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Building Organizational Commitment to the Volunteer Program

by Betty B. Stallings

This training design offers a complete strategy for fostering organizational commitment to the volunteer program. It is organized as follows:

Section I - The In Depth View

- Is My Organization Committed to the Volunteer Program?
- Assessment of Volunteer Program and Staff Training Needs (*pdf file*)

Section II - Examples and Exercises

- Introduction and Tips for Exercises
- Volunteer Program Commitment Strategies Worksheet

Exercises

1. Building a Vision, or "What if?"
2. Volunteer Challenges and Opportunities
3. When You Were a Volunteer...
4. Building Board Commitment to a Volunteer Program
5. Sharing Results From a Volunteer Program Assessment
6. Membership Organization's Look into the Mirror
7. Involving Staff in Designing Volunteer Jobs
8. Building Staff Commitment in Agencies Served By Volunteer Centers

Section III - Forum for Sharing

Sharing Your Experiences (*Please return to this section!*)

2. After all the visions are expressed and recorded, the next question to explore is: "What are the realistic barriers keeping us from creating this vision?" If you have done a survey previous to the retreat, you can give out information tallied from it. If not, you want to encourage all participants (staff, board members, administration, volunteer leaders and manager, etc.) to share concerns, first in a small group and then reporting out to the larger group. Encourage real honesty so you can see what problems, real or perceived, are standing in the way of the vision created in question #1. You might hear all of the familiar problems:
 - "Volunteers don't stay."
 - "I don't have time."
 - "I don't know how to supervise volunteers."

Receive all concerns with respect, for they are what must be addressed to improve the program.

3. After recording what is standing in the way of our success, the obvious last question is: "What can we do to diminish these problems so that we can get closer to our ideal?" Frequently the facilitator might have time to brainstorm some ideas for solutions to only one issue. I find that this is the perfect time to have a task force selected. The task force will commit to several sessions to determine a strategy or plan to address the most critical problems keeping the organization from reaching its ideal. This will have the advantage of having staff and others more involved in the success of "our" volunteer program.

In many cases, I have seen this exercise become the turning point of a program. Participants who have previously been overwhelmed with problems have never had the opportunity of exploring "what could be" and then be invited to be part of the solution.

Exercise #2 Volunteer Challenges and Opportunities

This exercise is fun and effective to use within an organization or with a mixed group of organizations exploring commitment issues. The exercise is quite simple.

You ask half of the small groups to spend 10-15 minutes answering the question:

What are the challenges of working with volunteers?

while the other small groups are answering the question:

What are the opportunities gained by working with volunteers?

The way I like to debrief this exercise is to have those who listed the challenges to share first. The facilitator or scribe lists them, then asks those who have been focusing on opportunities to brainstorm how to deal with the challenges mentioned.

Those who have been focusing on opportunities are always challenged to give good direction and response to these concerns. The facilitator can then work from the group's ideas to solve these challenges.

An example: One of the challenges is that today's volunteers generally want short-term opportunities. The opportunity people see this as a chance to design some new positions to involve people on a short-term and flexible basis. It also generally surfaces a discussion on the importance of creating an excellent short-term experience so volunteers will want to return for other opportunities within the organization.

What begins to happen is that participants see that nearly every challenge is an opportunity for the organization to change and improve their program. I have led this activity with a room full of 200 organizations and within a small staff who have had some folks who are committed and some who are not committed to the program. By having staff and volunteers be the key players in this exercise, your chances of moving people forward increase tremendously over *telling* them why they should see volunteers as opportunities.

The exercise can be great fun, and it creates lots of good energy. It becomes a test to see if the challenge folks can stump the opportunity thinkers!

Exercise #3 When You Were a Volunteer.....

This exercise can take on many variations and be used for skills-based as well as commitment-focused training. Basically, you ask participants to recall experiences that they have had as volunteers and use the information to explore why certain experiences were or were not successful for them.

When I am working with an audience that may be demonstrating a lack of commitment to the volunteer program or may be quite unsophisticated with regard to the skills of supervision, delegation, etc., I generally find that I get great involvement and ultimately some buy-in when I ask such questions as:

What was your motivation for working as a volunteer at a chosen organization and what kept you coming back?

or

What caused you to stop volunteering?

