming project. Another, very different type of obligation, comes from volunteers recruited through a court system's alternative sentencing program who must complete their assigned hours of service.

Understanding why people volunteer is important in establishing a reasonable expectation for the level and type of volunteer participation and in creating mutually satisfying volunteer situations. Motivations can and do change, and individual volunteer patterns will change along with them. The homemaker who finds paid employment likely will not be able to volunteer on the same schedule or donate the same number of hours as before.

THREE MAJOR TRENDS FOR THE 90S

THREE MAJOR TRENDS FOR THE 90S REFLECTING PEOPLE'S INTERESTS AND MOTIVATIONS TO VOLUNTEER — EDUCATION, ETHICS, AND ECOLOGY

EDUCATION. People value learning differently today. Education is being redefined and no longer limited to classroom learning. With an overload of information, many people want others to cut through it and tell them only what they need to know to be effective, productive, and successful. Education is valued more when it is practical and simply presented.

ETHICS. People are demanding ethical treatment of self, others, and the earth. People want to work with ethical people and will sacrifice money, titles, etc., to avoid unethical individuals, work, causes, and situations.

ECOLOGY. People want to protect the earth, its resources, and inhabitants. The definition of ecology has been expanded to include the "ecology of self," attending to one's own wellness. People consider time their most prized resource and want to spend it on relationships with others, on themselves, and on activities that really matter to them.

Volunteers are a community-based organization's greatest asset, especially in times of decreasing public and private financial resources. Local citizens are effective in identifying community needs and employing ways to solve problems creatively. Volunteers bring a fresh perspective to an organization's work and infuse new enthusiasm and energy.

Developing volunteer leadership is a service to your organization and your community. By serving others, volunteers themselves may experience a richer, more meaningful life.
PLANNING VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT

Careful planning is a key to successfully involving volunteers in various activities. Resolve all relevant internal issues within your group or organization before thinking about reaching out into the community to recruit the first volunteer.

Initial items to consider are: the types of jobs volunteers might do, the direct and indirect costs of involving volunteers, the best volunteer management model to use, and the level of participation or volunteer control over activities and outcomes desired. An organization may determine it is not ready or able to support volunteers at this time. If the organization gives the green light for involving volunteers, job descriptions and details of the volunteer work need to be determined.

CASE STUDY 1: WASHINGTON STATE MASTER GARDENERS

In the early 1970s, interest in home gardening mushroomed. Washington State University’s (WSU) Cooperative Extension offices were overwhelmed with requests for horticultural information. Dr. David Gibby, an extension agent in the Seattle-Tacoma area, found it impossible to handle all the calls he was receiving from home gardeners. As a result, Dr. Gibby, Dr. Arlen Davison, and other WSU Cooperative Extension personnel began discussing the concept of training knowledgeable gardeners to respond to the public’s demand for information. This led to the development of the Master Gardeners Program. The program provided volunteers interested in gardening with intensive horticultural training. In return, these volunteers agreed to help Cooperative Extension disseminate gardening information to the public.

In 1973, the first Master Gardener class was held. One hundred twenty volunteers were trained. Now there are over 2,000 active Master Gardeners in Washington State who help over 250,000 citizens annually. The Master Gardener concept has spread to 45 states and several Canadian provinces. In addition, this community service exchange model has been used by many other volunteer-based educational programs.

While the main activity of Master Gardeners has been to answer gardening questions, many other opportunities exist for community service. From the beginning, the program began to diversify, reflecting the skills and creativeness of the volunteers. Master Gardeners may operate demonstration gardens, teach gardening classes, or write articles. Today’s Master Gardeners are addressing important social and environmental issues. They are educating the public about the threat that fertilizers and pesticides pose to water quality. They help reduce the solid waste problem by teaching people to compost. Master Gardeners teach children’s gardening classes that emphasize environmental stewardship and human nutrition. In some communities, low-income citizens are learning how to grow their own food and become more self-sufficient with the help of Master Gardeners.

Source: Vineyard 1991

Volunteer Jobs

Consider any legal and professional constraints that might limit potential jobs for volunteers within your organization. Then, let your imagination take over. Volunteers can fill a wide range of administrative positions, conduct educational and outreach activities, handle professional duties and manage large-scale special events.

Administrative volunteers range from members of the board of directors or trustees to volunteers who perform routine clerical, behind-the-scenes tasks.

Volunteer board members often come from encouraging hardworking, knowledgeable, committed volunteers to rise to leadership positions.

Education and outreach volunteers are another traditional type of volunteer. Individuals in Extension Master programs are an example as they receive instruction from professionals and then share the information with others.
Professional volunteer positions occur sometimes, such as a tour director who plans tours for members, a public relations assistant, or a photographer who helps prepare a new brochure.

