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An Examination of the Benefits, Preferred Training Delivery Modes, and Preferred Topics of 4-H Youth Development Volunteers

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Abstract: Training is a critical component of any successful volunteer management system. The evaluation reported here examined the benefits of the 4-H Youth Development Volunteer training as well as ranks preferred training methods and topics. Participants in leader training reported that training yielded motivational and educational benefits. As part of the evaluation, volunteers identified the preferred training delivery modes as group trainings and electronic communication. Volunteers were most interested in learning about 4-H opportunities and leadership development.

Introduction

Volunteers have been an integral part of the development and delivery of 4-H educational programs since its inception (Wessel & Wessel, 1982). Over the years, researchers and practitioners have developed volunteer management models that identified components of strong volunteer programs. One of the main components identified within all these models is orientation and/or training (Boyce, 1971; Brudney, 1990; Campbell & Ellis, 1995; Culp & Schwartz, 1999; Naylor, 1973; Penrod, 1991; Rauner, 1980; Scheier, 1985; Smith &

Bigler, 1985; Vineyard, 1981; Wilson, 1976).

Training and orientation are critical to prepare volunteers for the role they have accepted within any organization. This preparation involves orienting volunteers to the organization and their jobs as well as supporting them with ongoing training opportunities designed to enhance their knowledge and skills (Kerka, 2003). Serafino (2001) found that volunteer training is often formal and limited to initial skill development to satisfy role requirements rather than focused on long-term, continuing volunteering.

Several studies showed inconsistencies in the training offered to volunteers. Fletcher (1987) found the majority of volunteers receive little formal training, instead receiving on-the-job experiences and the informal mentoring from other volunteers to learn their duties. According to a National Urban Institute Study designed to determine the volunteer management capacity in America's charities and congregations, only 16% of congregations and 25% of charities offered volunteer training and professional development opportunities to a large degree to their volunteers (Hager, 2002). An Ohio State University study showed that 4-H staff believed volunteer orientation was important; however, several 4-H programs lacked both a structured volunteer training program and a system of feedback measuring the effectiveness of the training program (Deppe & Culp, 2001). In her study of literacy volunteer tutors, Belzer (2006) found that volunteer training did not always transfer to practice. In such cases, she recommended less initial training and more ongoing training based on specific needs and strengths of the volunteers.

While these inconsistencies in volunteer training exist, research shows that training has a wide variety of benefits, including the development of new skills, increases in knowledge, and preparation for the volunteer role. Researchers have found that training gives volunteers skills and knowledge needed to perform their work well and effectively (Brudney, 1990; Culp, 1997; Cumming, 1998; Wilson, 1976). In their research with volunteer ambulance officers, Fahey, Walker, and Lennox (2003) discovered that 87% of volunteers reported gaining new skills as a motivating factor for volunteers. Hoover and Conner (2001) found that volunteers respond better to job responsibilities when they understand and are trained the job they are assigned. McGown (2007) found that volunteers in libraries benefited and were better prepared for their volunteer role from on-the-job training. According to Smith, Dasher, and Klingborg (2005), volunteers enhanced their career and life skills through training.

Training can benefit an organization in many ways. Wise and Ezell (2003) found that effective training inspires and motivates, as well as celebrates personal and group achievements. Anderson (2005) reported that orientation increases volunteer buy-in and support to further the mission, vision, and values of the organization in which they volunteer. Snider (1985) revealed that training increases the potential for program sustainability.

Studies have shown that training and orientation have had a positive impact on volunteer retention, increasing satisfaction and a level of higher commitment (Anderson, 2005; VanWinkle, Busler, Bowman, & Manoogian, 2002). Jamison (2003) found that pre-service and in-service training was significantly linked to reduced turnover among volunteers in human service agencies. Pierucci and Noel (1980) established that the orientation process was one of three significant factors that contributed to volunteers continuing with the organization. Fahey, Walker, and Lennox (2003) discovered that appropriate training is an organization's most powerful retention and recruitment tool, citing lack of training as a reason for high turnover for volunteer recruits. Anderson (2005) and Wilson, Killian, Gallagher-Gordon, Fay-Hillier, Hasson, and Ward (2007) revealed that training increased satisfaction among volunteers and lead to a higher commitment.