Feeding off of the information shared is a great way to begin dealing with commitment to a volunteer program. If participants have had negative personal experiences with

volunteer efforts, they generally are not committed to volunteer programs nor may they have the competency, since they did not experience good modeling in their own experience with it. On some occasions when I have used this exercise, I have gotten the group to see that when volunteer programs are not well-managed, volunteers do not generally have a good experience. It is a great segue into getting them to consider potential and then seek some competency training to prepare them to work well with volunteers in their organization.

On several occasions, I had the group play bingo, featuring a mocked-up bingo card indicating types of volunteer positions in the squares. The participants try to get their squares signed by other staff or volunteers who have participated in each type of volunteering. The ultimate goal is to have the group realize that many of them have been volunteers. With that awareness, the facilitator can begin to explore participants' experience with volunteering.

With an all-volunteer group that is having difficulty attracting new membership, I have them visualize a new person joining their group and have them discuss the experience that new volunteer might have. Issues that impact new volunteer commitment to a membership organization may surface and lead to a healthy discussion of barriers that may be discouraging outsiders from joining.

Exercise #4 - Building Board Commitment to a Volunteer Program

The topic of volunteers is rarely, if ever, discussed at a board meeting but it is important that board members are involved and supportive of this crucial aspect of the organization. A proactive leader of the volunteer program cannot wait for an invitation, but rather needs to be assertive in gaining the board's commitment to the volunteer program. The outcomes of a meeting with the board have the potential of greatly improving the board's understanding and investment in the volunteer program. Continued follow-up and information-sharing will be necessary to keep board members focused and action-oriented.

A good exercise to do with board members is to involve them in the creation of a philosophy statement for the utilization of volunteers within the organization. Having the board reflect on this will, undoubtedly, give rise to some discussion of commitment and what that entails with regard to board support of volunteers within the organization.

A helpful exercise is to ask board members, in small groups, to brainstorm their general beliefs about volunteering. You may determine one of several situations is present:

1. The board and executive director's view of volunteer involvement, whether limited or very expansive, is aligned with the general organizational use of volunteers.

2. There is some difference between the organization's view of the value of volunteers and the current utilization of volunteers.
3. There is a great variance among board members regarding their value of volunteers and thus lack of clarity and support in this area of governance.

With this awareness, the facilitator can respond in ways that will ultimately build further commitment and understanding of the program. This exercise generally leads to a discussion of current and potential utilization of volunteers and gives an opportunity for board education that can produce commitment and active support.

It may also be helpful to lead the board in a process of visioning about the potential of a great volunteer program. As with staff and leadership volunteers, if they are excited about potential, there is a good opportunity to discuss what needs to happen to bring the vision closer to reality. And even more important, it can lead to what their role as board members is in making this happen.

(The expanded version of exercises with Board members is available in the *55-Minute Training Series*, "The Board's Role in Leading and Supporting the Volunteer Program." See [?Uid=&nextPage=win2001/orgcommitfull4_1.php3](http://e-volunteerism.com/win2001/orgcommitfull4_1.php3)">Resources listed in this article.)

Exercise #5- Sharing Information from a Volunteer Program Assessment

After conducting an assessment of your volunteer program, you are in the best position to influence and enhance commitment and competency within your organization as it partners with volunteers. Making the results available in summary written form is useful, but if you want the information to truly help build commitment, you must have some type of retreat or, minimally, time at a staff meeting to review the results and discuss suggestions for improvement.

For purposes of building commitment, I would report the percentages of volunteers, staff, administrators/board and clients that felt certain ways about the program. If the report is highly positive, it will tend to defuse those who are most critical, but if there are obvious places of concern, it will give the entire staff a chance to be engaged in discussing how to improve "our" program. We all know that involvement is the cornerstone of commitment, so by allowing their participation in the assessment and then taking it seriously, you have moved forward in building buy-in to the program.

The retreat will report on the assessment findings but it should start with some type of visioning activity as mentioned in Exercise #1 ([?Uid=&nextPage=win2001/orgcommitfull2b_1.php3](http://e-volunteerism.com/win2001/orgcommitfull2b_1.php3)">Building a Vision) so that the group gets energized around potential. Initiating the session by presenting the results may not create the kind of energy that it will take to improve the program. Again, a task force might be assigned to work on some strategies to diminish these barriers or to

design the next year's plan for enhancing volunteer involvement in the organization.

