

What's different about training volunteers?

Every month, Four by Four poses one training problem and asks four experts to provide specific, practical solutions. This month, a quadrumvirate of experienced specialists in volunteer training and development tell what it takes to create—and retain—skilled, motivated volunteers.

"It has become fashionable to speak of collaborative team management, networking, flattening the hierarchical pyramid, short-term strategic planning, long-term goals, and valuing the contributions of workers in defining an organization's objectives," wrote Elinor Miller Greenberg in a 1983 article,¹ arguing that these concepts, so chic in business circles, have guided volunteer management for many years.

Just as the distinctions between managing profit and nonprofit organizations have blurred, their training functions have grown less discrete. In fact, each of the four volunteer training experts interviewed for this column stated, with varying degrees of conviction, that training in the two sectors is "not all that different."

Many arenas for volunteer training exist, from developing boards of directors composed of high-powered executives, to long-distance coaching of one willing but inexperienced rural adult who will, in turn, teach her neighbors to read. Most of the comments and suggestions in this column address training small to medium-sized groups of mid-level volunteer leaders, who later will train many others in specific attitudes and skills.

Our four contributors' experiences are diverse. Jeff Orr oversees a massive grass-roots program in which volunteers run sophisticated canneries, strictly according to government regulations, that provide food for needy people. One might suspect he would compare his situation, with its line managers, technical requirements and production goals, most closely with training in the profit-making sector.

But it is Kathy Webb, national secretary for the National Organization for Women, who insists there are no important differences between volunteer and employee training, at least not in her large and powerful organization. Terry Broomfield, former training director for the American Cancer Society in Los Angeles County and now a consultant to volunteer groups, emphasizes laying the often-missing groundwork for training: needs assessment, job descriptions, task analyses.

And Linda Church of Laubach Literacy Action, the U.S. arm of an international literacy program, offers practical tips for keeping volunteer trainees as loyal and productive as if they were drawing fat weekly paychecks.

"It demands much more than giving the volunteers a T-shirt or cap."

Jeff Orr is a training specialist with the Latter Day Saints Church Welfare Services, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Volunteer trainees need to master new skills, attitudes and information, just as paid trainees do. The difference is in what motivates their work. Both internal and external stimuli motivate paid employees. The external stimuli—benefits and pay—are lower order needs. Trainers of paid employees sometimes fail to consider higher order needs and assume the desire for monetary compensation is sufficient motivation to learn.

Once lower order needs are resolved, the motivation to work becomes internal, the desire to satisfy self-actualization needs such as a feeling of belonging and making a significant contribution to something worthwhile. The factors motivating volunteer work are almost exclusively internal, higher order needs. And the degree to which these needs are met influences the volunteer's degree of commitment and willingness to contribute.

The volunteer must be made to feel he or she is a unique, important individual, while at the same time feeling adopted into the organizational family. Once the volunteer experiences and enjoys this, his or her appetite for this kind of satisfaction increases, and motivation grows.

The trainer must provide a learning environment that satisfies higher order needs. This demands much more than giving the volunteers a T-shirt or cap. You must train more than how to perform a certain task; much of your job will be fostering pride and commitment in the organization and its purpose.

Get to know as many trainees as you can: their family situations, their dreams and aspirations. Establish some common ground with each of them; people feel greater commitment and willingness to work with those they consider friends.

Find out what the volunteer hopes to get out of associating with this organization. Don't just assume that he or she had some spare time to fill. Spare time may enable the volunteer to be there, but he or she is *there*, rather than somewhere else, to accomplish something satisfying. The trainer should help the volunteer achieve that.

Make your training promote the organization's mission and goals. The volunteer's degree of belief in those goals influences the willingness to defend, champion and devote time to the organization. This value or attitude training is one of your most important and challenging responsibilities.

In designing the training, focus as much as you can on the volunteer. The training should appear strictly learner-centered; encourage the volunteers to suggest what they need to perform effectively. Then use their ideas, but don't limit the training to that. Integrate the volunteers' expressed needs into your thoughtfully planned, well-balanced training.

