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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!*)

Section IV - Bibliography

Training Resources for Building Staff Commitment

Section V - Quarterly Gem

Commitment Check List

Section VI - Preview of Next Issue

Exploring Volunteer Trends for Use in Trainings

An important question to explore before conducting any staff training program is: "How committed is my organization to the volunteer program?" Often in my workshops, administrators of volunteer programs express confidence that their organization is totally supportive. However, after examining signs of possible resistance to their volunteer program, many see that their organization could definitely improve its commitment to volunteer/staff partnerships. Addressing this resistance immediately can improve the potential for success in all your staff trainings. This training design will help you in this endeavor.

Indications of Resistance

Sample indications that commitment may be lacking include:

- No written philosophy for the engagement of volunteers in the organization
- Non-management position for the person overseeing the volunteer program
- Volunteers leaving prior to the conclusion of their commitment
- No training and/or recognition for staff who supervise volunteers in the course of their work at the organization
- Unresolved issues that job security may be threatened by volunteer replacement
- Fears that volunteers will be utilized as justification for reducing a budget
- Lack of interesting volunteer positions available

Determining the Level of Resistance

It is vital in approaching this topic that you surface the barriers that your staff and leadership volunteers have to partnering with volunteers. They must understand that you are sincerely interested, not judgmental, about their concerns, barriers and issues in their work with volunteers. Pretending that these are not valid concerns or simply giving pat answers will only deepen the apprehension.

To determine the level of resistance in the volunteer program, I would suggest that you do one or a combination of the following:

- Conduct a customer survey of your volunteer program to get feedback from staff, administration, volunteers and, if appropriate, volunteers.
Subscribers to e-Volunteerism may utilize or adapt my Assess Program and Staff

[Traing Needs](#) at the end of this article for this purpose. This assessment is taken from my book, *Training Busy Staff to Succeed With Volunteers*, available in the Energize Online Bookstore at <http://energizeinc.com/total/tra.html>.

- Hold focus-group discussions with the groups mentioned above, utilizing a similar set of questions.
- Design a staff retreat which will surface issues of commitment or discuss findings of the survey information. The purpose would be to identify, then diminish the barriers keeping the staff from fully embracing the volunteer program. The focus of this article is to share retreat/seminar exercises that may be appropriate to use in identifying barriers to volunteer program commitment and to ultimately enhance attitudes toward volunteer/staff partnerships.

Conducting Training Exercises to Strengthen Commitment

In the next section are eight of my favorite training exercises to use at staff meetings, retreats and seminars, when your purpose is to surface commitment issues and strengthen the organization's commitment to volunteers.

It is appropriate to consider utilizing these retreat exercises when you are experiencing one or a variation of the following situations:

- Your staff does not fully support the volunteer program as evidenced by their selection of activities for volunteers to perform.
- Your organization does not appreciate the potential and benefits of having a great volunteer program supporting the organization's mission. It feels like "another thing to do."
- Your organization, or some staff and volunteers within it, have not experienced a good volunteer program and come with lots of baggage from previous work with volunteers.
- You are a membership organization, and members do not understand why "no one wants to be president anymore."
- Your staff is not appreciated and/or skilled in releasing significant work to volunteers.
- You are staff at a volunteer center trying to promote sharing of best practices among similar types of organizations (e.g., libraries, educational institutions, etc.) so they will be more committed to volunteer involvement.
- Your board of directors has no involvement or understanding of the nature of the volunteer program and thus is not supporting it to the extent needed.
- You have some staff who work well with volunteers and others who do not.
- You have administration that is giving lip service to volunteering, but is not truly supporting the program.

The exercises in this section can be used to respond to some of the situations described in the Introduction. The worksheet *Identifying Volunteer Program Commitment Strategies* at the end of this article can help you to tailor a design most

appropriate to your situation.

Tips for Conducting Exercises

- Rather than teach commitment, try to understand what stands in the way and attempt to collaboratively diminish the barriers.
- Try to rely on staff who are firm supporters of the program to share their experiences in a peer to peer discussion.
- Invite participants to spend some time visualizing the best possible program and what it might do for the organization, so that people are energized to work on the issues and problems keeping the organization from full commitment.
- Involve as many levels of the organization as possible (including the highest level administrator!) when dealing with commitment. Buy-in must be present throughout the organization for real success.

Exercise #1 Building a Vision or "What if?"

This exercise is generally done in one of several fashions, each getting you to your goal of having staff and leadership volunteers excited over the potential of having a great volunteer program in their organization. I would recommend an outside facilitator lead the session. Exchanging with another volunteer manager in your your local volunteer manager group or within your community may save costs.

The retreat leader facilitates the following series of questions:

1. Imagine how our mission could be enhanced if we had 100 (you name the appropriate number) fabulous volunteers partnering with us. What would we be doing that we are currently unable to do? How is it affecting your work as staff, leadership volunteers, administrator, manager of the volunteer program? Another variation of the visioning question is to have the participants independently think about the very best volunteer with whom they have had the privilege to work. Then ask them to visualize that this volunteer is multiplied by 100 (again, any appropriate number) and ask the same questions.

Since this part of the exercise involves visualization, you may need to prepare participants for the difficulty that many people have in imagining what could be. Encourage participants to let go of problems or any concerns in creating this vision. What you want is for them to experience and express *potential*. If they can get some energy around possibilities for a great volunteer program, you have a better chance of gaining their effort to work on the barriers keeping the organization from having these 100 fabulous volunteers.

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

· 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?			