Special event volunteers are among the easiest to recruit because of the short-term commitment. Special events serve a wide variety of purposes, including education, social, fund-raising, and publicity functions. Most would be impossible to manage without the help of scores of volunteers. Training may be minimal, but recognition and developing a tracking system are essential.

Direct costs associated with volunteer programs can include the salary of a volunteer coordinator, training materials, office supplies, pins, plaques, banquet or other forms of volunteer recognition, tuition to attend seminars and conferences, and reimbursement for transportation or other out-of-pocket expenses if such a policy is adopted.

The most significant indirect cost is the staff time invested in training and supervising volunteers. The costs of benefits offered to volunteers such as parking privileges, discounts on merchandise, or participating in educational activities and social events are sometimes difficult to calculate.

Insurance coverage is a related budgetary issue for volunteer programs. An organization's comprehensive public liability should cover volunteers as well as staff. Workers' compensation policies are available to cover volunteers injured on the job. Directors' and officers' liability insurance will protect volunteer board and staff members from individual liability for alleged errors and omissions in actions taken on behalf of the organization.

Consider which of the following broad volunteer management models would best serve the needs of your organization: centralized, decentralized, quasi-autonomous, or management by a board of directors.

Managing volunteers through a centralized system usually requires that a single staff member, such as volunteer coordinator, manage every aspect of volunteer involvement from recruitment through recognition. The volunteer coordinator can also be a volunteer. The coordinator finds volunteers, trains them, places them in job slots, supervises them, and is accountable for the quantity and quality of volunteer work. The coordinator usually has contact with each volunteer and is the intermediary between the organization and its volunteers.

A decentralized volunteer management system shifts the responsibility to individual program and administrative staff for locating, training, supervising, and rewarding the volunteers. Volunteer involvement is often confined to a specific program area and organizational contacts may not extend beyond the staff and volunteers in that program.

In a quasi-autonomous volunteer program, a separate association is often formed to support volunteer involvement, such as a Friends Council or a Docents Association. Typically these groups adopt bylaws, elect officers and a board of directors or executive committee, and establish committees to accomplish the tasks related to the organization's purpose. This type of system shifts a large portion of the responsibility for volunteer management onto the volunteers themselves.

The fourth model—management by a board of directors—operates only in all-volunteer or single-staff organizations. A committee structure is established, varying in complexity with the size of the organization and the range of activities involved. Board members chair these committees geared to ongoing or special projects in smaller organizations. Larger organizations develop sophisticated models for designating standing and special committees, assigning committee chairs, and laying the groundwork for members and other volunteers to carry out the committee's work.
Levels of Involvement

Various models describe volunteer involvement in different ways. Volunteer participation can range from little or no involvement to a high level of involvement (Figure 1). As the level of volunteer involvement increases, so does his/her control over the outcomes of the activity or program and, ideally, so may his/her commitment to the quality of the product(s) produced. Volunteers who have more control over their job and its outcomes may also begin to take greater ownership in the overall program and be willing to contribute more time and resources to its success.

Figure 1.

Levels of Volunteer Involvement

- High
  - Equal Involvement
  - Active Involvement
  - Moderate Involvement
  - Some Involvement
  - Token Involvement
  - No Involvement

- Low

Involvement all staff, board members who will work with volunteers, and representatives of the volunteers in planning what the volunteers will do. This will help ensure that volunteers are viewed as assets to the organization instead of a threat to the paid staff.

Volunteers operate in many ways as staff members to extend the organization's impact. Do not lower standards for volunteer workers.

Prepare job descriptions to help clarify the responsibilities, qualifications and expectations for each volunteer position. Job descriptions provide specific information about hours, details, and duties for repetitive and routine jobs. Job descriptions for committee chairs tend to focus more on the areas of responsibility and the limits of authority.

- Include the following information in the job description:
  - title of specific job
  - name and title of person to whom the volunteer reports
  - summary of duties
  - time commitment expected (average number of hours per week or month or by specific times)
  - qualifications (skills or previous experience)
  - length of commitment
  - training the organization will provide
  - expectations on recruiting and training their replacement

Convey job description information verbally or written to the prospective volunteer before negotiating with them on their commitment.

Timing is important from program, administrative, and logistical perspectives. Keep to a minimum the time between when volunteers are recruited and when they start to work.

Volunteer activities often occur during the evening and on weekends. They may need access to facilities, materials, and knowledgeable paid staff to get their work done.
WHERE WILL THE VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES TAKE PLACE?

