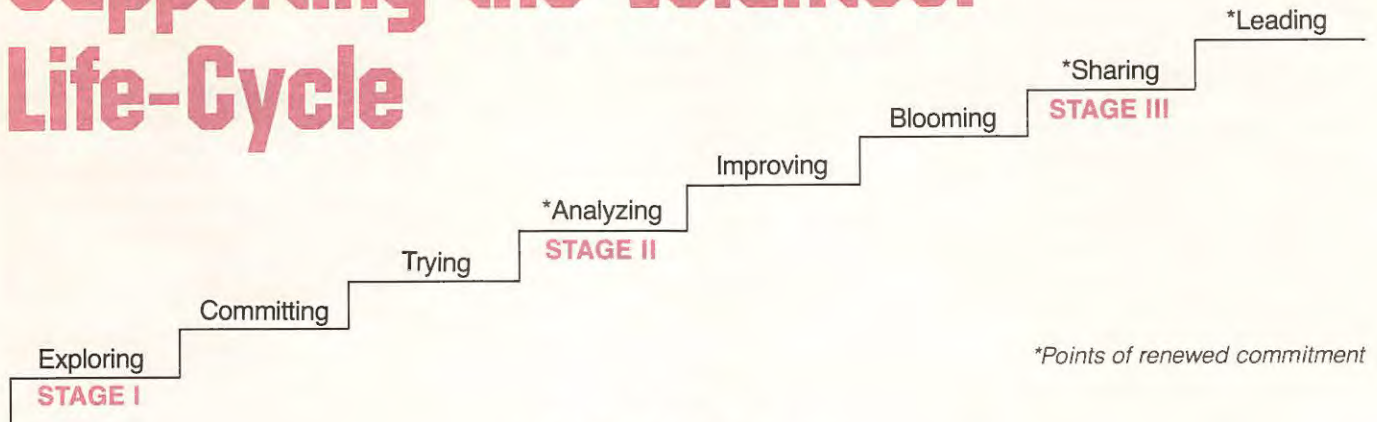


Supporting the Volunteer Life-Cycle



By Paula J. Beugen

Each of us is a unique human being. We enter into most new situations with a touch of enthusiasm and anticipation, hope and fear. This is as true for volunteers who are new in their positions as it is for volunteer administrators. We who cherish the contributions of volunteers work very hard to keep these special people on our team. We celebrate the emergence of experienced, successful volunteers.

Those of us who "have been around" for awhile have an important role to play. Some of us are formally responsible for providing support to volunteers. Others may choose to take on this responsibility. Every person involved is in a position to influence the climate of an organization and the well-being of volunteers.

This article is about helping volunteers grow in their volunteer positions and within their organizations. It is based upon my own observations and experience in working with volunteers for the past ten years.

In order to be supportive, we must be sensitive to each volunteer's feelings and needs at any given time. This is not a simple task and no one can do it perfectly. By thinking about the course of a volunteer's experience as a volunteer life-cycle, we will be in a better position to identify how we can help.

I believe there are three primary stages in the growth of a volunteer: Exploratory (Stage I), Developmental (Stage II) and Mature (Stage III). Usually, there are steps within each stage (see illustration).

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I want to emphasize that no two people or situations are exactly alike. Many volunteers will experience some variation to the described stages and steps. However, I suspect that much of what I have to say may feel familiar to many of you—because you have been there.

Stage I: Exploratory

Stage I is when the volunteer is becoming more familiar with your organization and expectations. He/she has made an initial commitment to volunteer, but this commitment has not yet crystallized.

The volunteer is eager to get started—but feels unsure. He/she wants to know as much as possible about the purpose and background of the organization, as well as the specific tasks required to perform. You can help by providing a thorough orientation where questions and comments are encouraged.

At this point, the volunteer will probably have these thoughts:

- "Is this a reputable organization?"
- "Is this a worthwhile way to spend my time?"
- "Can I really make a difference?"
- "Am I competent to do a good job?"
- "Will other people feel that I am the right person to do the job?"
- "Do I belong here?"

This is a critical period. The volunteer feels anxious and may consider backing out. With your encouragement and reassurance, he/she is likely to hang on a little longer.

Communicate with this person now. Point out that most people feel uncertain when they start volunteering.

Once this first hurdle is cleared, the vol-

unteer has made a commitment to give the position a serious try. He/she is very curious about what the experience will be like and what he/she needs to know.

It is time to help the volunteer start to dig in. *General* training, which is not overwhelming, will offer a needed foundation upon which to build even further instruction. Providing opportunities to observe others in a similar position can be extremely beneficial.

