TRAINING VOLUNTEERS

The Trainer As Teacher: A Personal Perspective

By Kathleen M. Brown

FOR THE PAST NINE YEARS, I HAVE BEEN a "trainer" of both volunteers and volunteer program managers. And yet, as a former classroom teacher, calling myself a trainer still conjures up visions of lion cages, whips, and horizontally held chairs. I am called a trainer, but I am really a teacher, for I am passing on my accumulated knowledge and expecting learners to question, challenge and integrate what I say into what they already know. I would never expect those I train to follow my instructions exactly. I can only present tools, and learners must determine how to apply those tools in their own settings.

In the same way, when you train volunteers to do a job in your agency, you give them the knowledge and tools they need to do the job. It's almost that simple. You do not expect them to follow every instruction mindlessly. You explain why jobs are done the way they are. You encourage questions and innovations that make work more efficient or satisfying. You are open to learning from the volunteers as well as they from you.

Good volunteer training is based on the following nine concepts:

1. People want to learn. I have found that sometimes volunteer program managers are apologetic about taking up their new volunteers' time with training. Though some volunteers may initially grumble, most truly want to learn whatever they need to know in order to do their jobs well.

2. All new volunteers need training. Even if a volunteer has done an almost identical job in another agency, he or she has not done it in your agency. Therefore, the volunteer needs orientation to *your* expectations, *your* ways of doing things, and *your* philosophy about your field of service. Volunteers represent your agency in the community, and you need to make sure they understand what they are representing.

A participant in one of my workshops told me about a volunteer who was recruited to visit a patient in a convalescent home and insisted that she didn't need training since she had visited sick people before. The brand new director of volunteers, afraid to offend the self-assured volunteer, agreed that the latter could begin visiting immediately. The first visit was a disaster; the volunteer was in no way prepared for the strong conflicting emotions most people feel when entering the world of convalescent homes. A good training course would have given her the necessary preparation. As it was, the volunteer quit after one visit, and the volunteer director learned a valuable lesson.

3. Training is one of the benefits you offer to potential volunteers. People often accept volunteer jobs because they want training in a particular skill or particular human service field. A good training course can be the card that draws potential volunteers to choose your agency over another volunteer opportunity across the street. Good training is a strong selling point for your program.

4. Training builds teamwork and commitment. There are important benefits to be gained from training volunteers as a group. Done well, group training stimulates thinking, encourages cooperative efforts, and provides new volunteers with peer support. I have often found that one volunteer will ask a question that many other volunteers are afraid to ask. Everyone learns from the ensuing discussion of that question, and the quality of the volunteers' work goes up.

All good training, whether group or individual, builds commitment to the job and the agency on the part of the volunteers. Those you train will most likely appreciate the investment the agency has made in them by providing high quality training and will perform accordingly. Increased understanding of your program also en-

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courages their commitment to the agency.

5. Staff and experienced volunteers reinforce their skills by training new volunteers. Asking staff members or experienced volunteers to train new volunteers may seem like an imposition, but it's actually an opportunity for review and re-evaluation. I once had a staff member tell me he had forgotten the basic purpose of his job until he had to prepare a presentation for a volunteer training course. Similarly, phone receptionist volunteers who provided on-the-job training for new volunteers found the necessary review of policies and procedures very beneficial for their own performance. They also appreciated the recognition they received from being asked to train new volunteers.

6. On-going training is necessary. I am on a particular soapbox here, because I believe many volunteers do not get adequate on-going training. The excuse is usually that volunteers cannot give any more time than their regularly scheduled commitment and so cannot be brought together for on-going training sessions. This is sometimes true, although often it is an assumption made without testing it out. However, if it is true, then some time for on-going training can be scheduled *during* the volunteer's regular commitment. Even if it is only a half-hour conference with the director of volunteers or the staff supervisor, and even if it takes the volunteer away from his or her job for a short time, it should be done.

From my own experience in working with volunteers, I can cite numerous examples of the value of on-going group training. In bimonthly meetings for phone receptionist volunteers, discussing how one volunteer had handled a difficult call provided an important learning experience for those who probably would receive that kind of call in the future. In group sessions with volunteers who work one-to-one with clients, the feelings of frustration and the doubts volunteers have about their competence can be relieved through problem solving and group support. Without this support, the difficulties that come with the job will cause many volunteers simply to leave.

On-going training can include peer support groups, sessions with outside speakers or films, sessions where staff members meet with volunteers, and many other variations. For organizations where volunteers cannot be brought together, some individual approach should be found. Volunteers need on-going training to sharpen their skills, gain new insights, and increase their commitment to the job. Providing on-going training is also a recognition of their worth to the agency.

7. People learn by doing. The best training is a combination of information and experience. People need basic information, and that is usually best imparted by lecture, written material or media presentation. But training should not stop there. New volunteers need the opportunity to practice doing the job before they are let loose and expected to perform.

One favorite practice technique is the "role play," one of the most fearsome terms in training. I used to hate role plays; my stomach would tighten at the very mention of the words. Now I truly enjoy them and will volunteer for any that come along in trainings I attend. The difference came when I stopped thinking that I was performing for an audience and let myself truly experience what the person I was playing was feeling. It's an awesome experience, and one I can't explain, but the learning is powerful. The empathy that people gain from role plays is readily transferable to their volunteer work with clients, staff and other volunteers.

Sometimes practice is best given by on-the-job training under the instruction and supervision of staff or experienced volunteers. Just telling a person how to do a job seldom suffices. Volunteers (and all other workers) need to be able to ask questions and have their progress monitored closely as they learn something new.

8. Learning is a two-stage process: first we imitate, then we "make it our own." When you learn how to play tennis, for instance, you first try to imitate the movements of your instructor. There is, at that stage, a "right" way and a "wrong" way to swing at the ball. Later, when you have learned the basic skills, you develop your own style and you are no longer just following the coach's instructions.

When you train volunteers to do a job, you should expect this two-stage process to occur. New volunteers will most likely follow instructions to the letter, and their way of talking to clients, for instance, will often directly mirror that of their teacher. But as time goes on, volunteers develop their own ways of doing things, and their individual personalities are reflected in the way they do their jobs with clients and staff. Unless their style causes problems, this individualization should be encouraged. People have only truly learned something when they have "made it their own."

9. There must be two-way communication between trainer and learner. As trainers we should never expect that people are learning just because we're telling them something. Learning involves communication between teacher and student, and the former must continuously check on how the latter is receiving the information imparted. In school, teachers checked up on us through tests; as adults we should engage in questioning, explaining and clarifying. We can also check progress through the practice exercises mentioned previously: role plays and on-the-job training with supervision.

These nine concepts should underlie the planning of all training for volunteers. Specific content, length of training, and methods used will depend on who is training whom for which jobs. For straightforward office jobs, such as typing form letters, an orientation to the agency plus detailed instruction and brief on-the-job training may suffice. For more complex jobs involving individual work with clients, a training course several weeks long may be in order. Regardless, the facts are that people want and need both initial and on-going training, that training benefits both volunteers and staff, and that learning involves supervised practice, interaction between teacher and learner, and individualization. Remembering these concepts will help trainers of volunteers be among the finest of teachers.