Clearly describe to volunteers the location and working conditions of their jobs.

Will the organization provide transportation or reimburse mileage costs? Where do volunteers park?

Is there room in the staff's or supervisor's office for volunteers to work? What about access to office space and equipment after normal working hours?

Will clerical support be provided for the volunteers? How much?

What supplies and equipment are available for the volunteers to use?

Can the volunteer work be done at home? How will communications and supervision be handled?

Resolving these questions before the volunteer begins will save a lot of frustration and resentment. It is best if the staff and volunteers understand all aspects of the volunteer's commitment prior to the volunteer beginning.

RECRUITING AND TRAINING

When the planning process has been completed, focus the recruitment effort on finding individuals to fill specific types of positions. Members are the first and most logical volunteers in a membership organization. Portray the opportunity to volunteer as a benefit of membership. Do not discount members if they have never volunteered before. Gallup surveys consistently show that most volunteers first became involved in a volunteer activity because they were asked. Friends of volunteers and members are another resource within easy reach. Clients or service recipients, e.g., adults learning English as a second language, might serve as good recruiters.

Focus next on groups interested in the kind of work you do. A garden club, for instance, might provide leadership for a youth club interested in learning about gardening. The group volunteer approach is also appropriate for special events requiring large numbers of helpers for a short period of time. A service club might take on the spring cleanup of park trails or operate a refreshment booth at the county fair.

Volunteer recruitment can also be undertaken through intermediaries. Many communities have a Voluntary Action Center that operates as a clearinghouse to undertake the matchmaker function.

Corporate programs are a growing source of volunteer support. Release time is granted to employees to volunteer for short periods. Corporations may also sponsor community-related projects undertaken by groups of employees or placement programs for retired employees. Corporate volunteers might be recruited for a park cleanup project or a neighborhood improvement day. The involvement of employees as volunteers can provide the link to support in the form of funding and materials contributions.

Youth volunteers can and will do almost anything that adult volunteers can. They often are available at times when working adults are busy. Internship and work-study programs offer consistent, intensive volunteer activity during daytime hours. Youth are a source of seasonal volunteers during the summer or at holidays. If youths have good experiences volunteering, they will likely continue with volunteer activities as adults.

CULTURALLY DIVERSE VOLUNTEERS

Culturally diverse volunteers are often underutilized human resources. As early as the year 2000, cross-cultural people will be the majority in 53 of America's 100 largest cities and will comprise 29% of the work force. Around 2030, people of color will make up more than half of the American population. Non-profit organizations that deliver essential health and human services have little hope of continued success unless they mirror the diversity of their communities.
Diversity supports other goals of an organization by exposing volunteers and paid staff to new issues, ideas, information, and cultures. Diversity creates opportunities for character development of paid and volunteer staff by teaching tolerance and respect for other people and by encouraging concern for racial and social equality. A culturally diverse organization that values and nurtures people from all backgrounds is worthy of active participation. Diversity can be a revitalizing force for carrying your organization into the twenty-first century.

To successfully recruit and retain culturally diverse volunteers, an organization needs to recognize four important points:

1. A positive environment is critical to help the culturally diverse volunteer feel welcome and succeed.
2. The success of volunteers from culturally diverse backgrounds greatly affects the ability of the organization to attract more people from culturally diverse backgrounds.
3. Inclusion policies need to be developed and followed.
4. Staff and supervisors need to be sensitive to cultural differences of the volunteers.

**RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS**

A well-run recruitment campaign will generate interest in your organization from a wide range of potential volunteers. The best recruiter is an enthusiastic, satisfied volunteer already involved with your organization. His or her enthusiasm is infectious and springs from first-hand experience. As a volunteer, the recruiter has more credibility than a paid staff person when asking others to provide free services. A volunteer recruiter can also tap friends and acquaintances. Match the recruiter to the audience. A college intern in blue jeans would not be a wise choice to recruit volunteers from a businesswomen’s club.

Broadcasting an appeal for volunteers through radio and television public service announcements and newspaper notices can be effective if done with caution. This approach reaches a large and otherwise inaccessible audience and provides general visibility for an organization’s work. Be very specific in media notices about the kind of help you need and when you need it. Be prepared to deal with a large number of responses reasonably quickly. Establish criteria to screen inquiries rapidly and graciously and promptly decline offers of help from candidates who are not qualified.

**PRESENTING YOUR CASE**

Recruit volunteers in the same way you would paid staff. Be as clear as possible in describing the kinds of skills required, the time commitment involved, the job to be done, and any other relevant expectations prospective volunteers should consider before committing themselves to work with your organization.

