



## *Designing an effective orientation session*

PRE-SERVICE TRAINING often goes by the name of "orientation." Regardless of the terminology, however, leaders of student volunteer programs and community agency supervisors and staff are becoming increasingly aware of the need for a more sophisticated form of job-introduction than the old, "Here's your desk, here's where you hang your coat, and this is Mr. Spelvin, your supervisor." The design offered here for training prior to the actual work experience lays out the essentials of a typical orientation and expands the concept beyond that of a perfunctory lecture session.

In the past, too many student volunteers were assigned vaguely-described jobs in unprepared agencies staffed by strangers who operated in what was for the newcomer a totally alien environment. Naturally, many were frustrated and disillusioned, and some failed completely at their tasks.

Most failures can be avoided if volunteers are given adequate pre-service training. But this type of training requires knowledge, skill, and a supportive attitude on the part of the agency staff. Most of those who undertake the training task will need assistance in designing and conducting effective pre-service sessions. The following design and the suggested techniques that accompany it should help. Its actual implementation should take about two hours and will function best with from 10 to 25 participants.

### **Preliminary Design**

The agency, student volunteer coordinator, or whoever will conduct the orientation sessions should assemble a representative group of people who have a stake in the project—student volunteers, agency workers and officials, and the student volunteer program leader—and prepare a preliminary design well before the first session's scheduled date. By airing their expectations, these people can help him establish general objectives based on the needs of the agency and the volunteers. The general objectives might be expressed as follows:

#### GENERAL OBJECTIVES

*To help student volunteers assigned to this agency to understand who we are, what we do, and how we do it, and to learn what the volunteers can do for us.*

This is just a sample general objective. Prepare your own to fit your situation.

Next, translate the general objective into specific, measurable objectives. These specific objectives must be measurable or you will not be able to train or evaluate accomplishments of the training sessions effectively.

Here is how you might write your specific objectives:

#### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

At the end of the orientation session, the student volunteers assigned to this agency will be able to:

1. List their expectations for the job and what they

think the agency should do to help them achieve these expectations.

2. Identify rules of behavior and appearance expected of them.

3. Describe the specific jobs for which volunteers are required.

4. Describe the work standards of the agency, indicating acceptable and unacceptable levels of work.

5. Identify their supervisors by name and title and describe how the supervision process affects them in their work.

6. State precisely work time schedules and the extent of their commitments in hours and weeks.

7. Show evidence of enthusiasm for their volunteer commitment and a sense of belonging to the agency. (This objective will probably be a matter of alert observation on the part of the trainer.)

Again, write your own specific objectives, making sure that they are the measurable as well as specific. Keep in mind, however, that these are preliminary objectives. At the start of the session you will want to adjust or change them to get goal agreement among the participants.

### **The Learning Climate**

Provide an attractive, informal environment in the agency, away from general traffic. Remember, you are offering group participation, and you want the volunteers to be actively involved in the learning process.

Be sure everyone has been informed of time and place. Have all your materials ready before the session starts, and arrange for refreshments to be available during breaks. Prepare name tags for everyone, including yourself.

Arrive early and greet the participants personally, handing out name tags to each. Introduce them to each other and enlist help in greeting others.

Finally, start on time.

### **Training Session Techniques**

Every trainer has his own techniques, and whether you are a professional trainer or strictly an amateur, you may have techniques that you are most comfortable using. The techniques described for the several activities or sections of these orientation sessions are only suggestions. If they don't work for you, develop your own methods.

*First Activity (about 10 minutes)*—Convene the group and greet them collectively, cordially, and informally. Introduce yourself and share your role. Start the session with the idea that it is intended to orient new volunteers to their jobs.

Introduce the agenda in this vein: "We think this information will be useful to you, however, we are happy to answer any additional questions you might have."

*Second Activity (about 20 minutes)*—Unless you are positive that everyone in the group knows everyone

else, provide a context in which volunteers can get acquainted with one another.

New volunteers like to know what kind of people they are going to work with. One way of offering people an opportunity to learn something about each other is to convene small discussion groups of five to seven and suggest that the participants introduce themselves and share some of the reasons they are volunteering or some of the benefits they will receive from the experience. Fifteen minutes should be sufficient for a group of five—a little longer if the groups are larger (six or seven).

*Third Activity (about 10 minutes)*—The participants' comfort will be increased if the student volunteer coordinator also shares some information about himself. For instance, he can tell about the personal benefits he is receiving from working with student volunteers.

After these introductions, proceed to the objectives of the orientation.

