TRAINING VOLUNTEERS

Choosing the Right Training Method

By Rick Lynch

ONE OF THE QUESTIONS THAT FREQUENTLY crops up at the beginning of training of trainers courses is, "What are the best training methods to use to make sure participants get the most out of training?" The answer is contained in that famous fourth grade phrase: "Depends." Just as a tuxedo may look great at a wedding but not at a backyard barbeque, so no training design will be successful in all circumstances.

It is important to begin the training design process by keeping in mind which of your objectives are related to increasing volunteer knowledge, to improving volunteer skills, and to modifying volunteer attitudes. For each of these types of objectives there are training methods which are appropriate and training methods which are not. Role-playing, for example, may be a perfectly fine way of helping someone learn to answer crisis calls, but it is a pretty lousy way to teach someone the history of the Red Cross.

To Increase Volunteer Knowledge

There are scores of training methods suitable to this domain. The most common are listed below with a brief discussion of when and why to use each.

Lectures. Lectures are the traditional means of transferring information from one person to another. People with no training in how to be a trainer frequently rely solely on this method, regardless of what the training objective is. The glassy stares this evokes after several hours and the sheer inappropriateness of the technique to learning a skill, such as applying first aid or skiing, leads many to say, "Lectures are a bad method."

But lectures are no worse than any other technique. They can be inappropriate or boring, but they can also

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be exciting and informative. Lectures are an excellent technique to use when the knowledge to be learned is not too lengthy or complex. (Studies show that people start tuning out relatively soon; anything over half an hour is "lengthy.") They are also useful when it is important to transmit a great deal of knowledge in a short period of time.

Readings. Where the material is long and complex, such as a case study, or where the time is exceptionally short, readings should be considered. The chief disadvantage is that people retain the least amount of information from this method over the long term (about 10 percent versus 20 percent for lectures). For that reason, it is best to supplement this method with others, such as discussion.

Discussions. Discussion is a much slower means of learning information, but it offers the advantage of greater long-term retention of knowledge. Whereas people remember about 20 percent of what they hear, they remember approximately 70 percent of what they say. Where there is enough time, you should consider this method carefully. Often trainers discard this technique because they feel they know everything and the trainees know nothing.

A well-constructed discussion, however, can help participants discover things they didn't know they knew. For example, given the objective of teaching people how adults learn, I could have them read an excerpt from Malcolm Knowles's book, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (of which they would retain 10 percent). Or I could have them listen to a spine-tingling, fascinating lecture from me (of which they would remember 20 percent). Or I could give them this assignment: "Think of a time when you learned something. What happened to you as you learned it? What was the role of the teacher or trainer? Why did you learn in these circumstances? What were the factors that made this an effective learning experience? Based on your answers to the above questions, what are some generalizations you can draw about the way adults learn best and the role the trainer should play?" Given sufficient time, I would always use the third option. And hard as it may be on my ego (not to mention Malcolm Knowles's ego), I have yet to discover a group that failed to come up with all the major points I was prepared to make.

Field trips/observations. If the information you want to impart is how people do things (perhaps as an introduction to learning how to do it themselves), you might have them go somewhere to watch someone do it. The disadvantages of this are logistical. (Which bus do we take? Will the boss remember we're coming and not be on her lunch hour?). The advantage is that people remember more of what they see (20 percent) than what they hear or read.

Films/video tapes/slide shows. These three methods have many of the advantages of the previous technique with fewer logistical pitfalls. Again, adding a visual element increases retention. The disadvantages relate to dependence on equipment (that the projector bulb not burn out or that the power stay on). One of my most embarrassing moments as a trainer came when I was showing a one-hour film. After fifteen minutes, I realized it was winding onto a half-hour take-up reel.

Panel discussions. This method is similar to the lecture as far as participants' retention of information is concerned. It is best used when you want to present several points of view about a subject, not just as a means of varying the speakers. I make this last point because too much is made these days of the energizing effect of changing the voice people are listening to; any increase in attention span wears off in a matter of seconds. The danger of panel discussions is that one person will monopolize the discussion or the panel members will make personal attacks on each other. For this reason I recommend that you rehearse the panel before the session and that you keep control of the discussion yourself.