Asking people personally to participate in specific tasks or events will elicit a better response than a general call for volunteers. Invite people to volunteer, but don’t bully them with guilt about community and social obligations. Portray the chance to work with your organization as an opportunity to contribute to accomplishing a larger goal. Be honest about the job and the commitment expected, but be positive.

Times of the year play a role in volunteer recruitment as well. In September and January adults tend to be more receptive to taking on new projects, while teenagers and college students are likely prospects during the summer months. Intern assignments usually revolve around school terms.
RESPONDING TO THE INTEREST OF POTENTIAL VOLUNTEERS

Respond promptly to volunteer interest. If you can't involve a volunteer immediately, let that person know of a future project or special event and when to expect to be contacted. Be sure to follow up. Direct the interested volunteer to other opportunities in the community if no suitable slot exists in your organization.

For major special events, no enthusiastic volunteer should be turned away. This kind of massive, short-term effort gives you the chance to familiarize vast numbers of people with your organization in a positive way.

INTERVIEWING, SCREENING, AND JOB PLACEMENT

Match the skills and interests of new volunteers with compatible job assignments. Review the job description with the potential volunteer and determine his or her special interests and skills. Try to find out what motivated the person to volunteer and what expectations s/he has of the organization and the volunteer assignment.

Don't assume that a candidate wants a volunteer position to mirror his/her paid job. The candidate may seek a change from his/her regular work or an opportunity to develop new skills or use skills not otherwise applied. Seek agreement between the potential volunteer and the on-the-job supervisor that the volunteer's skills and interests match the needs of the organization.

Conduct periodic evaluation of the volunteer and the job assignment to prevent problems. It could lead to reassignment or a graceful departure before problems escalate. Conduct exit interviews before a volunteer departs.

Background checks and character references may be required for potential volunteers in certain programs, e.g., working with youths or the disabled.

TRAINING THE VOLUNTEER

Training for most volunteer programs is an ongoing occurrence, beginning with an orientation program. Orientation must convey to volunteers that they are representatives of the organization in all their actions and contacts.

During the orientation, provide an overview of organizational goals and objectives. Review policies and procedures affecting the work of the volunteers. Introduce paid staff members and other volunteers in leadership positions and have them explain their roles and relationships to the new volunteers. Outline expense reimbursement policies and procedures and the extent to which volunteers are covered by organizational insurance policies at the outset to help avoid later misunderstandings.

Focus training on how assignments fit in with the total organization. Depending on the volunteer job, training can take place in groups over varying periods of time, on a one-to-one basis, on the job, or in a classroom. It can involve outside reading, technical skill training, role playing, or attending meetings. The orientation period is also a good time to assess the volunteer's skills and interest in the volunteer assignment.

The supervisor needs to provide the information necessary to get the job done and be accessible to answer questions and help with problems as they arise. Never criticize volunteers in front of other volunteers or in public.

Keep volunteers informed about what's going on in the organization. Include them in newsletter and informational mailings, invite them to appropriate staff briefings and public events. Offer refresher courses and in-service seminars for volunteers. Encourage attendance at leadership development workshops.

Communication includes the record keeping necessary to track volunteers and their involvement. Names, addresses, and phone numbers need to be current for mailing lists and personal contacts. Tracking volunteer hours provides a tangible measure of the resources committed to any given project, which is useful for planning purposes and as supporting documentation in funding requests.
Communication works in both directions. Volunteers should report progress and difficulties to an immediate supervisor, such as a volunteer coordinator, a committee chairman, or president of the board.

External communication is also vital to successful volunteer programs. Visibility and public recognition benefit the organization and individual volunteers.

CASE STUDY 2: VOLUNTEER TEAM BUILDING

Volunteer training must go beyond subject matter says Nancy Rausch, volunteer coordinator for WSU/Cowlitz County Cooperative Extension. In recent years, she has included a team building session in nearly all volunteer trainings. The team-building includes a "snapshot" forum where new volunteers are paired up and asked to interview each other. After completing the interviews, each person introduces their partner to the audience and describes the partner’s special interests. In the team-building sessions, volunteers also explore their motivational styles. This allows the volunteers to better understand themselves and the needs of other team members. It also enables the coordinator to better meet the needs of the volunteers.

Ms. Rausch has realized many benefits from team building. Volunteers get to know most of their classmates during the training. They naturally begin teaming with each other based on similar interests. New volunteers become integral and productive members of the group much sooner. The quality of service offered by the volunteer program improves and the volunteer retention rate increases significantly.

