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Volunteerism
The Electronic Journal of the Volunteer Community

Training Designs
Vol II, Issue 1, Fall 2001

Six Training Exercises to Enhance Recruitment of Volunteers By Betty Stallings

It is difficult to isolate the topic of recruitment because its ultimate success is intertwined with the development of good volunteer assignments (the product you are selling in recruitment) and with having an organization prepared to utilize volunteers' time and talents effectively when they arrive. It is important, however, to examine how potential volunteers are invited to consider becoming a part of your organization, particularly if this function is not centralized. Even if most volunteers go through a central recruitment process, all staff and volunteers within an organization are a significant part of its informal volunteer recruitment team. Thus, the principles of recruitment should be useful for staff/volunteers whether they carry out this function themselves or are ambassadors for the program.

Often when staff or volunteers of an organization are involved in recruitment, they are so anxious to fill slots or add to the membership that little care is given to finding the right person(s). Everyone can relate to the impact on the volunteer and the organization when the wrong person is recruited (i.e., the volunteer feels incompetent and/or unfulfilled, leading to performance and retention problems; the organization does not get the job done well and builds resentment or resistance to further utilization of volunteers).

The following 6 recruitment training exercises can be adapted for use with:

- the staff of an organization,
- leadership volunteers,
- membership/outreach committees, or
- a group of volunteer program administrators.

The purpose of each exercise is to change the mindset of participants as they reach out for new volunteers and/or to give them tools to aid in that effort.

Six Training Exercises to Enhance Recruitment of Volunteers

1. Remembering a time when you were recruited to be a volunteer/member.
2. Finishing the puzzle – “Don’t put a piece in the wrong spot!”
3. What factors might be keeping people from becoming a volunteer/joining?
4. Writing a recruitment message that speaks to the right person.
5. Using a marketing strategy to locate the best candidates.
6. Demonstrating persuasive, effective oral presentations to recruit new volunteers/members.

Training Exercise #1:

Remembering a time when you were recruited to be a volunteer/member.

One of the best methods to lead into a productive discussion of recruitment techniques is to ask participants to:

- recall a time when they were recruited to be a volunteer/member,
- remember the technique used,
- reconstruct how they felt about the form of recruitment used, their initial response to the “invitation,” and
- articulate what they learned about good/bad recruitment techniques through that experience.

Have the group divide into dyads to share their experiences and facilitate some key learning about good recruitment techniques discovered by participants.

To **add some fun** to the exercise, you might ask whether anyone has (or has been) recruited by any of the following techniques and what were resulting feelings or responses:

- **Bait and Switch.** (What they tell you up-front is not the REAL story on the position or organization.)
- **There’s nothing to it!** (If there is nothing to it, why am I such a good candidate?)
- **We’re desperate, anyone will do!** (Why doesn’t anyone want to do this job or join this group?)
- **Cast your net and see who swims in.** (Using sign-up sheets and asking for anyone who wants to do a job will leave you stuck with the one who raises his/her hand or signs on the sheet of paper!)
- **You’re a CPA. We could use one of “you”!** (We really don’t care what you want to contribute, we just know we are desperate for someone to be treasurer!)
- **We have lots of needs...Just stop by and help out!** (This may work in the forming stages of an organization’s life, but soon people want to know exactly what is expected and want to have their time well used.)
- **I’m tired of doing it...Anyone else want to do it?** (Think about it. Do you want your tired and weary out seeking their replacements?)
- **It’s your turn to be secretary.** (No one wants this job so everyone needs to take a turn – whether s/he is qualified or not!)

The facilitator should ask:

- Have participants had experiences with other ineffective (and demeaning) methods?
- What is common in all of these experiences?

The critical response to surface is that the recruiter in these methods is not interested in the volunteer’s interest, abilities, needs, or self-esteem. They are only concerned about filling a position.

All recruitment efforts should honor the position to be filled and the person being recruited to hold that position.

This brief, lively exercise allows people to laugh at themselves and at how they have responded to similar techniques but leaves them with the very definitive feeling that these methods are generally demeaning to volunteers and often end up recruiting the wrong person!

Training Exercise #2:

Finishing the puzzle. Don't put a piece in the wrong spot!

My favorite exercise to enhance recruitment involves a jig saw puzzle with many of the pieces missing. It is surrounded by people who can presumably fit into the puzzle. (See puzzle right after this exercise for use as a handout or transparency.)