Exercise #6 - Membership Organization's Look into the Mirror

Many membership organizations today are finding that their members are showing a lack of commitment as illustrated through a lack of interest in attending meetings, reluctance to hold leadership positions, and a lack of interest in changing the organization to be more attractive to others. As with most groups, it is easier for members to blame some external trend or entity than, to take a good hard look at themselves.

When I am asked by membership groups to help grow their membership ranks, I suggest that first they have a retreat and take that good hard look at themselves. This may be painful, but simply teaching recruitment or leadership development techniques will not be successful in an organization that is not committed to its future, but rather to its traditions.

When I lead such a retreat, I first want to bring people back to their vision of why they exist and make certain that their mission is still an exciting draw for them. Also, we can explore whether this mission is attractive for others that are not part of the existing association. Instead of starting with organizational issues, focus on mission and see if there is energy and interest in accomplishing what they had initially set out to do. If there is, they need to feel that spark and re-commitment, because that is what will carry them through the rough job of re-inventing how they accomplish their mission.

After participants have built some energy around their original mission or done a re-framing of it, it is time for them to look at their structure and ask basic questions about whether they have a system in place that will support that mission. If no one will take the office of president or chairperson, the question is "why not?" Each person needs to privately answer the question and then have an honest sharing. If there is an issue of people resigning their membership, the questions are "why?" and "what do we need to do to be more inviting, more engaging, more flexible?"

Sometimes a group will conclude that they are committed to their mission, but want to carry it out just as they have done previously. If that is the conclusion, they have, at least, made a conscious decision to allow the organization to flounder or possibly eventually to go out of business. On the other hand, if the group feels enough commitment to building the organization's future, they may make the conscious decision to change and begin to discuss what that will need to look like.

Exercise #7 - Involving Staff in Designing Volunteer Jobs

With permission, I am sharing Ivan Scheier's, Job Factor Process which comes from Chapter 3 in his book, *Building Staff/Volunteer Relations*, available in the Energize Online Bookstore at <http://energizeinc.com/total/buis.html>

So much of staff resistance comes from the lack of true involvement in designing jobs for volunteers, a process that is tremendously helpful when it involves staff in a conscious process to release some of the work they do. This exercise also encourages staff to think of the mission of the organization that currently is not accomplished due to lack of time or skills among the staff.

I became a tremendous advocate of this process when I first used it with my own volunteer center staff and leadership volunteers 20 years ago. I continue to feel that it is one of the best exercises to use when your goal is to build commitment to the staff/volunteer partnership. It quite literally changed how people resources for my organization would be utilized in the future. The process validated overworked and overwhelmed staff and gave them permission and support to let go of some of their tasks and find the best-qualified volunteers to perform that function.

These are steps to follow in my slightly modified version of this timeless activity:

- Ask staff and leadership volunteers to list all of the duties in their jobs
- Ask participants to put an asterisk next to tasks which:
 - They feel unqualified to perform
 - They would rather not be doing
 - They never have time to perform but know are important
- Have staff list the things they would like to do but at the present time do not have the time or skills to perform
- Write all tasks that surfaced in these two exercises on flip charts around the room
- In a brainstorming session, have staff list on flip charts the new or expanded programs, services, etc., they would like the organization to be performing
- Have all participants study the flip charts lining the room that list released work and visions of potential and ask them to develop some new, interesting, creative, potential volunteer jobs from the released tasks and dreams of the staff
- Have a small committee refine the jobs and develop potential job descriptions

Exercise #8 - Building Staff Commitment in Agencies Served by Volunteer Centers

I add this final exercise, since it was one I used often when I was frustrated with my attempt to build volunteer program commitment with agencies we served.

My most successful attempts occurred when I called together similar organizations (e.g., educational, libraries, cities, etc.), I carefully combined organizations that had excellent volunteer/staff commitment with others that were struggling.