The recommendations:

1. Establish personal relationships with the volunteers, based on shared information and goals.
2. Find out how the volunteers hope to benefit from their work, and help them achieve their goals.
3. Use the training to promote the organization's mission.
4. Gather input from the volunteers concerning what training they believe they need, and integrate their suggestions into established training programs.

"The paid staff of a volunteer-based organization often are uncomfortable working with volunteers."

Terry K. Broomfield is president of T. K. Broomfield & Associates, Consultants to Management, Huntington Beach, Calif.

In most respects, training volunteers and training paid employees are very similar. The principles and techniques are the same, and trainers' skills must be as good for one as for the other. Just as when you deal with other economic sectors, you have to know your client and speak their language. You must understand the volunteer world in general and the specific organization with which you're working.

Large volunteer organizations often develop sophisticated training programs

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at the national level. My comments address smaller, local groups, most of which are unaware of what training can do for them. Training is a low priority; rarely does anyone in the organization know enough about training to lobby for it, and the organizations have few physical or financial resources to support it. When an external trainer approaches a small non-profit organization, it's important to remember how many hats the leaders wear and how much else they have on their minds.

Once it's established that you will work with the organization, you'll face some special challenges. These groups tend to be very heterogeneous, especially in education levels. Many nonprofit organizations have poor recruiting standards and practices, with no written job descriptions or qualifications. Rarely have any task analyses been performed.

Equally rare are current needs assessments, and the organization may be reluctant to invest time and money in performing one. It is very important that you push for an assessment of needs at the local level. When you enter an organization to begin training, it's different than that organization at any other time. Lobby as effectively as you can to conduct a needs analysis for this unique circumstance, with this group of people.

Ironically, the paid staff of a volunteer-based organization often are uncomfortable working with volunteers. They may not be secure in their jobs, or they may not understand the philosophy of volunteerism. Often, in lieu of a needs analysis, staff will "decide" what kind of training the volunteers need, an assessment that is not always accurate.

Another challenging aspect of training volunteers is the dearth of material published on the subject. And, unfortunately, few nonprofit groups are willing to share their resources or materials.

The recommendations:

1. Lobby hard for conducting a needs assessment. Pattern, in-person interviews are good, if possible. Telephone interviews or written surveys also serve well.
2. Lobby equally hard to conduct task analyses so that you know what you're training people to do.
3. Include some staff and some volunteers in planning the training. Staff have good ideas, and they'll be less anxious and territorial, and more committed

if they've participated. Volunteers also have good ideas, and through involvement in planning they can learn design skills. They'll also be more apt to lobby their peers to participate.

4. Conduct the training when it's most convenient for volunteers, not staff. More and more nonprofit groups are seeking the involvement of business people, so evenings and weekends may be your best times.

"Avoid jargon, acronyms and technical terms. It's easy for volunteers to feel insecure."

Linda Church is director of field services for Laubach Literacy Action, Syracuse, N.Y.

Since they don't receive paychecks, we have to make sure we understand volunteers' motivations for participating in a particular program, and we have to make sure our training meets their needs and expectations. Otherwise, we lose the volunteers. Common motivations include exploring a new career, developing marketable skills, helping people, filling time in a meaningful way and effecting social change.

You may have fewer opportunities to provide follow-up and supervision when you train volunteers than when you train paid employees. Trainers must make sure the volunteers understand and have confidence in the systems and structures that will support them after training. And we must make sure those systems are in place and working well.

Trainers must consider the volunteers their peers, and treat them as such. The quality of their training must be at least as good as what we would deliver to paid staff. In fact it should be even better, if possible, since volunteers have less obligation to continue participating. We must emphasize the volunteer's opportunities for development and growth, and we must set high standards for their performance and follow-through.

Any organization or program considering using volunteers should avoid the trap of assuming volunteers are "free." They often are an effective, low-cost way to

develop and deliver services. But volunteer training, supervision, communications and recognition—if they are done effectively, with meaning for the volunteers—cost money.

The recommendations:

1. During training sessions, avoid using jargon, acronyms and technical terms that may be unfamiliar to the volunteers. If you must use one, explain it. It's easy for volunteers to feel insecure, and they may be reluctant to acknowledge that they don't understand a concept or term. Not only will they fail to understand, they may not come back at all.