Question the expert. This is a variant on the lecture or panel methods. Here the trainees meet in advance to generate a list of questions they want the expert to answer. Although the content of the session may not be what you or the lecturer want, it will be what the trainees want, and they will retain more. Arlene Schindler and Dale Chastain have pointed out (see "Training Volunteers" in spring 1980 *VAL*) that trainee control of the content is a very important factor in the amount of learning that takes place. The chief disadvantage is that it takes more time.

Quizzes and essays. This is an often overlooked method, but one of great value. We can increase the learning that takes place after a lecture or other method to 70 percent by having participants write essays or answer questions on a quiz. This is a particularly good method to use when you have small groups of trainees discuss the questions so that they hear other points of view, fill in gaps in their knowledge, and don't feel they are being "tested" so much.

To Improve Volunteer Skills

While there are many methods that can be employed to impart knowledge, there are really only four techniques to employ in skill training. In my opinion, you should normally use all four of these in the sequence in which they are presented below.

Skill training normally will be preceded by some explanation of what we want the volunteer to do and why. This preliminary work falls under the heading of increasing knowledge; therefore, you should employ one of the methods previously described. For example, if you are training volunteers in a hospital to work with families of terminally ill patients, you might want them first to learn the stages of dying and the steps in the counseling process. Once the volunteer has acquired that knowledge, you then can train him/her to *do* the counseling, using the following methods:

Demonstrations. The first step in the skill training process is to demonstrate the skill so the volunteers know what they are expected to do. You can do this by having them observe someone doing the task on the job, or you can do it by play-acting in a workshop setting. (To correct a common mistake of labeling, this is not role-playing. When you do the play-acting and they watch, that is a demonstration. When they do the acting, that is role-playing.) Films also can be used to demonstrate a skill.

Role-playing. After the trainees see and hear what they are expected to do (and after they discuss it), the next step is to have them try it out in a situation where it is safe to make mistakes and where they can learn from their errors. One way of doing this is to employ the role-playing technique. Here participants pretend they are in the real situation and act out a scenario as though they were at work. In training scout masters to counsel troubled youth, for example, one trainee might play the role of a troubled Boy Scout while another plays the scout master who attempts to help the "scout." Role-playing is done best with someone observing the interaction so the trainees can get feedback on their ability to carry out the task. The main disadvantage of this method is that sometimes people feel self-conscious and threatened by playing the role of someone else. It does provide, however, the closest approximation of a real situation without actually performing the task on the job.

Simulations. A simulation is a designed experience demanding the same skills that the job experience demands. It differs from role-playing in that there are no artificial roles—everyone behaves naturally. In training people to improve their communications skills at meetings, for example, I have used an exercise in which each of seven people are given a part of the information

needed to solve a complicated word puzzle. Because they can only share the information orally, they must work closely with others in the group and communicate effectively. As with any good simulation, the skills they employ are the same ones they will employ in their meetings, even though solving the puzzle is a quite different, artificial experience.

A simulation is another way to approximate the real situation while allowing the trainee to make mistakes and learn from them. It may be substituted for role-playing as step two of the skill development process.

The advantage of choosing a simulation training method over role-play method is that people don't have to adopt an artificial role. Since they are behaving naturally, you will get a better idea of how well they can employ the skills they have learned. The disadvantages are that it is a lot of work for the trainer to design a good

simulation and that sometimes the artificial nature of the experience puts people off ("I don't have time to play games").

On-the-job practice. After participants and trainers become comfortable with the trainee's ability to employ the skill effectively, trainees can proceed to practice it in the real situation. This is not a matter of merely turning them loose on clients; experience is observed and trainees receive feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their performance. On-the-job-practice is the last step in the skill training process and should be attempted only after trainees and trainers are convinced, from practicing in the safe situation, that mistakes are unlikely to be gross enough to harm clients (staff or buildings).

To Affect Volunteer Attitudes

Attitudinal training is not something that volunteer leaders will want to get involved in very often. For one thing, it is the hardest type of training to do. Also, if someone's attitude is wrong for the job—such as a Meals-on-Wheels volunteer who is disgusted by those who are elderly and infirm—it is usually a better use of your time to recruit a different volunteer than to try to change the attitude of an old one. On the other hand, attitudinal training in the sense of consciousness-raising (developing or strengthening an attitude that is already or potentially there) may be useful in some types of volunteer training. Also, some of us occasionally find it desirable to do some attitudinal training with other agency staff in terms of their attitudes toward volunteers. In any case, here are some of the techniques you might properly employ in the attitudinal domain.