The facilitator shows the transparency and asks participants in the training:

→ **“How many of you have ever put together a jigsaw puzzle?”**

→ **“How many of you became tired and wanted to get it completed as soon as possible?”**

At this point stay with the metaphor of the puzzle and have the group imagine that they are tired and want to get the pieces put into the puzzle and move on.

→ **“How many of you have ever had this happen?”** (You, as facilitator, should act as though you are trying to push a piece into the puzzle, obviously the wrong piece.)

→ **What happened to that piece?**

Possible group answers:

- The piece gets its edges frayed.
- The piece pops out.
- The pieces around it get their edges frayed.
- When I try to put the piece in the place it belongs, it is already damaged.
- You know something is wrong when you look at the whole puzzle.
- The piece that should have been in that place will not fit comfortably now.

After you have gotten these and other sentiments out, ask the group to imagine that the puzzle is their nonprofit organization or membership group and see what they discover when you put the wrong person(s) into a slot in the organization:

- The person does not perform well because they do not fit in.
- The staff working around them get upset as this person cannot fill the role needed for that slot.
- People that might have filled the position have found another spot, in another organization.
- The poorly placed volunteer now has a bad experience with volunteering and may chose not to volunteer again even if eventually offered the right spot – his/her “edges are frayed.”

The other great learning with this puzzle is that it is far better to leave positions unfilled for a while and take the needed time to find the right people to fill them. Otherwise, as a volunteer leader or volunteer program administrator, you will spend your time in crisis management as people leave their positions, staffs resist utilizing volunteers, and the potential of a great partnership between volunteers and staff or volunteer/volunteer is never realized.

As the facilitator you might give your participants a copy of the puzzle to hang in their office. It will be a marvelous visual reminder of why one should not rush to fill a slot with the wrong person.

Training Exercise # 3:

What are the barriers keeping volunteers from responding to your recruitment efforts?

Prior to developing your recruitment campaign for an increasing number of members or volunteers, you may wish to engage the group in an exercise to help sensitize them to issues and barriers that might be hampering their recruitment efforts. These barriers may be personal (time, childcare needs, etc.) or organizational (location of facility, costs involved in volunteering, type of client served, nature of current membership or volunteer corps).

Group Activity

Step 1: Using a flipchart or chalkboard, create a simple chart as the group brainstorms barriers as to why people might not respond positively to opportunities to volunteer with your organization. Start with organizational barriers and then move on to personal ones. Here's an example:

Barriers to volunteering here:

- ✓ People's limited time
- ✓ Costs related to volunteering
- ✓ Distant location of organization
- ✓ Need for flexibility, regular commitment is difficult
- ✓ Type of client that organization serves (homeless, mentally ill, prisoners)
- ✓ Organization has a majority of long standing volunteers

Step 2: After identifying these, go back and add a second column of possible responses or actions your organization might be able to take to address or counter the barriers. Such as:

Barriers to volunteering here:

Organization's Potential Response:

- ✓ People's limited time

Develop more short term, episodic positions

| | |
|---|--|
| ✓ Costs related to volunteering | Offer to cover expenses |
| ✓ Distant location of organization | Offer job opportunities that could be done from one's office or home |
| ✓ Need for flexibility, regular commitment is difficult | Design a back-up substitute system for volunteers |
| ✓ Type of client that organization serves (homeless, mentally ill, prisoners) | Brainstorm types of people who care about who care about your clients and design a targeted recruitment effort to reach them |
| ✓ Organization has a majority of long standing volunteers | Discuss the long-term impact of entrenched organizations where new volunteers do not "fit in" |

Debrief of exercise:

Discuss the possible strategies the group has brainstormed. This may also be the perfect time to suggest that a task force assist you in more deeply addressing these barriers and designing action steps to diminish them. This exercise should broaden participants' understanding of the many factors influencing successful recruitment.

Training Exercise #4: Using a marketing strategy to locate and reach out to the best candidates.

This simple exercise is particularly useful for volunteer program administrators or others within an organization who are responsible for seeking qualified volunteers to fill positions. It utilizes principles of marketing, taking into account the needs of the organization as well as the interests and needs of volunteers. The exercise helps individuals approach recruitment - not from a list of techniques, but rather from a strategic marketing approach. The exercise consists of a series of questions. A form for your use is located at the end of this exercise.