The volunteer is ready to try to do the job. The first time is the scariest. Again,

Sue Johnson

When Sue Johnson first started volunteering with the Minnesota Office on Volunteer Services, she never dreamed that three years later she would be coordinating the entire MOVS library. During her first year, she spent most of her time typing. It soon became obvious, however, that she was capable of much more responsibility. Gradually, she was introduced to a range of library tasks.

Today, Sue is in charge of circulation of all MOVS library materials. She distributes books, handles necessary correspondence, monitors overdue notices, prepares documents for the shelves, and delegates tasks to other volunteers.

Over the past few months, Sue has bloomed. She is moving into the sharing step of the mature stage and will be supporting other volunteers as they enter the volunteer life-cycle as MOVS library volunteers.

he/she needs your acceptance. This is another major hurdle to be jumped. One way to help is to offer an opportunity to practice a skill before it is actually applied. Identify one key person to assist the volunteer as the need arises.

Cheer for the volunteer. Recognize his/her courage and risk-taking for trying a new task and following through on a commitment. Although the volunteer is probably feeling frustrated, knowing that he/she is genuinely needed may be enough for him/her to "stick to it." The volunteer is keenly aware that until now he/she has been receiving more than giving.

As a result of careful instruction, close monitoring, communication and on-going encouragement, the volunteer has done a reasonably good job from the very beginning. He/she is striving for excellence while accepting that imperfection is to be expected at first. Most of all, a valuable volunteer has been retained through several attempts at carrying out an important task.

Hooray for you! You have helped a volunteer move through Stage I, the Exploratory Stage.

Stage II: Developmental

In the next stage, the Developmental Stage, the volunteer really experiences a growth spurt. It is an exciting time, and the

volunteer is hungry for information and specific techniques.

There are many ways to support a volunteer during this stage. It is a perfect time for specific in-service training. The volunteer wants to know how to do an even better job and is busy analyzing and testing different ideas and approaches. You will want to reinforce accurate or positive behavior. Comment on the volunteer's strengths and show him/her ways to do things effectively. Coach the volunteer.

Feelings of satisfaction from the volunteer position usually begin to emerge now. The volunteer realizes that his/her performance constantly is improving and that he/she is a contributing member of the team. Sessions where peers in like positions get together to exchange ideas and experiences can be particularly valuable and exhilarating during Stage II. The presence of a knowledgeable facilitator or advisor is often worthwhile.

During the latter part of the Developmental Stage, the volunteer is blooming! He/she is starting to assert his/her views and observations. This is healthy. The volunteer wants to apply higher-level skills and his/her dependence is decreasing.

Now is an important time to restate and clarify the goals of the volunteer position. You may want to suggest resources that correspond to the philosophy and approach of the organization. Opportunities to interact with key leaders or staff members will reinforce the values and methods of the organization.

Sometimes the volunteer will feel undervalued or even unappreciated during Stage II. Other people may be too engrossed in their daily activities to notice the volunteer's contributions, or the volunteer may not yet have a complete understanding of the "total picture."

You can increase the volunteer's sense of belonging by communicating frequently, respecting his/her feelings and ideas, noticing progress toward established goals, and perhaps arranging for a social gathering to celebrate the volunteer's recent accomplishments.

Congratulations! Once again you have stood by a volunteer. At the same time, you have helped to assure quality services within your organization. The volunteer chooses to stay, not knowing he/she is on the verge of moving from Stage II to Stage III.

Stage III: Mature

The final stage in the volunteer life-cycle can be the most fulfilling of the three

Barb Winikoff

Barb Winikoff began her career in Minnesota's Robbinsdale School District as a volunteer at her neighborhood school in Golden Valley, Minnesota. I met Barb several years later when she became interested in volunteering to help adults learn English as a second language—which she did very effectively for two years.

Barb wanted to test her skills in new areas. In 1979, she came to me to explore options for her development. We decided that Barb had many skills to offer and that she could grow as a volunteer by working as a volunteer administrative assistant for the Robbinsdale Area Schools Volunteers in Action program.

Barb matured as a volunteer. She built her qualifications through volunteer experience. Subsequently, she was hired to supervise the entire Volunteers in Action operation.

Jeffrey Hazlett

Jeffrey Hazlett moved very quickly from the exploratory stage to the developmental stage of the volunteer life-cycle. This past summer, Jeff began volunteering with the Minnesota Office on Volunteer Services. He is a teaching associate with the University of Minnesota Composition Department and came to MOVIS to share his interests and skills as well as broaden his work experience.

