

Training Volunteers and Assessing Their Leadership Abilities



Volunteer-based organizations play an integral role in the success of the population and in the communities they serve. These organizations would not be successful agents of change without the hard work and dedication of volunteers. This is why volunteer organizations continue to allocate their limited resources to train these essential volunteer leaders.

Let's Talk Training

It is recommended that volunteer leaders be trained in a method and manner that fits both the needs of the organization and the age and ability of the volunteers (Proctor, 2012; Conners, 2011). The volunteer workforce is made up of individuals of all ages. The content and delivery of volunteer training must be diverse enough to meet the needs of the specific volunteers engaged in the learning experience (Conners, 2011). In terms of values, each generational group can identify with certain ideals that are uniquely their own. This means that, in order for the volunteer training to be successful, trainers must learn to communicate in a way each group will understand and identify with (Conners, 2011).

The nature of a volunteer organization lends itself to 1-day, content-heavy trainings. However, this structure may not be the most beneficial for the volunteer participants (Morrison, 2017). Instead, training should be broken down into a series of shorter instruction times that focus on the goals of the organization; in this way, key points can be thoroughly reviewed and built upon (Morrison, 2017). In addition, opportunities for volunteer leaders to collaborate with paid staff during training can increase volunteer trust in the process and buy-in to the mission and goals of the organization.

Let's Talk Evaluation

Leadership assessment of the volunteer is just as important as the initial training. Assessment and evaluation are imperative to the growth of the leader and the success of the organization as a whole (Morrison, 2017). Relying on a one-shot work evaluation or a stand-alone peer evaluation may not sufficiently gauge the performance of volunteer leaders within the organization (Morrison, 2017). For this reason, practitioners should employ a 360-degree evaluation of the volunteer's leadership ability (Culp et al., 2009; Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004). To conduct this type of evaluation, multiple people from all levels of the organization should provide feedback on the performance of the volunteer leader. The four steps for designing and implementing a 360-degree evaluation (Nowack, Hartley, & Bradley, 1999) include:

Step 1: Define what to evaluate and measure

When appropriate, the evaluation should employ multiple measures, such as surveys, focus groups, observations, and interviews.

Step 2: Design the instrument(s) by which to measure volunteers

The instrument(s) should be carefully developed and tested for the intended outcome.

Step 3: Gather data

To ensure maximum participation, provide instruments in multiple formats.

Step 4: Analyze data and summarize results

Provide a summary of the results to the volunteers and other stakeholders in the organization.

Let's Talk Recognition

Just as evaluation is a necessity for developing great volunteer leaders, so, too, is recognition. Volunteers who strive to lead their peers toward the goals of the organization deserve recognition. Recognition can come in many shapes and sizes, depending on the resources available and reason for acknowledgement. A simple thank-you note or gift card can be just the reassurance needed to convince volunteer leaders of their importance to the success of the organization.

Let's Talk Big Picture

The success or failure of volunteer-based organizations falls into the hands of the volunteer workforce. Organizations should not dismiss the opportunity for volunteer-leader development; in fact, they should consider approaching it differently than before. With purposeful volunteer-leader training and evaluation, the benefits to the volunteer leaders, the organization, and the community they serve are limitless. These benefits include increased volunteer pride and retention, decreased stress on the organization's paid staff, and increased organizational outreach and social change in the community.

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