To utilize this exercise most effectively, the facilitator can ask a participant to share a volunteer position for which it is particularly challenging to recruit applicants. The facilitator initially explores the position by asking questions that should elicit information that would be on a typical job request form or job description. This would be followed by a discussion of the skills and qualities needed to perform the work.

Once this is clearly understood, the participants can break into smaller groups and attempt to come up with answers to recruitment questions. At the end of a 15-minute discussion, each group can share their strategies for recruiting people who are potential candidates for the position.

Once the job description and the skills and qualities needed to fill the position are clear, participants discuss the following questions related to developing a recruitment strategy to fill the challenging position.

- What types of people are most apt to have these qualities?
(age, gender, educational level, experiences, types of people who have previously made the best volunteers in this position.)

- What are the best sources for finding my needed volunteer(s)?
(service clubs, corporations, colleges, youth clubs, etc.)

- What techniques or methods would be most appropriate to gain access to them?
(friend or colleague, speak to Rotary, talk to classes at the local college, PSA on a teen radio station, etc.)

- What benefits will these volunteers receive by doing this job?
(i.e., What exchange are we offering them? Work experience? Networking? opportunities, making a difference?)

→ Who is the best person to do the recruitment and why?

This exercise is particularly helpful for people who are beginning to design recruitment strategies. Once they have used the form to assist them in thinking through possible strategies, it becomes a natural approach to recruitment.

The other major outcome (learning) of this exercise is that it demonstrates the power of several people brainstorming ways to approach the recruitment of this position. If you do this by yourself, you will not have the insights, experiences and thoughts of folks that can take you in a new, productive direction. You can easily demonstrate this by having each individual try to design a strategy for recruiting for the same challenging position and then put people in groups of 3-5 people and compare the quality of the end product!

Training Exercise #5:

The Recruitment Message: What do we say once we are speaking to the right audience?

Trainers and authors such as Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch have illustrated the importance of including key elements in a recruitment message. Whether you are writing a promotional recruitment piece or giving a speech at a community club, a good recruitment message contains 3 essential elements. Prior to *telling* people what they are, a facilitator should ask the participants what *they believe* they are.

The key elements are:

- The Statement of Need
- How the Volunteer Can Help
- The Potential Benefits to the Volunteer

The worksheet for this exercise is found at the conclusion of this article.

The Statement of Need

The critical mistake made by so many recruiters is that they list the need(s) of the organization rather than the need(s) of the clients they serve. The difference is quite dramatic and is illustrated by an example prepared for me by Special Olympics.

The need in terms of the organization:

Special Olympics needs softball coaches for the spring league.

The need in terms of the client:

They have gloves, bats and softballs...but no coach. 75 boys and girls with mental retardation are waiting for a coach. Don't let them strike out. Join our Special Olympics Team!

How the Volunteer Can Help Solve This Problem

This is the section of the recruitment message that states the nature of the work that volunteers can do to help resolve the problem, whether hungry clients, battered children, lack of cultural arts in the schools, etc. The facilitator should suggest that use of the word "You" rather than third person "Volunteers" makes the message considerably more powerful. For example: *Your* family can adopt a senior resident.

The Potential Benefits to the Volunteer

This section of the message shares what benefits are inherent in this job. If it is a generic recruitment message, include general benefits of working at your organization such as reduced prices at a gift shop, free entrance to a show or a museum, or the intrinsic benefit of knowing you are helping to eradicate some critical problem. If you are recruiting for a specific position, you would make the benefits more specific, such as training, networking opportunities, etc.

Before asking participants to write a recruitment message, remind them that the three elements might be positioned differently in their message. So, if you want to recruit teenagers for a volunteer activity, you might start with the benefits to them...for obvious reasons!

Writing a Recruitment Message

To get the juices flowing, you might wish to share one of several recruitment messages that were written for different organizations and causes. Ask the group to see if each one has incorporated the 3 elements effectively. (I generally share some good examples and some that they might be able to improve.)

Examples:

Family Recruitment Message

Many elderly in our community live lonely stretches without a warm smile or embrace. Your family could volunteer to adopt one of these senior residents. The members of your family will experience some rare quality time together while giving someone's grandma or grandpa a real lift.

Battered Women's Shelter Recruitment Message

Every 15 seconds a woman is beaten in this country. Every 15 seconds her partner shares in her loss of self-esteem. Their children are learning how to behave in relationships. You can help stop the cycle of violence and learn valuable communication skills by volunteering with Battered Women's Alternatives. In the next 15 seconds, you can make a difference.