I was the facilitator and simply asked questions of the representatives of the groups. (I had previously tried to provide training on building staff commitment and realized that it was falling on deaf ears. Without saying it directly, agency participants were saying: "What did I know? I was not struggling in their setting.") By putting similar groups

together, suddenly that argument or barrier was gone. Some of the groups had worked through issues of building commitment and could share methods they had used that had been successful within their organizations. Although most of the suggestions were ones I had previously mentioned, they heard them with new ears, and I began to notice progress.

And so, I learned the big lesson that we do not need to take it upon ourselves to teach people commitment, but rather we need to strategize ways that will bring them to this place themselves. We need to understand the issues standing in the way and guide the organization in a process to diminish these barriers.

Training Resources for Building Staff Commitment

Although there are numerous books that refer to the need for building commitment to a volunteer program, few books give training exercises to use within the organization.

The following are special resources from which I derive training exercises or that have training examples on this topic.

Hawthorne, Nan. **Building Better Relationships with Volunteers: Training Manual.** Sound Volunteer Management, Seattle, Washington, 1997. (order at Cybervpm.com)

Kinlaw, Robert C. **Coaching for Commitment.** Pfeiffer and Co., 1989. (order at Amazon.com)

Scheier, Ivan. **Building Staff/Volunteer Relations,** Energize, Inc., 1993. (Order in the Energize Online Bookstore at <http://energizeinc.com/total/buis.html>)

Stallings, Betty. **Training Busy Staff to Succeed with Volunteers.** Building Better Skills, Pleasanton, CA, second edition, 1998. (Order in the Energize Online Bookstore at <http://energizeinc.com/total/tra.html>)

Stallings, Betty. **The 55-Minute Training Series** (10 Modules). Building Better Skills, Pleasanton, CA, 1996. (Order in the Energize Online Bookstore at <http://energizeinc.com/total/55.html>)

Commitment Check List

The commitment check sheet list on the next page can be effectively utilized with staff and leadership volunteers to help determine why an organization has some commitment issues.

Next Training:

Exploring Volunteer Trends for Use in Trainings

Trends in volunteering are greatly impacting an organization's effort to effectively and creatively carry out its mission, the Spring 20001 issue of *e-Volunteerism* (<http://e-volunteerism.com>) will share an exercise in exploring volunteer trends that can be used in training an organization's staff and leadership volunteers. It educates agency personnel on the changes, helps to identify the challenges and opportunities of these changes and leads to a discussion on the adaptations needed to keep an outstanding, cutting-edge volunteer program.

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 obtain information about her seminars, retreat facilitation or materials development for nonprofit organizations, churches and public sponsored programs. Many of Betty's books and training materials are available in the Energize Online Bookstore and are listed below. She can be reached at the addresses and telephone number listed below:

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Some 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>

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From “Training Designs” by Betty Stallings

Building Staff Commitment to the Volunteer Program

This list is adapted from material from Dennis Kinlaw, *Coaching for Commitment*, Pfeiffer and Co., 1989

Clarity	Yes	No	Needs Work
Do staff understand what is expected of them concerning the management of volunteers in our agency?			
Are staff responsibilities concerning volunteers outlined in their job description?			
Is the purpose and philosophy of the volunteer department part of staff orientation?			
Is effective working with volunteers a criterion for staff performance appraisal and promotion?			
Competence	Yes	No	Needs Work
Do staff understand the skills and basic theories of volunteer management?			
Do staff have the necessary skills to do the job expected?			
Is training in volunteer management currently available to staff?			
Are staff given the necessary tools to get the job done successfully?			
• administrative support			

· adequate time to do what's expected			
· equipment			
· print materials (forms, manuals, brochures)			
· current books, periodicals, videotapes			
Influence	Yes	No	Needs Work
Have the staff been involved in the planning of the volunteer opportunities?			
Is there encouragement for innovation and creativity in implementation of volunteer activities?			
Are staff asked for feedback on volunteer performance and projects during implementation?			
Are staff involved in the evaluation meetings held at the completion of projects where volunteers were active?			
Appreciation	Yes	No	Needs Work
Are staff formally recognized for outstanding work with volunteers?			
Are staff informally recognized for their involvement with volunteers or the volunteer department?			
Is there a staff appreciation day at the agency?			
When volunteers are recognized, are staff partners also identified?			