

Training: What Do Volunteers Want?

When volunteers begin working they neither want nor need the entire history of voluntarism, but they are eager for training in the ground rules for their first assignment. This is their "teachable" moment.

Authentic information and practical experience acquired in training gives them confidence to take initiative rather than passively waiting to be directed. Adults bring life-learned wisdom to training events and test their experience for applying it in new roles, making training a mutual learning experience.

And training should nurture that original enthusiasm. Without it, the initial motivation to solve problems and effect change can quickly dissolve into frustration and indecisiveness. When unrealistic expectations are not met volunteers either give up entirely or even worse, make others wish they had.

Above all, having a voice in planning his own training gives a highly motivated person a sharp focus and eagerness to learn. On the basis of his past experience, the volunteer is ready to learn what he thinks he needs to know to accomplish his tasks. He does not like to feel forced to re-invent the wheel, so training should offer visible help for immediate needs. It should begin where the learner thinks he is; only then will historical perspectives or philosophic abstractions seem important.

Volunteers are welcomed warmly, and feel welcome, when people see clearly what needs to be done and the ways to meet the goals. Training provides sharpened focus both

for the volunteer and for paid staff.

By supplementing basic knowledge with wider vision, new information and skills, training increases the volunteer's confidence and competence and leads him from his first, parochial anxiety, to wider interests and a forward look. It encourages self-direction and individual creativity and fosters the in-depth learning that follows naturally as problems demand new alternatives and fresh insight.

Training is for staff, too! Experienced before the arrival of the volunteer, training helps paid staff understand what volunteering means to people and how to keep the volunteers they have. Further, training helps staff and volunteers appreciate each other, gives them mutual confidence and respect and the ability to work together

for common goals. The interaction tells the volunteer his accomplishments are valued and important. It makes him feel real progress, so often the crucial difference between dropping out and a deepening commitment.

Finally, and always, training should deal with ever-widening concerns, beginning with and returning in a continuous cycle to self-understanding.

Testing oneself against the requirements of each new situation means seeing what experience and skills are applicable and taking advantage of opportunities to learn whatever else is needed: about the work, about the clients, about the organizations, about the resources and changing needs of the community.

Training does not end with an introduction to a task, but continues until the task is finished.