
TRAINING VOLUNTEERS

The Role of Clients

By Robyn James

Volunteer training programs occur in various forms, ranging from workshops, seminars, meetings, supervision and the use of booklets to self-directed training. It is my belief that the clients or consumers of organizations should have a large say in the content—that is, in developing the material for training programs—as well as responsibility for conducting the volunteer training programs. It is essential—one could say a basic right—that consumers have input into a process that has an effect on their lives.

Organizations and groups using volunteers have a responsibility to provide their volunteers with the appropriate training. To assist volunteers in performing their duties most effectively, a volunteer training program should include all of the following aspects:

- An orientation to the organization. What are the aims and philosophy of the organization? How do volunteers fit in? and so on.
- Information about the specific needs of the client group. What societal problems do they face? What issues does the volunteer need to work through?
- The necessary skills to perform their duties, such as how to find information, how to operate equipment.

The responsibility for training volunteers varies from organization to organization. Many employ a person whose responsibility is to coordinate volunteers and as part of this job, they are expected to make sure that training is provided. In other organizations, people share the responsibility of coordinating volunteers—so then a group of people are responsible for training. Some organizations involve volunteers in a very “ad hoc” way. Nobody has any particular responsibility for volunteers, so no two volunteers receive the same introduction to the organization, training or support.

The example I will use here is one in which I was involved at the Spastic Society and Yooralla Society in 1983-84, where the consumers of these two organizations had the responsibility for training volunteers. This clearly illustrates the benefits of involving consumers or clients as trainers.

The training program involved three sessions, each three hours long involving between 10 and 25 people. The topics covered included an introduction to the course and some “get-to-know-you” activities. This was followed by a simulation game, where each volunteer completed tasks while simulating, in turn, paraplegia, hearing impairment, visual impairment and speech impairment. For example, the speech impairment exercise involved people working in

Robyn James is a training consultant with James & Ross & Associates, an Australian firm that specializes in issues relating to volunteering, disability and basic management.

pairs. One person placed a ping-pong ball in his/her mouth and read a two-sentence message to the other person, who was instructed to write it down. One of the messages was, “When I open my mouth to speak, people don’t understand me. They assume that I cannot think because my speech is difficult to understand.”

Then roles were swapped. Small group discussions revealed that volunteers came to a quick understanding of the judgments they had previously made about people. They also realized how much longer it takes a person with a disability to get through everyday tasks. These small group discussions were led by people with disabilities.

This activity was followed by a film entitled, “I’m Not What You See,” which dealt with such issues as beauty, normality and humanness.

In the second session, the volunteers saw a short film entitled, “Emerging,” which focused on the abilities of people with disabilities. Once again, people with disabilities led small group discussions on attitudes toward disability.

There was another session in which participants engaged in a detailed discussion of rights and responsibilities. Volunteers received handouts, including one that explained their insurance entitlements. There was also a presentation on the philosophy of the two organizations, services and programs offered, and possible volunteering options.

The final session started with a brief discussion on cerebral palsy, epilepsy, spinal bifida and muscular dystrophy led by people with those disabilities. Then a speech pathologist made a presentation on “Communication Boards and Assisting People with Eating,” and a physiotherapist demonstrated lifting techniques.

At the end of the sessions, the volunteers evaluated the training in terms of course structure, content, etc. While comments varied greatly from person to person, the universal feeling was that the leadership provided by people with disabilities was greatly appreciated.

Benefits

The training provided benefits to both the volunteers and consumers.

The volunteers benefited from the following:

1. Any “do-gooder” instinct was stifled as they were put in the position of looking to consumers for leadership and guidance. The “charity ethic” was given no chance to blossom.
2. They learned that a disability tells very little about the abilities of a person.
3. They were given the chance to raise and deal with issues that would not arise naturally without the participation of clients, such as the importance of giving opportunities for independence, learning how to communicate with a person who has a speech difficulty, and the difficulties of using

public transportation when it is inaccessible to wheelchairs.
4. They had an opportunity to build a good working relationship with this particular consumer.

For the consumers, being involved in training volunteers meant many things:

1. They had ownership over the information that was passed on to volunteers. Paid staff were not seen as the "experts."
2. They gained and improved skills in leadership, group work and public speaking.
3. They experienced an increase in self-esteem that comes from performing a task previously considered impossible or the duty of a professional.
4. As a consequence of the training program, those consumers who were not part of the training team were treated as individuals and weren't judged on the basis of their "label."

Training the Trainers

The consumers themselves had to undergo training before taking part in the volunteer training program. Each person (and group of people) that I worked with had different training needs. I will describe how one group of four consumers was trained. They expressed an interest in the volunteer programs and attended a training program for volunteers as a participating member of the group. This gave them an understanding of the issues that concerned volunteers, of a group-work approach to training, and that they were able to influence attitudes.

Fortnightly meetings were held with this group to

- pass on technical information on volunteering, such as recruitment techniques, philosophy of volunteering and style of recordkeeping;
- monitor the volunteer program from a consumer point of view—for example, to ensure that recruiting articles were not patronizing;
- determine the greater role that each person would take at the next training program and individual training needs.

The consumers were also enrolled in additional courses, such as a projectionist course, public speaking, assertiveness training and group-work training.

As the training programs progressed, this group of consumers was gradually given greater responsibility, so that at the end they had full responsibility for running the sessions. This included welcoming and introducing volunteers, leading groups, showing films, introducing guest speakers and coordinating experimental activities.

There is one important limitation in the process of involving consumers in training volunteers. The paid staff member needs to spend a significant amount of time in working with consumers to build up their skills. It is this one limitation that prevents many "professionals," not just those working with volunteers, from passing on the appropriate skills and information to the consumers.

Despite this limitation, it is clear from the example discussed here, that there is a strong case to be argued in favor of involving consumers or clients in the training of volunteers. The opportunity for the volunteers to see and understand "life" from the client's point of view and the client's ability to have control over something that concerns them directly are two big pluses that outweigh the limitation of time needed to train the clients.

The benefits are overwhelming!