Jeff's involvement with MOVIS has ranged from editing resource materials to reviewing and processing library publications and creating a manual for maintaining the MOVIS resource library.

Within just a few weeks, Jeff made a huge commitment. He tried and analyzed a variety of tasks and became familiar with the MOVIS library system. Now Jeff is making suggestions to improve library administrative procedures and is working independently to update the library bibliography.

Jeff, too, is blooming!

stages. At this point, the volunteer is often giving more than receiving, even though he/she receives a lot!

The mature volunteer is frequently unassuming or even modest. He/she has become comfortable in carrying out responsibilities, intuitively knowing what to do and how to do it. This is an extremely skilled person who often is unaware of the extent of his/her high-level abilities.

Sometimes a mature volunteer unconsciously feels under- or over-involved. A symptom may be an apparent loss of enthusiasm. By reflecting on the situation, you might interpret whether or not the volunteer's skills are being fully utilized.

He/she may be ready for some form of advancement within the organization. On the other hand, the organization may be becoming overly dependent on this single volunteer and, therefore, the volunteer is getting tired. A place to start is to affirm the value of the volunteer's current contributions. Recognize and communicate his/her *specific* qualities, competencies and accomplishments that have been an asset to your organization. Explore whether or not the volunteer is willing to share his/her experience with others or desires a change in responsibilities.

There are two steps in the Mature Stage. The first is the "sharing step" and the second is the "leading step." The latter is the highest step in the entire volunteer life-

LIFE-CYCLE OF A VOLUNTEER

Predominant Factors

Stage I Exploratory	Characteristics	Common Feelings	Needs of Volunteer	Needs of Organization	Possible Action Areas
	Exploring Committing Trying Receiving more than giving	Curious Eager Anxious Frustrated Unsure Overwhelmed	Encouragement Instruction Communication Reassurance Acceptance Recognition	Quality Control Retention of the volunteer	Orientation General training Opportunities to observe others Regular communication Opportunities to practice ideas Identification of one key person who can give help
Stage II Developmental	Characteristics	Common Feelings	Needs of Volunteer	Needs of Organization	Possible Action Areas
	Growing Testing and analyzing Blooming Asserting views and observations Decreasing dependence on others Contributing Recommitting	Excited Confident Wanting to know how to do a better job Satisfied Undervalued Wanting to learn new or higher level skills Unappreciated	Reinforcement Support resources Communication Clarification Sense of belonging Recognition	Quality control Retention of the volunteer Progress towards established goals	Frequent communication Peer support mechanism In-service training Social gatherings
Stage III Mature	Characteristics	Common Feelings	Needs of Volunteer	Needs of Organization	Possible Action Areas
	Advising Leading Mentoring Unassuming Sharing Modest Giving more than receiving Recommitting	Skillful Comfortable Under or over involved Modest Unaware of the extent of his/her high-level skills	Affirmation of value Opportunities for advancement Recognition	Retention of the volunteer Utilization of skills and experience of the volunteer Development of leadership	Leadership training External training Teaching roles Advising roles Advocacy roles Career paths Public visibility

Note: Factors will vary according to the individual and organization.

cycle. Not everyone aspires to reach the "leading step"; some leave the volunteer community before reaching the "sharing step."

The "sharing step" can be characterized as a time for exchanging ideas and experience with others (often in addition to continuing previous responsibilities). For example, the volunteer may be willing to offer one-to-one support to another volunteer on an informal basis. Or, he/she might participate in a support session with volunteers in the Developmental Stage to offer insights.

The volunteer who is in the "leading step" would take this even further. Per-

haps he/she would be a mentor to another volunteer (provide long-term emotional support and practical advice that would help another volunteer achieve desired goals). Or serve as a consultant to a support group upon request. Or become the chairperson or president of a key group.

The mature volunteer is especially precious. He/she is the leader, advisor or mentor within your organization—the one you rush to consult when a problem or challenge arises.

Because you have continued to care, a volunteer has blossomed and matured. Your final major task is to encourage your organization to draw upon the skills and

experience of the volunteer whom you have supported. Stress the value of leadership development experiences such as participation in training sessions sponsored by other organizations; opportunities to hold teaching, advising or advocacy positions; and new responsibilities that will propel the volunteer along a career path. Create situations that stimulate public visibility for this steadfast volunteer who can serve as a role model for others to follow.

In the final analysis, *your success* in helping one volunteer to grow from strength to strength will be passed on, and on, and on....