

## Training Adult Volunteers

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Volunteer managers train on a daily basis. Whenever a volunteer is asked to do something new, or change past behavior, teaching and learning are at work. The adult volunteer is the learner and the volunteer program manager is the teacher.

Training new board members, problem solving staff-volunteer communication, changing to new forms, correcting sub-standard work or teaching agency policies are activities made easier by knowing the adult learner.

Information on adult learners comes from a variety of sources. Malcolm Knowles, author of many books on the adult learner, is the best known of the modern adult educators. Harriet Naylor is considered a pre-eminent theorist in applying adult education principles in the volunteer field. Adult learners are another source of information. Adults vote with their feet, either mentally or physically. The adults' response can tell us techniques, methods, and processes that work most effectively. Research on adult motivation, participation rates, and information from those who work with adults have provided a foundation for some principles of adult learning that can be applied in the volunteer setting.

The effective volunteer manager is one who sees his/her role as a teacher/mentor of adults. In the teaching role, the volunteer manager helps adult volunteers grow and develop rather than show off their own knowledge. This can be achieved by understanding the principles of adult learning that motivate volunteers. Knowledge about adult learners is growing

daily. Here are 10 principles about adult learning from the experts that can guide the volunteer program managers (please note references at the end of the article).

1. *For an adult few experiences are new. She/he fits new information into an already organized body of information about society.* Adult volunteers probably have encountered policies before. Given the chance, they can write the policies for a volunteer program. The volunteer program manager must design a learning environment where volunteers can select from previous experience and apply that knowledge to the new task.

2. *Adults are sensitive to failure in a new situation.* Adults take mistakes personally and let it affect their self-esteem. Careful planning must be done to avoid potential for a bad first experience. For example giving clear directions on time, place and parking instructions can enhance the volunteers' introduction to the organization.

3. *The ability to learn is not impaired by advancing age.* Loss of visual acuity, hearing, or slow psychomotor skills should not limit a volunteer's ability to serve. A recent study showed that 90-year-olds can learn new things quite readily when their "teachers" take into consideration their physical limitations. A variety of techniques can enhance their learning experience. Type size is but one consideration as the teacher plans the training session. Self-paced learning activities is another.

4. *There will be a wide variance in the age, experience, motivation, and goals of adults who are learners.* No two volunteers are alike. The volunteer manager must plan all ac-

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tivities with this fact in mind. Escort duty in a hospital for a 20 year-old college sophomore is a different experience than for a 58 year-old retired accountant. The job requires flexibility to take into account the age, experience, motivation, and goals of the person holding the job.

5. *Adults are more motivated when they are involved in the decisions which affect their lives.* The volunteers bring years of experience to the volunteer situation. They are a resource to be tapped. Adults, when asked "where do you learn the most when attending conferences?" will cite the bar. The fact is that adults prefer self-directed learning about 7 to 1 over "traditional" teacher-directed learning. The volunteer program manager who selects a self-directed activity is harnessing the maximum in motivation power.

6. *Leadership in an informal situation should be shared.* Adults learn well—some even say, best—from each other. Training sessions, orientation meetings, practice sessions work best when "teaching" is shared by those participating. New policies and procedures, written with volunteer expertise, will have wider acceptance.

7. *Learning is an evolutionary process, harvested after a period of time in constructive effort.* New knowledge has to be integrated with old. Integration takes time and focused effort. Administrators who think it is more efficient to pour information into the heads of their learners need to think again. Adults retain knowledge that is received through a variety of techniques and that requires hands on experience. Immediate application of new knowledge makes it understandable and useful.

8. *Adults seek out new experiences that involve learning to cope with specific life changing events.* Retirement, moving, children leaving home, a new job, marriage, divorce, a death can be factors that prompt the choice of a new experience. Sometimes this includes choosing a new volunteer activity. It is often a method of coping with change. Volunteer program managers need to acknowledge this as a reason for volunteering and to help adults build problem solving skills that can be used inside and outside the organization.

9. *The learning environment must be both physically and psychologically comfortable.* A job

that requires 8 hours of sitting with no breaks might create a retention problem. A training session with long lectures on hard chairs in a poorly lit room will cause irritation. Volunteer managers telescope their respect for volunteers with the physical environment in which they are asked to serve.

10. *The principles of adult learning suggest a multifaceted approach to the learning environment.* A skillful volunteer program manager will consider all these principles when working with adults. The volunteer program manager does not however apply a single theory or principle all the time. The ability to stand back, analyze, and set personal ego needs aside are critical skills for the effective volunteer manager.

These 10 principles are important considerations when working with adult learners. Motivation and learning are personal processes for individuals. Volunteer program managers need to involve adults in learning activities that utilize their previous experience, are problem oriented, and solution directed.

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