Role reversal. Here the person is assigned the task of playing the role of the person he or she has problems working or sympathizing with. This will help the person see what it is like to be in the other person's shoes, *if* the role-reversal is long and serious enough. A ten-minute stint as a handicapped person, for example, isn't likely to change a person's attitudes, particularly if the person playing the handicapped individual is permitted to make jokes about his/her situation.

Self-evaluation. When you want to increase a person's awareness of his or her values, a self-evaluation may help. Some common forms include ranking of values or items, identification of reactions to case studies, and analyzing videotapes of oneself. This method may uncover conflicting values or provide a point of discussion of the appropriateness of a person's attitudes toward the job, the clients, or the co-workers. In order to use this method, you need first to establish a fairly high degree of trust with the person and the group,

otherwise the self-evaluation will tend to tell you what he or she thinks you want to hear.

Simulations. Simulations can be excellent experiences to analyze in terms of one's own reactions and attitudes. In training volunteers to work with the blind, for example, I have used a simulation in which half the group is blind-folded for an entire day. The other half is assigned to be their helpers. They then go through a number of everyday experiences, such as making sandwiches, washing their hands and so on. This simulation, when debriefed in terms of the feelings of both the helpers and the blind, often modifies attitudes each group holds about handicapped people and the role of the helper.

Counseling. It may be stretching things to call this a training technique, but one-to-one counseling is often the best way to explore a person's attitudes and determine the likelihood of change. It is also the best long-term method for affecting attitudinal change.

Case studies. Well-written case studies can serve the same function as a simulation in terms of giving participants an experience to analyze and react to. It is less powerful than a simulation, however, in that people do not actually have the experience themselves. They only read about it.

Observations. Here we provide an opportunity for the volunteer to observe a situation by a field trip, a film or other vehicle. As with the simulation and case study, it gives people an experience they can react to so they may analyze their own feelings and the ramifications of those feelings. The disadvantages of field trips and films are the logistical and technical pitfalls you may run into. It does, however, save you the time and trouble of inventing a simulation or writing a good case study.

Other Considerations

In choosing a training methodology there are some other considerations that deserve attention.

● Perhaps the most important is that, in a long program, you should vary the method you use from session to session. The most grisly torture I have ever witnesses was imposed on a group of VISTA volunteers by a group of trainers who lectured them eight hours a day, four days straight. The trainers, who took turns giving lectures and left the room when their part was done, attributed the slack-jawed, catatonic stares they received to trainee apathy and naivete. No wonder they were unable to account for the massive revolt that took place on the final day. The problem was not that the individual lectures were bad or that they were inappropriate to the objectives the trainers were trying to achieve. The same response can be produced by repeating *any* technique over and over. So where possible, try a different method in each part of your training program.

● The method should maximize the trainees' feelings of self-direction. Once again, it is very important to the learning climate that trainees feel they are in control of the content. They should decide *what* they learn; you should choose the *best method* by which they can learn.

● The training design should include maximum opportunity for active trainee involvement. This means that when you employ a technique in which trainees are passive (such as a lecture or a panel discussion), it is good to follow it with a technique in which they are actively involved (such as a discussion of a lecture or a role-play after a demonstration).

● Wherever possible, the training design should utilize the trainee's own knowledge and skills. We often overlook the fact that trainees come to training with many experiences and bits of knowledge. They will learn more by analyzing and assembling their collective experience, in many cases, than by listening to an expert.

There is, of course, more to designing a training program than selecting the appropriate method, but we'll have to reserve such discussion for the next training volunteers installment. This is an important first step, however, for if you choose an inappropriate method, the rest of your design work cannot make up for that error.

Summary

Training Methods Appropriate to Increasing Volunteer Knowledge

Lectures

Readings

Discussions

Field trips/observations

Films/video tapes/slide shows

Panels

Expert questioning

Quizzes/essays

Training to Improve Volunteer Skills

Demonstrations

Role-playing

Simulations

On-job practice

Training to Affect Attitudes

Role reversals

Self-evaluations

Simulations

Counseling

Case studies

Observations