

Training Volunteers for Success

By Stephanie Kipperman

As a coordinator of volunteer outreach programs for over 15 years, I have worked with hundreds of volunteers. I have seen the difference that good training makes and the disappointment, frustration and ill will that are inevitable when training is inadequate or nonexistent. The purpose of this article is to discuss the "why," "what" and "how" of effective training—training that will prepare volunteers to do their jobs and expand and enhance the services an organization can provide.

Why Provide Training: Goals and Objectives

At my agency, training provides guidelines and procedures, information and skills, an overview of the goals and philosophy of the agency, and an introduction to staff, clients and other resources.

Training highlights the meaningfulness of our work, the commitment of the staff that is doing it and the importance of the volunteer component to overall success. It communicates firm expectations and standards of performance, and is designed to reflect the professionalism of our program as a whole.

Training also enables us to communicate our enthusiasm for the program, inspiring potential participants to want to "get started as soon as possible" and even to refer a friend.

Encouragement is important, for most volunteers feel at least somewhat anxious about taking on new responsibilities. They are likely to feel hesitant even if they have education in the field, have worked before in a similar setting and have personal knowledge upon which to draw. Even parents need to be trained to work in our preschool drop-in center in order to know its guidelines and procedures.

A volunteer who has teaching experience still needs to be trained to work as a home-based conversation partner and "American friend" for a family of refugees from the former USSR who are overwhelmed by culture shock in their new community.

Training increases skills and self-confidence by providing ideas and techniques that are new and by reminding the volunteers of what they already know. For example, volunteers who help refugees increase their fluency in English repeatedly express their appreciation for being reminded of the need to speak slowly and

clearly, to rephrase rather than repeat if not understood, to let the newcomer do the talking as he or she is the one who needs the practice, and to recognize that even small three-letter words like "get" may be highly idiomatic, as illustrated by just a few examples: Can you get me a pen? Can you get the door? I get that!

In each of our programs, training clarifies what is expected and how the job should be done. Training supports and inspires the volunteers to overcome their initial nervousness in order to make a difference.

What Kind of Training: Content and Focus

The areas to be covered during training need to be based on the role the volunteer is being asked to fulfill, the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary to do it well, and the goals and objectives of the specific program involved.

For example, if volunteers are expected to interact with young children, they will need to understand and adhere to very definitive safety and developmental considerations. If volunteers work with persons for whom English is a second language, communication tips and cross-cultural information will increase understanding and sensitivity. If volunteers are working with seniors, knowledge of the losses of aging and awareness of signs of abuse and neglect are essential.

The general format I have developed for an initial volunteer training session includes the following:

1. Warm statement of welcome
2. Introduction of participants, program and agency
3. Overview of the client population
4. Representative selection of anticipated issues and concerns
5. Clarification of roles and responsibilities
6. "Hands-on" skills training
7. Additional opportunity for questions and answers
8. Genuine statement of appreciation and encouragement

Specifics of the prospective assignments and makeup of the volunteer group, as well as the amount of screening that has already taken place, will affect the depth of discussion.

My approach is to focus on what pre-screened volunteers want to learn and to start there. I have the

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benefit of a written application and an in-office interview to assist me in knowing these things. What I will say is also influenced by formal and informal feedback from former volunteers about what to include and what to avoid and the availability of other staff or program volunteers to assist.

Listening to volunteers who have participated in past trainings as well as soliciting the concerns of newcomers has helped me to separate what volunteers want to hear from what is likely to be boring, distracting or just not useful.

Watching my "audience" carefully is imperative. I must be alert for blank looks when jargon or abbreviations—so second nature to each of us in our day-to-day work—are unexplained, and glazed eyes when I "wax theoretical" rather than share practical suggestions. There's so much I want to communicate, but I know that if the program "goes on and on," the volunteers may well wish they were someplace else and hear little of what is said.

Rather than telling all there is to know, I want training to help the volunteers learn enough about what they are being asked to do that they can judge whether the "fit" is right. If it is, they will have the preparation and self-confidence to do the job.

How to Train Effectively: Means and Techniques

For training to fulfill these multiple goals, it must be lively, informative and engaging. There needs to be time for questions, room for humor, and opportunity for interchange. Yet we must stay on schedule. Presenting training in a format that includes a variety of approaches keeps things moving and encourages involvement whatever the volunteer's learning style.

It has been repeatedly demonstrated that most people learn significantly more by eye than by ear. Yet, written materials alone are not enough. Even if thoroughly read—and this is often not the case—written information inevitably raises questions and requires explanation, but provides no forum in which the issues are addressed or the questions answered.

Handouts that include detailed material in black and white—or color if possible—remain with the volunteer for reference and review afterward. However, if unread, they might as well not have been written.

My experience is that if the contents of written materials are not discussed during a training session, they are likely to be ignored, even discarded, soon afterward. To avoid this, I make a point of relating critical issues, such as confidentiality and record-keeping, to the appropriate pages of our agency volunteer manual and providing a verbal and visual overview of all of the materials assembled in our program-specific packet.

We use visual props to highlight key ideas. For example, a bar graph which compares the number of arrivals of refugees in San Francisco over a 10-year period

proves the point that "a picture is worth a thousand words."

Similarly, a circular diagram that identifies the number of tasks that each newly arrived refugee family faces in its first few months in America dramatically illustrates the stress and pressure it faces. Brainstorming the varied emotions newcomers may feel in the initial resettlement period will actively involve the volunteers, and will have far greater impact when written on a blackboard or poster paper, than if simply stated by the trainer.

It is not news to managers of volunteer programs that information and explanation can be significantly enhanced by opportunities to practice skills and participate in role plays.

Over and over again, volunteers express their appreciation for "hands on" practice, such as the opportunity to try out "conversation stimuli" and to pose "open-ended questions" during the One-to-One Tutor Program Orientation. Senior Outreach Volunteer trainees role play specific problematic situations, and "Chicken Soupers" who bring meals to homebound clients with AIDS focus on anticipated issues involving loss and grief. Volunteers in each of these programs confirm what Confucius wrote many years ago:

What I hear, I forget

What I see, I remember

What I do, I understand.

Training helps prepare the volunteer for the task ahead, but must not be a one-time experience. Only as an ongoing process can training continue to provide the skills, knowledge and support to enable a volunteer to do his or her job as it should be done and to grow and develop in the position.

Because volunteers "in the field" often do not come to follow-up trainings, we offer a variety of opportunities for "staff development" to out-based volunteers. In the One-to-One Program, for example, we provide tutoring tips, cross-cultural sensitivity training and information and updates about community resources through monthly newsletters, phone support and open-agenda or theme-based quarterly workshops.

Our basic premise is that if we don't train volunteers well, we are doing a disservice not only to them, but to our clients and community as well. On the other hand, if training is effective and ongoing, the efforts of our volunteer staff will significantly increase the level of service we are able to provide and leave the volunteers with a feeling of satisfaction and pride in the difference they can make.

By training, we demonstrate our commitment to invest the time and effort necessary to insure that the work of the organization is done competently, effectively and professionally, we recognize the importance and value of the volunteer staff that is doing it well, and we reassure the board, the community, paid staff and client consumers that our volunteers are well prepared for the jobs they undertake.

Training sets up volunteers for success and the agency for respect. Isn't that the message we want to send and the goal we want to achieve? ■

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