

1995 International Conference on Volunteer Administration

ABSTRACT

This article provides helpful guidelines and tips for designing an effective volunteer orientation process. Rather than an isolated event, orientation is a process with potential for long-term impact on the commitment and satisfaction of volunteers. The orientation process should be coordinated with the organization's recruitment materials and other volunteer management systems. To be effective, orientation must address the needs of both the organization and the volunteer. Two checklists are provided to help the reader determine readiness to provide orientation. The authors share the top 10 questions volunteers bring to orientation, and suggest several methods for ensuring that a volunteer orientation is on target.

On-Target Orientations

Laurie McCammon and Suzanne Hand

Today's highly competitive volunteer market challenges volunteer administrators to attract and support volunteers for maximum success and tenure. Volunteer orientation is often overlooked as a key tool for ensuring a growing and committed volunteer base. Volunteer orientation is an important retention and recruitment tool within the overall context of the volunteer management system. It begins with the first contact between the volunteer and the organization, that is, at recruitment, and it has a far-reaching effect that, when maximized, can greatly enhance a volunteer's commitment to the organization.

ORIENTATION IS A PROCESS, NOT AN EVENT

When we began talking to volunteer administrators about orientation we found that they tended to view volunteer orientation as a written manual or single learning event. In contrast, when they re-

flected on their own experiences in becoming acquainted with their jobs, they tended to refer to an orientation process taking several weeks or months. The first step in realizing the potential of orientation is to view it as a process.

Orientation is defined as a welcome or an introduction, a way to become familiar with and adapt to an environment. Frequently one's introduction to an organization begins when one first hears about the organization through brochures, the media, a volunteer bank, or a friend. It is important to be aware of the promises we make in our public relations and recruitment materials. We must address these expectations in our orientation sessions and materials. Inconsistent messages, and unfulfilled promises can call into question the integrity and trustworthiness of the organization.

Although an orientation is often where a volunteer first interacts with an organi-

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- Do we have a written mission statement?
 - Do we have written position descriptions for volunteers?
 - How many volunteers are needed, and how many are we prepared to support and supervise?
 - Have we assessed the risks and liability issues for each volunteer position, developing policies, procedures, and systems to minimize those risks?
 - Are supervisors of volunteers familiar with, and evaluated on, volunteer management practices?
 - Is there an adequate budget to support the volunteer program?
 - Do we have systems in place to provide volunteers with feedback about their performance, to provide recognition, to resolve conflicts, to release volunteers, and to "promote" volunteers?

Figure 1. ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS CHECKLIST

You know you are ready to provide an orientation session for a new volunteer when:

- The volunteer has been properly screened and placed.
- A supervisor or contact person has been assigned.
- Written orientation materials are prepared.
- You have planned how you will put the volunteer at ease and make him/her feel welcome and needed.
- You have determined how to portray a positive image of your organization, living up to any promises made at recruitment.
- You have determined the logistics of the volunteer's first assignment.
- You have planned for any special accommodations needed for the particular volunteer at orientation, keeping in mind reading level (especially when you are distributing handouts), location, time of day, age, cultural background, length of assignment, etc.

Figure 2. INDIVIDUAL READINESS CHECKLIST

zation, it should be one of the last pieces of the volunteer management system the organization puts in place. The volunteer management system is the process by which a volunteer is recruited, screened, placed, trained, supervised, and evaluated. At an orientation session it is likely you will make promises about what the volunteer can expect in terms of supervision, reimbursement, recognition, feedback, and benefits. If policies, procedures, and lines of supervision are not in place, you risk making a poor impression on the volunteer. Checklists such as those illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 can be helpful in assessing organizational readiness for the implementation of orientation. If you have unfinished or unclear items on those lists, you will want to address them first.

SUCCESS EQUALS MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE ORGANIZATION AND THE VOLUNTEER

Let's assume your organization is ready to develop an orientation process. A successful orientation must fulfill the needs of both the organization and the volunteer. Orientation is 50 percent training, and 50 percent matchmaking. If the fit is not right for either party a mutually beneficial, long-lasting union is unlikely. Given the amount of time and resources you are likely to devote to orientation manuals and sessions, a string of unsuccessful unions can put a major strain on your program's success.

The first step in building a successful union between the organization and the volunteer is to identify the needs of both parties. Volunteer administrators have little difficulty identifying the needs of their organizations. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the volunteer wants what the organization wants. Because the needs of volunteers tend to be more personal, more diverse, and less understood than organizational needs, the only way to accurately determine the needs of volunteers is to ask them. We

suggest that you pose the following question to yourself: What assumptions do I make regarding a potential volunteer's knowledge of, and commitment to, my organization? Ask new and existing volunteers in your program to give you feedback about your answer. Ask them what they want, need, and expect orientation to provide. Are your assumptions on target?

THE TOP 10 QUESTIONS VOLUNTEERS BRING TO ORIENTATION

We asked people who volunteer for a wide variety of organizations what they needed in an orientation. A compelling pattern emerged which we have named **SAPP**. **SAPP** identifies the four key areas that should be included in an orientation: safety, affiliation, purpose, and performance. Although there is no implicit ranking in the listed order, it is important to consider all 10 questions included under the four key areas when designing an orientation.

Safety

- What are my volunteer rights and how can I expect to be treated?
- What is my level of autonomy and authority to make decisions?
- What risks are inherent in the job, and does the organization protect me from them?

Affiliation

- Who is my contact person/supervisor? With whom will I be working?
- What does this organization value? What is its mission? Who does it benefit?

Purpose

- How does what I do make a difference? Why do it? How will it help?
- Will there be opportunity for growth or new assignments?

Performance

- What exactly will I be doing, and

how do I get started?

- Logistics of the job: when, where, how long, how often? What policies and procedures do I follow?
- What tools and resources do I need (training, equipment, manuals, etc.), and will you provide them?

YOU'LL NEVER HAVE A SECOND CHANCE TO MAKE A FIRST IMPRESSION

Orientation is often just that: the first impression a volunteer forms of your organization. At this formative stage in the volunteer-organization relationship the symbolic nature of orientation is critical. For example, what assumptions would you make about an organization whose orientation session was sloppy and poorly organized? What if the person conducting the orientation was rude and disrespectful? What if at orientation several "surprise" demands were revealed to you that did not appear in recruitment materials? Would you trust that organization? Would your commitment to that organization be enhanced?

Is your orientation saying to volun-

teers what you really want them to hear? What assumptions and generalizations might volunteers make about your organization based on what they experience at orientation? We suggest that you make a list of the desirable qualities and values of your organization. Try to find evidence of these qualities and values in your orientation session outline and manual. Next, consider the qualities that you do not want to portray. Is there evidence of these qualities in your orientation materials? Ask an impartial group of observers to help you assess your volunteer orientation materials for these subtle messages. They often see inconsistencies and errors that you are unable to see.

When faced with the task of creating or revising your orientation materials remember that honesty is the best policy. Orientation is like a looking glass. It should reflect what is actually there. Highlight the strengths of your program, but do not "invent" qualities or philosophies that do not currently exist. Instead, put those desired, but yet unachieved qualities to work to implement real changes within your organization.