### **OBJECTIVES 1-3**

The first three objectives fall together naturally. Again, they are:

1. List student volunteer work expectations and ways in which the agency should help them achieve these expectations.

2. Identify rules of behavior and appearance expected of student volunteers.

3. Describe the specific jobs for which volunteers are required.

These fall into categories of expectations and requirements. Each party to the contract (the volunteer and the agency) must make expectations unequivocally clear. Part of that process is an assessment of tasks and capabilities. It is counterproductive to ask for volunteers without specifically detailing what they are required for. So, for purposes of this design, we'll assume that the agency has adequately written job descriptions. (See "Job Descriptions—Matching Volunteer Skills with Agency Needs," an article by John Cauley, page 36).

Who comes first? Should agency people immediately tell the volunteer their expectations or should the volunteer have the first chance? Most orientations follow the first alternative. We'd like to suggest that you follow the second because:

- You can avoid answering questions that volunteers are not asking or questions for which they do not need answers at all.

- You can get a clear sense of the group's concerns and start building presentation priorities on that basis.

- You will reaffirm the climate-setting phase of the orientation by seeking volunteers' opinions and doing so in a considerate manner.

- You will be alerted to concerns that you had not thought about.

*(Continued on next page)*

Keep in mind that the volunteer is vulnerable. He is new to the environment. He may believe that he doesn't have the right to voice demands and expectations. If that's not a problem, the volunteer may assume that the agency knows what his expectations are, or assumes that all the volunteers have similar expectations and that the agency knows them. Finally, some people have no expectations at all—or at least none that they can articulate. In any event, do not assume that people will voice their expectations in an orderly manner just because you ask for them.

Incidentally, the recitation of mutual expectations is not very interesting. If it goes on very long, volunteers will get bored. So will you. Communicate as quickly and as interestingly as possible. Here's one technique:

*Fourth Activity (about 15 minutes)*—Present a brief introduction to the subject: "Before we can work together productively, you have to know exactly what legitimate expectations are going to be made of you and we need to know the expectations you have of us. None of us is clairvoyant, so these mutual expectations should be expressed and shared before we can decide whether or not we belong here and are building a good working relationship."

Hand out the job descriptions and add any clarifications that seem necessary. Ask each person to read the description and be prepared to answer questions or give reactions.

After sufficient reading time has elapsed, form discussion groups. Again a group of five to seven participants is about right. Ask for questions and reactions. Answer the questions fully and honestly. Listen to the reactions and comments.

*Fifth Activity (about 20 minutes)*—It is not only important that the volunteer know what is expected of him but the agency should also be aware of his resource area talents. You could begin by mentioning that the agency still doesn't know precisely what you can contribute. When they do, they will be able to match your talents with the jobs to be done. The purpose of the following discussion topics is to help you identify and be ready to share your abilities with people at the agency:

1. Think about the talents you have that may be useful on your volunteer job.
2. What things do you need to know that will enable you to do a better job?
3. How can the agency help you learn the things you need to know?

You may want to write down the answers to these questions so you can refer to them later when you get on the job. Take about five minutes to think of the answers, then talk about them.

By this time, you have:

1. Helped volunteers get acquainted with each other.
2. Helped them assess their expertise.
3. Facilitated the process of stating their backgrounds, talents, and needs.

At this point, it is time to be more specific about the job structures.

#### OBJECTIVES 4-7

Objectives 4-7 focus on performance standards and relationships within the organization:

4. Describe the work standards of the agency, indicating acceptable and unacceptable levels of work.

5. Identify volunteers' supervisors by name and title and describe how supervision affects them in their work at the agency.

6. Precisely state work time schedules and the extent of volunteer commitment in hours per week and weeks per year.

7. Be able to identify co-workers by name and appearance and relate at least one conversation with each.

*Sixth Activity (about 45 minutes)*—Take 30 minutes and tell the volunteers what they should know about job standards, their supervisors, work schedules, and any other information they will need during their first months as volunteers. One important caution: Don't overload. Tell the volunteers only the things they really need. It doesn't matter how significant or insignificant the information may be. If they need it, tell them. But don't talk about the history of the agency or people who have "gone before." That information is interesting and they will appreciate it more after they have been on the job a while.

When the presentation is over ask for questions and wish them well.

| A PRE-SERVICE TRAINING SESSION |               |   |   |
|--------------------------------|---------------|---|---|
| Activity                       | Time Allotted | Objective   | Methods   |
| 1                              | 10 minutes    | Introduction<br>Share agenda  | Presentation<br>Answer questions                                |
| 2                              | 20 minutes    | Participants get acquainted with each other                                     | Small group discussions   |
| 3                              | 10 minutes    | Participants get acquainted with volunteer coordinator                          | Presentation  |
| 4                              | 15 minutes    | Job clarification   | Read job descriptions<br>Share expectations<br>Answer questions |
| 5                              | 20 minutes    | Background and talent identification  | Write talent descriptions, skill and benefit expectations       |
| 6                              | 45 minutes    | Identify job standards, supervisors, work schedules, other basic data about job | Presentation<br>Answer questions                                |