

ABSTRACT

This work addresses one of the basic concepts of volunteer management, a three-level program for training volunteers. The author addresses the need for an appropriate amount of training, the important categories of training for volunteers and the use of volunteers as trainers of other volunteers. She presents a perspective of training of volunteers which is applicable to many types of organizations utilizing volunteers and to a diversity of volunteer services. The author's direct and simple approach to this aspect of volunteer management serves as a reminder of the important part training plays in the volunteer experience.

How Effective Is Your Training of Volunteers?

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Periodically it is helpful, even necessary, for managers of not-for-profit agencies which involve volunteers to review basic concepts of volunteer management. This article presents an opportunity to explore training for volunteers. It will explore how much training is needed, what categories of volunteer training are considered important and the use of volunteers as trainers of other volunteers.

HOW MUCH TRAINING IS NEEDED?

The amount of training considered to be "enough" varies widely, and depends on the unique needs and goals of the specific organizations, on the policies of those organizations, and on the people who serve as volunteers in a variety of capacities within those organizations. There are two major opportunities for agencies to incorrectly assess the "enoughness" of training of volunteers. First, agencies may provide little or no training. Second, the agencies may provide excessive training that alienates volunteers. Overly trained volunteers may feel that their entire volunteer experience will be limited to being taught more than they need to know to serve as volunteers.

In some instances, there may be valid reasons for lack of adequate training.

Lynch (1984) suggests that in recent years the number of volunteers has increased faster than the training capacities of staff and facilities. However, seldom is there just cause for excessive training.

Ilseley (1990) recommends that the "best training" provides volunteers with the skills and attitudes they need to accomplish their tasks successfully and offers them many chances for learning, inspiration and personal growth. Given the wide variation in experience, level of education, and learning capacity of volunteers, as well as the wide variety of volunteer opportunities, Ilseley's suggestion provides a guideline to achieving an appropriate amount of training for volunteers.

Writers on the topic of training volunteers (Ilseley, 1990; Ilseley and Niemi, 1981; Novaratnam, 1986) agree that volunteers usually need three types of training: orientation, preservice training and on-the-job training.

ORIENTATION TRAINING

Orientation training acquaints the volunteer with the existing situation or environment. This will usually include information about the agency, its philosophy, history, traditions, mission, policies, proce-

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dures, the importance of volunteers to the agency and the relationships between paid and volunteer staff. Other topics include varieties of voluntary services, benefits of volunteering, time commitments expected and opportunities for further training in various service categories.

Orientation training enables volunteers to hear the language of the organization and learn its idiomatic expressions and acronyms. Participants gain a sense of heritage, shared beliefs, traditions, and values. This should enhance and confirm their own desire to participate as volunteers in the organization.

Little, if any, time should be devoted to specific skill training during the orientation presentation. This session should be limited to 2 to 2½ hours duration. An effective orientation program should develop mutual trust, clarify expectations, and begin the team-building process.

Many agencies deliberately provide simultaneous orientation training for both paid and volunteer staff in an effort to create team-like relationships between the two staffs. Both are felt to benefit from the common introduction to the culture of the agency. The American Red Cross, for example, orients all direct service, administrative, advisory, and governance volunteers and most newly hired employees in the same orientation sessions (Volunteer 2000 Study, 1988).

Ideally, orientation training should be provided as early as possible for the volunteer and paid staff. Practical limits to this ideal exist in matters of facility scheduling, instructor availability and class size.

Problems may occur regarding the availability of management staff for delivering orientation training. Novaratnam (1986) recommends involving experienced volunteers as teachers of orientation courses. This method is used by the American Red Cross. Such volunteer instructors can relate to the newcomers by sharing their own personal experiences, perhaps in a more meaningful way than paid staff. Volunteer instructors may more effectively

sense what novices are feeling during the orientation experience. Their descriptions of benefits of volunteering are more likely to be accepted by novice volunteers than those of a person who has not been a volunteer in the organization.

Isley (1990) points out another advantage for including presentations by experienced volunteers in the orientation training. He notes that managers of agencies are apt to forget that new volunteers may not yet have sufficient background information to understand certain information which the manager considers to be of special importance.

Loomis (1986) promotes the idea that novice volunteers be provided with something to hold, something to see and something to hear during the orientation session. Training materials and sessions should be shared or periodically attended by administrators and staff members. This practice accomplishes dual purposes of informing staff about important roles played by volunteers and communicating that volunteers are valued members of the team.

The orientation process does not cease at the end of the orientation course when volunteers indicate their preferred opportunity for service and turn in a course evaluation form. The process of orientation proceeds throughout the career of the volunteer.

PRESERVICE TRAINING

Preservice training, sometimes referred to as entry level training or skill development training, typically follows the assignment of a volunteer to a specific task and prepares the volunteer to perform that assigned task (Isley, 1990). Novaratnam (1986) suggests that preservice training may precede the assignment to a specific task. In either case, preservice training includes an assessment of the abilities of the volunteer and the provision of needed additional knowledge and skills required to perform the activities. Development of specific knowledge and skills will vary considerably with the nature of volunteer

services. Preservice training will require more time than the general orientation. It may also require more tutoring time, special instructional materials and individualized attention from paid staff (Novaratnam, 1986).

As with orientation training, experienced trained volunteers can and do participate in preservice training of volunteers. Active, knowledgeable and willing volunteers should be selected to participate in a train-the-trainer program to prepare them for such responsibilities. The American National Red Cross has developed a one-day Instructor Candidate Training Course which is required of all volunteers. This course is the first step in becoming a specialty instructor in American Red Cross Disaster Services, Health and Safety Services, and Military Social Services. Following this initial course, volunteers complete a specialty skill course for the volunteer service for which they will become instructors. As a concluding step, volunteers may complete a course in how to teach that specialty course. Both volunteer and paid staff complete this three-step process before they are certified as Red Cross instructors in the specialty.

IN-SERVICE TRAINING

Sometimes referred to as on-the-job training or continuing training, in-service training for volunteers refers to the perfecting of skills usable in the volunteer's current assignment or that are needed for transfer to another assignment within the same agency. Frequently such a transfer makes use of experience gained in a previous assignment.

On-the-job training may require an extended period of time, and agencies may not be able to afford paid staff to conduct this continuing training. Novaratnam (1986) believes that volunteer trainers can help volunteer trainees to study procedures, policies and mandates of the agency in depth, and assist the paid staff in supervising and evaluating volunteer trainees. A volunteer involved in in-service training may be paired with a novice

volunteer to provide real-life experience. A three-way relationship among paid staff, volunteer trainers and novice volunteers can create a friendly group atmosphere.

SUMMARY

Managers of not-for-profit agencies involving volunteers may find it advantageous to review their existing policies regarding current training of volunteers and the utilization of volunteers and trainers.

Further studies would help managers make decisions about training their volunteers more effectively. The following types of questions might guide this study:

1. Is there a correlation between the retention period for volunteers and the type of training they receive?
2. Is there a relationship between the retention period of volunteers and the amount of training they received?
3. Does the timing of the training of volunteers affect retention period of volunteers?

With the expectation that society will need increasing numbers of volunteers to provide essential social services, practices which encourage volunteering are worth exploring.

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