EFFECTIVE VOLUNTEER GROUP LEADERSHIP

Eight steps to ensure that program objectives are achieved and group members find their experience maximally rewarding

By Michael J. Marx, Ph.D.

Being a volunteer leader is potentially a very important job. It can also be a personally rewarding job if done effectively. Of course, that raises the question: "How does one effectively lead other volunteers?" Admittedly, the answer is: "It depends upon the leader's style, the situation and the type of volunteers." But there are eight steps which have proven to be effective leadership techniques.

Step 1. Build a Good Rapport Among Group Members.

When two people meet for the first time, they will usually explore the fruitfulness of meeting again or developing the relationship further. If their first impressions are good ones, they may end their conversation by arranging to meet again. If their

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first impressions are bad ones, they probably will leave the meeting to chance, if not take steps to avoid it altogether.

When volunteers become members of a group, they do the same thing—test to see whether their membership will be rewarding. And, just as in a personal relationship, first impressions are crucial. That is why it is so important to build a good personal rapport among team members from

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the very beginning. They all must be made to feel comfortable and needed or they might not return.

How do you build rapport among team members? One of the best ways is to begin with a brief "getting acquainted" session. Group members each give a brief description of their background and reasons for volunteering for this committee. After each introduction, other members

are invited to ask casual questions and explore areas of common interest. It is this question-and-answer exchange between each person and the rest of the group that helps build rapport.

When everyone has introduced him/herself, the leader can turn members' attention to a discussion of their expectations for the group. How do individual members want the group to operate in the process of achieving its goals? What problems have they witnessed in other groups they hope this one can avoid? This discussion clarifies member expectations for the leader and vice versa. It also invites members to be open and honest about their interests. When this stage is reached, the group is ready to get down to business.

Step 2. Understand Different Motivations for Helping.

Volunteers are motivated by their expectation that they will achieve certain valued results. Some of these results are personal and some are altruistic. A good leader will discover which results volunteer group members value most and give them assignments from which these results can be realized.

Personal results are the positive things a person feels or learns about him/herself from doing a particular type of volunteer

job. For example, some volunteers want tasks that challenge them to use their existing skills or to develop new skills. Other volunteers want tasks that let them interact with enjoyable people. (A volunteer desiring to run a stop smoking clinic probably values the former more. A volunteer happily stuffing envelopes or answering telephones probably values the latter more.) Usually personal rewards fall into either the achievement or affiliation categories.

Altruistic results are the positive things persons see happen to others as a result of what they do as a volunteer. For example, some volunteers want to offer positive help to cancer patients. Others want to do the same with healthy population groups. Still others want to make the organization run more smoothly. (A volunteer in Service and Rehabilitation is probably in the first category. A volunteer in Public Education is probably in the second. A volunteer in Fund Raising is probably in the third.)

Problems arise when volunteers are assigned to or choose the wrong tasks—those that do not offer the personal or altruistic results they value most. It is important for volunteer leaders to question committee members to find out what personal and altruistic results they want most to achieve. They then try to avoid appointing volunteers to jobs in which they are needed but unmotivated.

Step 3. Make Sure the Group Has or Sets Clear Objectives.

This is extremely important! A team must have specific objectives for which to shoot. The leader's job is to make sure these goals are established and clearly understood by everyone involved. The leader's job is also to get team members committed to these goals so they will exert the amount of effort required for success.

How should groups go about setting objectives? The best way is for the leader to initiate a discussion around the question: "What specific results do we want to achieve in this program, project or activity?" Sometimes these results are already specified, as in the case of smoking clinics, and sometimes they are not. If they are, then the next question for the group is: "What level of results should we try to achieve?" Should we try to get 15 or 25 participants per clinic? Should we get 10 or 15 schools K-6 to adopt our "Early Start to Good Health" program as part of their regular curriculum?

Whenever possible, the committee should set objectives that are results-oriented, specific, quantifiable—and challenging. With these kinds of objectives, a group knows exactly when it is victorious and members can take a personal pleasure from accomplishing a challenging objective.

Step 4. Identifying the Activities Required to Achieve Each Objective.

Once a group knows what it wants to accomplish, then it can decide how to accomplish this. If the objectives are clearly stated in terms of results, the group can conduct brainstorming and discussion sessions to get a list of the different activities required of them. Involving the whole group in this step is very important. Members usually have different backgrounds or experiences so they can suggest all

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kinds of activities or strategies that a leader might not think of alone. In addition, they will often identify activities or strategies they are more interested in pursuing. If there is more than one way to reach a goal, let team members reach it in the way they find most enjoyable or rewarding— as long as it will work.

During a planning meeting, the leader can write a program objective(s) at the top of a flip chart or blackboard and ask group members to list all the different ways this objective could be reached. Then each approach can be taken separately and group members asked to list all the activities that must be performed if each approach is taken. Following this, the group can be asked to establish criteria for selecting the best approach. Then, using this criteria, the group can choose the best alternative. Voting is not recommended. Mutual agreement or consensus is. If the group votes, someone may "lose" instead of being persuaded. And if this happens, s/he may not be as committed to the group's final plan of action.

Step 5. Defining Group Members' Roles

When group members have identified what activities must be carried out to achieve objectives, they can begin to define individual roles. It is usually best to let group members decide for themselves what activities they will take responsibility for. They know their own capabilities and what results they value most. Obviously, then, they are best able to choose the tasks that motivate them most and to avoid the tasks they find unmotivating. If the leader needs to suggest or even "assign" tasks or roles to a volunteer, the information gained in Step 2, "Understanding different motivations for helping," can be used to identify what might satisfy the volunteer most. Occasionally there will be tasks two people want or no one wants. It is the job of the leader to work out acceptable solutions in these instances. Usually the solution in both cases is to divide up the activity so two or more people share responsibility for it.