2. Make sure what's expected of the volunteers is crystal clear. Review their job descriptions and their relationships to staff, and you will avoid problems later.

3. Most groups of volunteers are quite diverse, with a broad range of skills, values and life experiences. Acknowledge these differences, and build on them. Trainers can find many ways to use varied outlooks and experiences in training sessions.

4. Consider carefully the timing of your training programs. You must allow for volunteers who hold full-time jobs or have other day-time responsibilities. Spreading training over a relatively long time period, giving trainees adequate time to absorb the information, is usually more effective than holding several sessions close together.

"A major reason NOW can maintain such high volunteer standards is our commitment to training."

Kathy Webb is national secretary of the National Organization for Women, Washington, D.C.

There are no important differences between training volunteers and training paid employees, in my view and in the views of the other trainers at NOW. Our standards and expectations are as high as those held in large private organizations where I've been employed as a trainer.

such as Phillip Morris and 3M. We convey to all our state chapter leaders that theirs are positions of responsibility. They have clear job descriptions, and we have high expectations for their performance.

A major reason NOW can maintain such high volunteer standards is our commitment to training. And we have access to human and financial resources many volunteer organizations, even other large national ones, do not. The chapter development department (our name for the training department) employs professional trainers who develop professional training materials and programs.

I'm on the road 40 percent of the time, and some of the other trainers are on the road even more, usually conducting intensive leadership training workshops. About half our state chapters have a volunteer chapter development coordinator, whom we train and who in turn trains volunteers.

Chapters are required to share information. For example, when a chapter approaches the national organization for funding a development project (how to organize chapters in conservative rural areas, for example), the leaders are required to specify the training materials they plan to develop that can be applied to other chapters in similar situations. National staffers work closely with them in developing the materials, and in this way we assemble a variety of training materials for highly targeted audiences.

The one difference between paid employees and volunteers is, of course, money. We replace money with involvement, recognition, personal satisfaction, the rewards of achieving NOW's goals and, perhaps most important, skill development that can be transferred to other jobs or to a political career.

I attended a chapter conference a few years ago where the state president was a woman with a full-time job and a family with small children. She obviously was thoroughly worn out from her many responsibilities, but at election time no one else wanted the job, and she agreed to do it again.

I returned to that chapter's conference the following year. The president spoke at length about the skills she'd mastered during her tenure. She'd learned to lobby legislators; she was skilled at giving media interviews; she knew how to prepare and manage a budget for a good-sized organization; she knew how to chair a meeting; and the list went on and on.

The third time I attended that conference, it was election time again. This

time, at last, the state presidency was hotly contested. It had taken a while for these chapter members to catch on to the potential benefits of volunteer work and training, but once they understood, they wanted a piece of the action.

NOW's approach to volunteer recognition differs from chapter to chapter. Some hold a "feminist of the year" banquet or other ceremony, award a scholarship in the name of an outstanding volunteer or recognize volunteers through newsletter articles or by securing local media coverage of their contributions.

Organization development goes hand in hand with political development. If you fail to develop an organization, then, when the political project is over, the organization falls apart. And when you want to get involved in another project, you have to start all over.

The recommendations:

Editor's note: Kathy Webb's belief in the similarity of training volunteers and paid employees is so strong that, when interviewed, she declined to provide the requested four suggestions concerning volunteer training. Thus, the following are not Webb's explicit recommendations, but conclusions about effective training drawn from her remarks. They apply to all kinds of training.

1. Maintain clearly defined, high standards for leaders, who should set equally high standards for those they train and develop.
2. Support those standards with appropriate, professional-quality training.
3. Make effective use of organization subgroups by facilitating their development of special training programs to share with other subgroups.
4. Emphasize (transferable) skill development as a primary benefit of training and good performance.

September's Four by Four will ask, "What do we need to know about a group's ethos before designing training for it?" The column is edited by Elizabeth Lean.

References

1. Greenberg, E.M. (1983, Summer). Voluntarism—In spite of the questions, we persist. *Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly*, pp. 6-10.

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