

Volunteers – The Heart of the Community

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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; it’s the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead

Every human being has a circle of influence within their home, among their friends and in their community that contributes in a positive way to society. Many feel that volunteering contributes to society in important ways, especially by improving things for the next generation.

Volunteers are critical to many community programs and organizations. Volunteers help identify needs in the community and provide the manpower for addressing those needs. Without committed volunteers, our community life would be much poorer. The ISOTURE model is an effective way to manage volunteers (Boyce, 1971).

The first step is the **identification** of willing individuals who have the competencies and abilities to fulfill leadership roles. The following questions must be answered:

- What are the needs of the program?
- What jobs need to be done?
- Are position descriptions written for these jobs?

The process of **selection** is crucial because the abilities of volunteers must be matched to the

requirements of the jobs. Performing criminal background checks and interviews and checking with references are becoming standard practices as organizations select volunteers. Here are some tips for recruiting good volunteers:

- Ask!
- Greet the person by name and with eye contact.
- Find out what the interests of the volunteer are.
- Offer the volunteer a choice of jobs.
- Invite the volunteer to visit the office to see the support given by paid staff.
- Provide training opportunities.
- Follow up personal visits with a note, e-mail or telephone call.
- Put the volunteer to work no more than 10 days after he or she agrees to serve.

Orientation should occur very soon after the volunteer has been recruited and selected. Volunteers will need general information about the organization, but most important are the specifics that will help them be successful in their roles. The orientation should cover:

- The mission, vision, values, philosophy, objectives and staffing pattern of the agency or organization;

- The volunteer's job responsibilities and expectations;
- An assessment of the need for future training specific to their role; and
- A printed job description with any adjustments based on the volunteer's need or abilities.

Training will stimulate and prepare volunteers with the knowledge, attitude and skills they need to carry out their roles. For training to be effective, the organization must have the following in place:

- Annual training calendar;
- Basic and advanced training based on job needs;
- A procedure for offering training before the new knowledge or skill is needed;
- Flexibility to allow for individualized instruction at any time;
- Knowledgeable volunteers who serve as instructors; and
- Accurate records on volunteers and their training.

Volunteers want the chance to put their training and skills to use. Keys to success are a supportive environment, and a supervisor and peers who treat all paid and unpaid staff equally.

Volunteers should be given **recognition** to reward excellent performance. Volunteers need to be thanked and feel that their work is meaningful. A sense of satisfaction will result in dedication.

Formal and public ways of recognizing volunteers include:

- Certificates
- Newspaper articles
- Banquets
- Plaques and other gestures

Informal and private ways to recognize include:

- Word of thanks
- Hand-written note
- Pat on the back

Evaluation, and the feedback it provides, are important both to the volunteer and to the organization. By evaluating the volunteer's performance, the supervisor can offer helpful coaching and may discover new leadership potential in the volunteer. Volunteers want to know:

- How they are doing
- What they do well
- How can they improve

They also want an opportunity voice their opinions and make suggestions for improving the program.

There is no doubt that the time invested in volunteer-driven programs is well worth it. The more time a paid staff volunteer coordinator devotes to volunteer management, the greater the organization's capacity to take on additional volunteers. Thus, increasing the investment in volunteer management also increases the benefits derived from volunteers.

References

- Boyce, M.V. 1971. *A systematic approach to leadership development*. Washington, D.C.: USDA.
- Klumpp, M. 2004. *Volunteer Core Competencies*. National Association of Extension 4-H Agents.