Activity Directions

Ask participants to look over their written recruitment material or brochures to see if these effectively incorporate the three benefits above and/or ask them to write a recruitment message for a position in their organization. After giving them sufficient time (approximately 10 minutes), ask some of them to share their message with the group. Have the group critique them to determine if they have incorporated the three critical elements and if the messages are compelling and appealing. It is truly amazing to experience the group's helpful critique.

Training Exercise # 6:

Activity to demonstrate persuasive, effective oral presentations to recruit new volunteers/members

If you are training a group of potential recruiters who will be speaking on behalf of your organization, try the following exercise which I developed while teaching volunteer management at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

Write a brief presentation to recruit volunteers from a group of Rotarians, a church group or any other designated group you identify. Write a 1-2 minute talk on the benefits of volunteering for your organization. Make 3-4 copies of it and give it to that number of participants. The only difference in their assignment is how they are to deliver it.

Each talk uses the exact same words; the instructions on delivery differ dramatically. **Get creative!** Here are four sample instructions:

- Make no eye contact and mumble most of the words.
- Speak very fast and sound breathless or nervous.
- Speak very softly and quietly, with no emotion.
- Relax, develop good eye contact, and tell your story with obvious feeling.

After everyone speaks, ask for feedback. You will get all the obvious feedback about distracting, annoying things people can do, unintentionally, when they speak, but, *incredibly*, often no one notices that they are the exact same speeches (unless you don't have good actors). Thus, the point you make with great impact is that it is **not what you say** that is nearly as lasting as **how you say it**. This can be a memorable exercise to use as part of your training for volunteer recruiters.

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About the Author

Betty Stallings, M.S.W., is an international trainer, consultant, author and keynote speaker, specializing in volunteerism, nonprofit fundraising, board development and leadership. She has written many popular books including: *Getting to Yes in Fund Raising*, *A Resource Kit for Managers of Volunteers*, *Training Busy Staff to Succeed With Volunteers* and *The 55 Minute in-Service Training Series*. She has also authored "Families as Volunteers," a chapter from the book, *Managing Volunteer Diversity*; an article for *USIA Electronic Journal*, "Volunteers From the Workplace," and a booklet entitled *Volunteer Program Assessment Guide*. She has four training videos: *Volunteer Trends*, *Recruitment*, *Recognition and Risk Management*. She has recently co-authored a book entitled *How to Produce Fabulous Fundraising Events: Reap Remarkable Returns with Minimal Effort*. She received the 1999 AVA Harriet Naylor Award for Distinguished Service to the field of volunteerism.

Formerly, Betty was the Founder and 13 year Executive Director of the Valley Volunteer Center in Pleasanton, California. While at the Center she initiated such programs as the Women's Re-entry Internship, Career-Links, Borrow-An-Expert, Project Manage, The Corporate Volunteer Council. Several of these programs have served as national models of volunteer utilization. While directing the Center, Betty obtained funding and supervised innovative research on volunteer management and this resulted in the

publication of the book, *At the Heart-The New Volunteer Challenge to Community Agencies*.

Seeking resources for nonprofit organizations became Betty's hallmark while directing the Valley Volunteer Center. She obtained hundreds of grants from major foundations and corporations, initiated successful signature fundraising events and raised financial and in-kind resources from individuals and small businesses in the community, totaling millions of dollars.

Currently, Betty is an instructor in university nonprofit and extension programs, a popular trainer for state, national and international conferences on volunteerism and fundraising, and a trainer and consultant to many nonprofit organizations, corporations and public sector programs around the United States and Canada. Organizations that utilize Betty's training designs include the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, the National Special Olympics, and the National Parks Service.

Betty's rich background in human services and volunteer management, her broad-based experience as a volunteer and fundraiser, and her humor, vitality and inspiration have made her a sought-after trainer, consultant and speaker throughout the nation.

You may contact Betty directly to order her books and other products and/or to obtain information about her seminars, retreat facilitation or materials development for nonprofit organizations, churches and public sponsored programs. She can be reached at the addresses and telephone number listed below:

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Books by Betty Stallings

Training Busy Staff to Succeed (available at <http://energizeinc.com/total/tra.html>)

How to Produce Fabulous Fundraisers (available at <http://energizeinc.com/total/howt.html>)

Preparing a Recruitment Message – Worksheet

→ The Statement of the client need

→ How the volunteer can help

→ Benefits of the job

Recruitment message developed from above information: