

Increasing Staff Effectiveness When Working With Teen Volunteers

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INTRODUCTION

Teens are volunteering in record numbers. Whereas agency staff enjoy and value the teens' efforts, they vary in their effectiveness in working with teen volunteers for a variety of reasons. They may make the assumption that the strategies they use to guide and manage adult volunteers will work equally well with teen volunteers. Or it may be that staff, especially those from smaller agencies, do not have the resources or opportunities to participate in specialized teen volunteer management training. Hence agency staff, even those with the best intentions, may not be as effective in working with teen volunteers as they could be with increased training and support.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

To address this issue, a half-day workshop was planned and delivered collaboratively by a youth development professional with expertise in adolescent development and service-learning, and a (private) high school community service director who is also the former executive director of a large volunteer center. Staff from the local volunteer center also provided information about creating teen volunteer opportunities and using the center's resources.

All the agencies on the volunteer center's mailing list were invited. Registrants were charged \$10.00 to ensure their commitment and to cover the cost of morning refreshments and workshop expenses. Scholarships were available for grassroots agencies but none were requested.

Twenty-six staff from 19 agencies attended the workshop. In an introductory activity called "the dipstick", participants rated themselves for both expertise and confidence in working with teens. Over 80% rated themselves strong in both categories. Despite this fairly high level of perceived expertise among participants, evaluations indicated that participants found the workshop beneficial and increased their knowledge about effectively working with teens.

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

Intended outcomes for the three-hour workshop were as follows:

Participants will:

- Understand characteristics of normal teen development and potential program implications
- Acquire new strategies for effectively communicating with teens
- Know how to design volunteer jobs for teens
- Acquire teen volunteer recruitment strategies

Workshop Content

Following is the information participants rated as most useful. The concepts can be imparted through a variety of interactive strategies described in the training agenda and handouts that appear in the appendices. Two of the activities rated as most useful were adapted from a national curriculum, *Moving Ahead: Preparing the Youth Development Professional* (2000).

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Presentation by Teens: A presentation by teens was highly rated by participants and set the stage and tone of the workshop. The presenters were not “stars,” but typical teens who initially were reluctant to volunteer. They described their experiences candidly, including what worked well and what did not. Participants asked the teens numerous questions. Developmental and communication concepts taught later in the workshop reinforced the teens’ opinions:

- The teens were not interested in receiving extrinsic awards and public recognition, but most valued being treated with respect and as equals by agency staff.
- The teens highly valued the trust shown them by being allowed to conduct tasks unsupervised and worked extra hard to maintain that trust.
- Clear, objective feedback was always welcome and never resented.
- The teens felt that they had made a difference, especially when one of their ideas was adopted for use by the entire agency.

Developmental Characteristics: Participants found the characteristics listed in Table 1 and their implications relevant to their teen volunteer programs.

Teen Communication: Participants rated the communication activity as the most help-

ful. The following concepts were covered:

- Feedback should be given immediately and privately.
- The most effective feedback focuses on the behavior and its effects on the agency or you.
- Feedback given as an “I” message is much more effective than a “you” message. For example, saying, “I need you to update the data bank regularly” is much more effective than saying, “You are behind on your data bank work”.
- An effective way to frame “I” messages, along with an example, is as follows:
 1. State the unacceptable behavior: *“When I see the teen volunteers sitting and chatting instead of doing their work...”*
 2. Express concern about the behavior: *“I feel very nervous”*
 3. Describe the effect of the behavior: *“Because we may not get all the work completed by our deadline.”*

Most staff recognized that warning, threatening, preaching, moralizing, advising, lecturing and diagnosing are not effective communication strategies. They were surprised, however, to learn that praising, agreeing, sympathizing and reassuring could be equally ineffective and sometimes perceived by the

TABLE 1
Developmental Characteristics

| Developmental Characteristics | Potential Implications |
|--|---|
| Can initiate and carry out their own tasks without the supervision of others | Train the teens for the job, then let them work independently. Avoid “hovering” |
| Will lose patience with meaningless activities | Explain how their job fits into agency’s mission. Assign them higher skill tasks and not only menial tasks such as sorting, folding, cleaning, etc. |
| Can think abstractly, consider information and think of new ideas | Let them choose how to carry out their job as long as they achieve the agency’s desired results. |
| Tend to reject ready-made solutions from adults in favor of their own | Involve them in resolving solving difficult situations and problems. |
| Want adult leadership roles; renegotiate relationships with adults | Include them in staff meetings. Ask for their opinions and use them. |
| Are ready for in-depth long-term experiences | Create opportunities that build autonomy and leadership over time. |
| Search for career possibilities | Share what you and other staff do and what you most like about your job. |
| Find a place in a valued group | Recognize and honor their contributions to your agency. Include them in staff functions and meetings. |

teens as patronizing. For example, a teen who expresses doubt about her presentation does not want to be told, "Oh, it was fine." Instead, she would find it more helpful to be asked why she had doubts, what she would like to do better and be given a chance to brainstorm strategies for future presentations. Teens respond well to responses that demonstrate empathy, acceptance, reflective/active listening and willingness to hear more, e.g. "Tell me more about..."

Development of Job Description:

Although a job description for the teen volunteer shares many similarities with one for adults, special mention needs to be made to the time commitment and its fit with school; how the job relates to the agency's mission; and the job skills the teen may acquire. A sample worksheet and job description is included in the appendix.

Networking/Recruitment Strategy Sharing: As with most adult learning opportunities, participants highly valued time spent networking with their peers. Many stated in their evaluations that they would appreciate more time for sharing in future workshops.

CONCLUSION

Often staff believe they are effective teen volunteer staff/directors because they genuinely enjoy working with the teens. Genuine enjoyment is certainly an important, key ingredient in successful teen volunteer programs. However, the results of this workshop demonstrate that even those who are experienced and comfortable working with teens can benefit from additional information and training, especially in addressing the developmental and communication needs of teens.

One participant said it best: "Thank you very much for inviting me to this workshop. I feel more knowledgeable and ready to take on the teen volunteers in our agency. Thank you!"

REFERENCE

USDA/ARMY School-age and Teen Project (2000). *Moving ahead: Preparing the youth development professional*. Kansas State University.

Appendix 1 - Training Agenda

| MIN | TOPIC | DESCRIPTION |
|-----|--|--|
| 10 | Welcome, overview of day, "expertise dipstick" | As participants arrived, their first assignment was to identify their level of expertise/confidence in working with teens. |
| 15 | Introductions | Participants gave their name, organization, and one way their organization involves or wants to involve teen volunteers. |
| 25 | Youth/Adult Partnerships | The large group was divided into two smaller groups. Each group took on the role of either teens or adults and identified what their group thinks are the challenges and benefits of working with the other group. The strengths of partnering were discussed. |
| 25 | What Youth Have to Say | Two youths described their volunteer experiences including: why they volunteer; what worked well; how the experiences could be improved. |
| 10 | Components of Successful Volunteer Program | Participants reviewed a handout describing eleven necessary components of successful programs. They individually conducted a self-assessment in which they determined if elements are missing from their program. |
| 25 | Developmental Characteristics of Teens | The large group was divided into four groups. Each group was given a puzzle of teen characteristics (either 12-14 years old or 15-18 years old) and asked to discuss characteristics, assemble the pieces and determine implications for their programs. |
| 15 | Designing Volunteer Jobs for Teens | Each participant completed a job development worksheet to be used to draft a job description. |
| 25 | Effective Coaching/Communication Strategies | Working in pairs, participants discussed typical communication issues that might arise in their agencies and appropriate responses. These were shared with the large group and discussed. |
| 20 | Recruitment | The large group discussed recruitment and shared tips including: where to find teen volunteers; partnering with other agencies; and using the Volunteer Center. |
| 10 | Wrap-up; evaluation | Participants completed a retrospective pre-post-test evaluation. |

Appendix 2

Youth Volunteer Job Development Worksheet

Agency: _____ Supervisor: _____

Minimum Age of Volunteer: _____ Time Commitment: _____

The task I want accomplished is: _____

This task could be best accomplished by (write task (s) in appropriate boxes):

| | Short Term Project On Site | Short Term Project Off Site | Long Term Project On Site | Long Term Project Off Site |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Individual Teen | | | | |
| Teen Team (2-4 youth) | | | | |
| Adult Led Team | | | | |
| Class (30 youth) | | | | |
| Large Group (200 youth) | | | | |

The person or group needs these qualifications:

This task will help us fulfill our mission by:

In order to complete this task, we will need the following resources:

A volunteer will get this training and/or gain these skills:

These are the benefits youth will obtain from working at our agency:

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Appendix 3

Job Description for Youth Volunteers

SAMPLE

What would the **JOB TITLE** be for a paid staff person performing the same type of duties?

LMNO Neighborhood Community Center

Job Title: Peer Educator

Supervisor: Project Coordinator

Time Commitment: 4 hours per week, as arranged (plus training time) in the afternoons.

Duties:

- Provide direct education to youth clients on HIV Risk Reduction, STDs and pregnancy prevention
- Lead workshops in schools on these topics
- Assist in training of new volunteers

Qualifications:

- Non-judgmental perspective on very challenging
- Peer-counseling experience a plus, though not necessary
- Awareness of AIDS health issues
- Familiarity with local community
- Public speaking skills

Training:

- 20-hour training program
- 4-hour apprenticeship with experienced Educator
- Required monthly support group for all Educators
- Attendance at relevant conferences

Importance of Job to Our Mission:

xxx Community Center is dedicated to providing our neighborhood with activities, educational programming, daycare, and other projects to empower women and children accomplish their personal and professional goals. The HIV Education project is the newest of our resources. Passionate and intelligent young people can educate their peers to fight against the further escalation of the AIDS crisis in youth communities.

If interested, please contact the Project Coordinator at
415-000--1-1

Is the **TIME COMMITMENT** realistic and feasible for a student? How many hours are expected? When?

What are the "ideal" **QUALIFICATIONS** that you see in a volunteer for this position?

Are there certain skills or **TRAINING** that a volunteer will be able to obtain through on the job experience?

What is your agency's **MISSION**? Why was this position created? How does it relate to others in the organization? Why is this position integral?

Whom should an interested youth **CONTACT**?