Program Description and Objectives

Over a 2-year period, a convenient sample of 303 volunteers participating in Area 4-H Volunteer Trainings was taken. The 5-hour volunteer training featuring major educational portions, including keynote speakers, group updates, and workshop sessions. All presentations were interactive and on relevant topics to the attendees. Networking opportunities were provided through icebreaker activities, idea sharing, and exhibits. Each session focused on an educational theme such as service learning, youth development, leadership development, or 4-H club management. The typical participant was a 4-H club leader or assistant 4-H club leader.

In determining whether the needs of the volunteer leaders were met through the Area Leader Trainings, the following evaluation questions were developed:

- What were the training benefits, if any, to the 4-H volunteers as a result of the 4-H Area Leader Training?
- What were the most helpful training topics?
- What were the preferred training methods of the volunteers?

Evaluation Procedures

A descriptive evaluation was conducted to determine the benefits of training, to identify the training topics 4-H volunteers felt they needed, and to determine the training methods preferred. The evaluation featured four sections: training benefits, preferred training topics, preferred training methods, and demographics. In the training benefits section, participants were asked to rate six potential training benefits using a Likert Scale consisting of strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree, or strongly agree. Volunteers were asked to provide multiple responses on how they would use the information gained during the Area Leader Training. In the preferred training topics and methods sections, the volunteers were asked to give multiple responses to determine their preferences for these items.

Following a review of literature to identify training benefits, topics, and methods, a survey was developed and reviewed by a panel of experts including an evaluation specialist, 4-H Regional Coordinators, a State 4-H Volunteer Specialist, and 4-H Agents. The data was analyzed using SPSS 10.0 statistical software for social statistics. After data collection, a Cronbach's alpha test was run on 43 statements to determine the reliability of the instrument. Alpha values for the survey yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.73. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (1993), reliability coefficients of .70 or higher are acceptable for research purposes.

Findings

Training Benefits

Volunteers achieve a wide variety of benefits from volunteer training, including gaining knowledge, increasing motivation, and enhancing 4-H programs. As noted by the evaluation, 96% of the volunteers broadened their knowledge of new 4-H areas and projects, while 93% increased their knowledge of youth

development. Ninety-five percent of the volunteers experienced personal development in the form of developing skills as a volunteer. Ninety-seven percent of the volunteers were energized about 4-H and motivated to expand their role in 4-H. Ninety-six percent of participants felt that their 4-H program would be enhanced by the training.

The training benefits went beyond the volunteer participants to the youth and adults they work with. Sixty-six percent of the volunteers planned on using the information to enhance the management of a local 4-H club, parish, area, regional, or state 4-H project. Sixty percent of the volunteers planned to share the information with local volunteers, Extension staff, or others as well as planned to use the information to implement a local 4-H club, parish, area, regional, or state 4-H project. Twenty-one percent planned to conduct an information session on the local, parish, area, regional, or state 4-H level. On average, each volunteer reached 115 youth and 18 adults annually. Volunteers gave an average of 8 hours per month, with a range from 1 to 99 hours per month.

Training Topics

When it came to determining which subjects would be most helpful in strengthening their knowledge and skills as a 4-H volunteer, 47% of the volunteers selected member opportunities as the topic they wanted to learn more about. Leadership development, of which 44% of participants selected, received the second most helpful training topic identified with volunteer opportunities (42.8%) rounded out the top three. Risk management and specific subject matter skills were areas that the volunteers felt were least helpful. Table 1 consists of the training topics ranking by volunteers.