Once group members have accepted various responsibilities, the next step is for members to indicate what type of support they need from other group members. For example, I may agree to give a presentation to the bank president, but I may need to have arrangements made by the committee member who knows this person. I may agree to do a task if the member who did it last year will meet with me to explain the procedure in advance. Some tasks may even require support from two or more group members. But this is the principle of a team effort. Members have a primary role on some activities and a supportive role on others. But everyone works together.

The final step is to set deadlines for these activities to be performed. Once this is done, all group members have defined the primary and support responsibilities which comprise their role. They also know when their assignments are to be completed. All that is left is for the leader to have this information typed and distributed to all members. This way everyone knows what everyone else is supposed to do and can refer to the role descriptions if questions arise.

Step 6. Monitoring Group Progress by Getting Feedback.

It is impossible to coordinate a team effort unless the leader knows what has been accomplished, has yet to be accomplished, and cannot be accomplished unless there is a change in plans. Inevitably, circumstances change, things go wrong, or expectations are incorrect. When these happen, the strategy has to be changed. To assume that members will report these problems immediately is usually folly. People do not like to admit they are having problems. That is why it is important to establish in advance a procedure to provide regular feedback to the coordinator on what has been accomplished, what changes have occurred, and what problems need to be handled.

This system does not have to be elaborate. A telephone call, memo or postcard may be sufficient. *But members of the group should agree on when and how they will communicate what to whom.* Will they give bimonthly feedback or monthly feedback? Will they always call or just write a note on a pre-stamped, addressed postcard? What should they be sure to mention in their feedback? Should feedback summaries be distributed to everyone at the next meeting or mailed out?

The added advantage of this system is that the leader can provide recognition to volunteers as they progress toward the goal. It takes seconds to send them a memo of congratulations or appreciation. But this small act has a strong positive effect on members' commitment to the group and its objectives. Besides, they earned some recognition, so why wait until the project is over?

Step 7. Redefining Members' Roles When Necessary.

What do you do when certain volunteers are not making the progress the group needs to achieve its objectives? Do you fire them? Do you give them a pep talk? Do you perform their duties yourself? These are all relatively unpleasant solutions for you and for the volunteers. And they are all methods of last resort. Long before you reach this point, try a different solution.

Ask the volunteer if s/he has run into some unexpected barriers or problems and needs team support to overcome them? It is very common for volunteers to experience difficulties they lack (or believe they lack) the ability to solve. If this is the case, perhaps the solution is to get some additional support from other team members who possess the necessary abilities.

If the person does not really want support, then the problem may be a loss of interest or motivation for their particular role. In this case, you can ask the volunteer to look over the role responsibilities of other group members and see where a trade might be possible. Then you can mediate the trade. If this does not work, you can ask the volunteer to redefine his or her role in a way that would be acceptable or enjoyable. Perhaps they can achieve the desired results in a different way.

Always be willing to let group members redefine their roles if this will enhance their involvement and performance and not cause other problems. But ask them to define the changes they need in their role definition; do not do it for them. When changes are defined, then work from there.

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Step 8. Recognize Group Members' Contributions.

Some people seem to believe that a leader should withhold recognition of others' performance to increase the value of his or her praise when it is given. While they may have some basis in truth, for the most part this theory is both manipulative and unsound leadership practice. It is true that volunteers do not need to be recognized every time they do something. But they should *always* sense that their efforts are recognized and appreciated. And a volunteer leader's occasional praise can communicate this, especially if it is done properly.

Although it is important to recognize volunteers' effort and contributions, it is not always easy to do this correctly. In fact, one authoritative source found that 65 percent of all praise or compliments made the recipients embarrassed, uneasy, defensive or created suspicions of an ulterior motive. So if you are going to give group members praise, make sure to follow some simple rules:

1. *Be specific* in your praise. Rather than saying, "Good job, Marsha!" it is better to say, "Marsha, the way you handled that situation showed real tactfulness and a good understanding of the problem."

2. *Praise the act,* not the person. Instead of saying, "You are a great volunteer, Jack," which praises the person, it is better to say, "Jack, the approach you suggested we use worked beautifully."

3. *Be discriminating* with your praise. When some volunteers do more than others due to greater effort, recognize both contributions, but subtly give greater recognition to the greater achievement.

4. *Recognize accomplishments* soon after they happen. Do not necessarily wait until the next time you meet. Telephone or send a note to recognize a volunteer's achievement. If you wait, you could forget or the comment could lose its value.

5. *Be totally sincere.* If you do not believe what you are about to say—do not say it. People are well trained to detect deception and when receiving praise from a leader, they can be particularly sensitive to ulterior motives.

6. The best reward for many volunteers would be a "promotion." Provide rewards that volunteers value. Some volunteers are satisfied with the verbal recognition they receive for doing a good job. Other volunteers are best rewarded by a "promotion" or opportunity to assume a more challenging assignment. Look around your organization for opportunities suitable to members of your team or group.

In summary, being a leader of a group of volunteers can be a very rewarding experience, especially if done properly. The eight steps which have been described in this article are generally sound principles of group leadership.

Take a moment before your group meets to visualize the type of team relationship you want to foster. Then use the suggestions in this article to help you create this relationship. Remember, the goal of volunteer leadership is to facilitate the exchange between the organization and its volunteers. The organization must achieve its mission, and its volunteers must value their experience. With good leadership, everyone can win!