MOTIVATION AND RECOGNITION

Recognition may take many forms and is an effective technique for motivating most volunteers. Traditional forms of recognition (service pins, certificates, award luncheons) are appreciated by some volunteers. Invitations to participate in social and educational activities, discounts on publications, and opportunities to meet community leaders are other ways to acknowledge volunteer efforts. Some people like to see their photos and names in print. Place articles about volunteer contributions in newsletters, newspapers, and journals. List the names of volunteers in the program brochure for events to which they have contributed.

These tried and true techniques are not meaningful to everyone. Many volunteers are motivated by the same type of rewards that encourage paid staff members—increased responsibility, more interesting work, and promotion to leadership positions. Having an increased voice in program decisions is appreciated by some volunteers.

Create a "career path" for volunteers. Provide options for applying skills in a variety of areas or at a higher level. The strength of a volunteer program is built on developing leadership skills and providing the channels to use them.

Most important of all, say thank you at every possible opportunity and give credit, both privately and publicly for outstanding performance.
Citizen participation is a little like eating spinach; no one is against it in principle because it is good for you. Participation of the governed in their government is, in theory, the cornerstone of a democracy.

Sherry Arnstein

RETIANDING VOLUNTEERS

Helping volunteers grow and develop is the key to retaining them. Paying attention to all of the elements of the Volunteer Retention Cycle is helpful (figure 2). Problems can be eliminated or reduced with careful preplanning and follow-through with each phase. Volunteers deserve no less than an organization’s best effort to ensure that they have:

- A task that is important to the cause.
- A feeling that their special skills and talents are needed.
- A sense that they are valued as unique and worthwhile individuals.

FIGURE 2.

VOLUNTEER RETENTION CYCLE

PRE-RECRUITMENT:

MISSION
NEEDS ASSESSMENT
JOB DESCRIPTION

RECRUITMENT

REASSIGNMENT

RECOGNITION
ASSESSMENT
COACHING

REVIEW

TRAINING

ORIENTATION

INTERVIEW

SELECTION PLACEMENT

Disadvantages sometimes identified are:

- harder to manage if commitment is limited
- higher turnover rate
- difficult to fire volunteers
- increased time required to recruit, train, manage, and supervise
- not always cost-effective
- may not be as dependable as salaried staff

The volunteer may be mismatched with the job or with the organization. Personality conflicts can develop or outside circumstances may prevent the volunteer from fulfilling his/her obligations. A volunteer may consistently exceed the limits of his/her authority or misrepresent organizational policy. For these and other reasons, situations do arise where a volunteer is doing more harm than good.

Terminating an organization’s relationship with a volunteer can be a difficult and unpleasant, yet necessary, task. If supervisory conferences, admonishments, and other reasonable and diplomatic efforts to improve the situation have failed, be honest with the volunteer. Try to offer options within the organization or suggest other organizations that might be a better match for the skills the volunteer has to offer. The volunteer may even welcome a chance to exit gracefully.

Be prepared to listen to constructive criticism from a “failed” volunteer. Ideas for improved management and structure may be gained. Exit interviews are important whenever a volunteer leaves an organization.
Mobilizing Citizen Participation

Here is a summary of suggestions to mobilize citizen energy:

- Recruit and involve new people, enjoy new ideas, and encourage different people to come with new ideas, new awareness, and new resources.

- Utilize open systems to allow additional members to join committees or task forces at any time. Encourage a better use of human energy with ad hoc groups that meet for one or two times for a specific purpose.

- Design more participative and productive meetings. Meetings should have a goal, a design, advanced planning, a realistic time table, good environment, and ample opportunity for everyone to participate.

- Learn about and then build on people’s preferences. Keep a file of people’s resources and skills. Have the volunteers share their skills with other volunteers.

- Shared leadership is an increasingly popular way to ensure good leadership.

- Build in ongoing feedback, evaluation, and opportunities to redesign projects and activities.

- Keep good records of plans, actions, and results.

- Collaborate among agencies and organizations in the public, voluntary, and corporate sectors. Collaboration is often more cost-effective than duplication of effort.

- Offer volunteer leadership workshops where they can develop communication and organizational skills.

- The public becomes more aware and knowledgeable of the work of your organization.

- Adults and youths—inter-generational groups—working together learn about and gain respect for each other.

- Offer services not possible with limited funding.

- Encourage service from many people instead of a few.

- Build excitement about productiveness.

- Do creative risk-taking in a supportive environment.

- Build new connections between groups not usually working together.

- Question traditional ways as well as test new methods.

- Use different resources, styles, and backgrounds.

- Tap into new people and leadership potentials.

- Be excited and puzzled rather than concerned, depressed, and overwhelmed.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead
Volunteers do make a difference!

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