Table 1.
Most Helpful Training Topics

	N = 303	Percentage	Rank
Member Opportunities	143	47.2%	1
Leadership Development Skills	135	44.4%	2
Volunteer Opportunities	130	42.8%	3
Club Management	127	41.8%	4
Motivational Skills	125	41.3%	5
Parent Involvement and Recruitment	113	37.3%	6
Character Education	79	26%	7
Team Building Skills	75	24.7%	8
Life Skill Development	75	24.7%	8
Planning Skills	71	23.4%	10
Organizational Skills	62	20.4%	11
Time Management	52	17.1%	12
Communication Skills	51	16.8%	13

Behavior Management	50	16.4%	14
Youth Development	48	15.8%	15
Conflict Resolutions	43	14.1%	16
Technology	39	12.8%	17
Delegation Skills	34	11.2%	18
Teaching Skills	33	10.9%	19
Marketing and Public Relations	31	10.2%	20
Diversity	30	9.9%	21
Learning Styles	24	7.9%	22
Interpersonal Skills	18	5.9%	23
Financial Management	15	4.9%	24
Risk Management	13	4.3%	25
Subject Matter Skills	13	4.3%	25

Training Methods

In determining what training methods they preferred, volunteers were asked to select all the delivery modes they favor. With 40.5% of the participants selecting this delivery mode, group training was the most frequently selected training format preference. The second most preferred training delivery mode was e-mailed information, with 30% of the volunteers indicating a preference for this method. The least preferred training option was audiotapes, (7%). The preferred training methods are reported in Table 2.

Table 2.
Preferred Training Delivery Methods

Preferred Training Delivery Method	N =303	Percentage	Rank
Group Training	123	40.5%	1
E-mailed Information	92	30.3%	2
Small Support Group	81	26.6%	3
Videos	81	26.6%	3
Computer Based CDs	80	26.3%	5
Mailed Information	79	26%	6
Mentoring	67	22%	7
Self Guide	50	16.4%	8

Web-based Training	46	15%	9
One-on-One Training	38	12.5%	10
Audio	22	7.3%	11

No significant relationships existed between the years of volunteer experience, number of hours a volunteer served, and preferred training method.

Limitations

Due to the sampling techniques used, the findings cannot be generalized to any group beyond the population surveyed. Additional research with an expanded sample could provide meaningful data for future studies.

Discussion

Supported by other research studies, these evaluation findings indicate that volunteers gain a wide variety of benefits from volunteer training. Through leader training, volunteers broadened their knowledge of new 4-H areas, increased their knowledge of youth development, increased their motivation, developed their skills, and felt their 4-H program would be enhanced (Braker, Leno, Pratt, & Grober, 2000; Brudney, 1990; Culp, 1997; Cumming, 1998; Hoover & Conner, 2001; McGown, 2007; Smith et al., 2005; Walker & Lennox, 2003).

The first and third most popular training topics volunteers wanted to learn about were member and volunteer opportunities, respectively. Leadership development and club management were also identified as important areas for training. Risk management and specific subject matter skills got the least interest from volunteers. These results were aligned with earlier studies that found training must be learner focused, helping adults understand why they need to learn something and how it is relevant to their life (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2000; Richardson, 1994; Wise & Ezell, 2003). Sinasky and Bruce (2007) recommended that volunteer training programs address the needs of individual volunteers and groups of volunteers in order to foster collaboration, team development, and growth opportunities.

The evaluation found that volunteers prefer a wide variety of delivery modes that differ depending on group and individual setting. Volunteers cited preferences for a wide range of technology delivery modes.

According to the evaluation, the most conducive means of training delivery methods are group meetings and direct electronic communication. Hoover and Conner (2001) noted the importance of trainings taking a variety of forms. Not only should different training options be offered, but also incremental training opportunities that provide opportunities for peer reflection, mentoring, and network building are effective (Hoover & Conner, 2001; Smith & Enfield, 2002; Smith et al., 2005).

Conclusion

Volunteers are an important part of a non-profit organization. Volunteer training programs benefit volunteers by preparing them for their role in the Extension 4-H Youth Development Program as well as the organization by having a highly qualified pool of volunteers to support programs. The obvious benefits of training are knowledgeable volunteers who are more prepared to perform their jobs. Volunteer training can have motivational benefits ranging from inspiring volunteers to get more involved to keeping them in the program. To be effective, training should be learner focused on topics that the volunteers feel they need and should be delivered in a variety of ways.

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