



October 2009
Volume 47 Number 5
Article Number 5RIB4

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A Focused Interview Study of 4-H Volunteer Performance Appraisals

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Abstract: This article describes a focused interview study used to identify effective volunteer performance appraisal criteria from the perspective of the volunteer, including methods, approaches used, purpose of performance reviews, and criteria. Participants in the study were recruited from among the certified 4-H volunteers enrolled in the Arizona 4-H Youth Development Program. The article provides a method that can be used to identify trends, concerns, and potential outcomes of 4-H volunteer performance appraisals.

How do the 4-H professional and the 4-H volunteer know if the volunteer is doing what he or she actually volunteered to do? Is the volunteer being assessed based on the basis of a written position description or other performance criteria? In the Arizona 4-H Youth Development program, there was no formal format for evaluating or reviewing the performance of volunteers. Therefore, a focused interview study was designed to identify, from the volunteers' perspective, acceptable performance appraisal methods and approaches. This article describes the methodology employed, the characteristics of performance appraisals identified by participants, and suggestions by the authors on how to apply the emerging criteria identified in the study.

Literature Review

Culp, McKee, and Nestor (2005, 2006) identified 32 key components needed to be effective 4-H leaders, based on research with volunteers. These components were further delimited into competencies pertaining to behavioral attitudes and tasks, which fit nicely into the four essential elements identified in the National 4-H Impact Study (Peterson, Gerard, Hunter, Marek, Phillips, & Titcomb, 2002):

- Belonging: Positive relationship with a caring adult; A safe environment; An inclusive environment;
- Mastery: Engagement in learning; Opportunity for mastery;

- Independence: Opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future; Opportunity for self-determination; and
- Generosity: Opportunity to value and practice service to others.

Various performance appraisal models have been researched to determine the impact performance reviews may have on programs. In order to determine the impact volunteers have on a program it is important to include changes in behavior, new practices adopted, and changes in attitudes as well as what was taught and who participated in the program (Culp & Nall, 2001). Key aspects of a good volunteer evaluation system include self-assessment, feedback from staff working with the volunteers, and the volunteer's satisfaction in relation to the evaluation experience (Kerka, 2003). The basic process identified by Lynch and McCurley (1996) involves the use of a "sandwich" approach such as: praise, concern, praise, which allows for feedback from the volunteer; identifying future programs and goals; and identifying where help can be obtained to meet the goals. Furthermore, Medbaugh (1999) states that the volunteer has an area of expertise and wishes to be evaluated on competency-based criteria.

Methodology and Protocol

A focused interview method was employed in the study reported here to obtain qualitative information from participants regarding their perceptions about using a performance review process to evaluate them. Interviews are an appropriate method for obtaining answers to discerning questions and gathering qualitative information from participants (Dick, 1998). Participants in the study were recruited from among the certified 4-H volunteers enrolled in the Arizona 4-H Youth Development Program. Five of the state's 15 counties participated, including two with large urban settings and three primarily rural counties.

The 4-H agent in each county was asked to identify and contact individual volunteers who would agree to be interviewed. The local agent was asked to recommend volunteers from a variety of programs, projects, leadership roles, and experience. Interviews were conducted at locations convenient for the participant, such as their home, business or workplace, public library, county fair, Extension office, or restaurant. Interviews averaged between 30 and 40 minutes.

The protocol established for the focus interviews consisted of nine open-ended questions about performance review and five demographic questions administered consistently across interviews by the lead author. All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. A panel of expert reviewers made up of five Extension professionals, including 4-H and Family and Consumer Health Science agents, analyzed the data to identify emerging themes through content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Results

Fourteen volunteers were interviewed. Their volunteer experience in 4-H ranged from 3 years to more than 30 years. The volunteers served in a variety of capacities: Community Club Leader, Project Leader, Board member, Resource Volunteer, and after school program volunteer. Most individuals interviewed volunteered for other organizations, on average, approximately three other organizations. Two participants only volunteered for 4-H. The age range of participants was from 25 to over 65 years. Nine of the 14 participants had bachelor's degrees or higher, and one had a vocational degree. Ten participants were White, non-Hispanic, and four were Hispanic.

Twelve of 14 participants expressed a positive attitude toward performance review processes, and two stated

that they were neutral about such processes. All participants expressed a desire to know the extent to which they were doing the job they were asked to do. Six of the 14 participants stated that they had experienced a poorly conducted performance appraisal at some point in their adult life. They described these poor evaluations as tending to be one-sided; from the evaluator's point of view; providing no opportunity for feedback; being done to prove a point or based on a single situation rather than referring to an overall set of circumstances; and, finally, that expectations were not clear.

In addition, all participants reported having experienced what may be labeled as a "high quality" performance appraisal when responding to a question about the "best" review they had experienced. Characteristics of a "high quality" performance review included:

- Appropriateness (i.e., based on improvement, recognition, and accountability)

- Frequency (i.e., annually for new volunteers and every 3-5 years thereafter)

- Performance based

- Provides positive recognition

- Identifies areas for improvement and goals are established

- Identifies new program area

- Covers content and relationship

- Allows for open communication

Participants were asked to describe the desired criteria for a performance appraisal of a 4-H volunteer. Participants indicated that performance appraisals needed to:

- Be objective and measurable,

- Be performance based,

- Include clearly stated and understood expectations, and

- Include content related to volunteer training.

The most commonly identified methods for conducting a performance appraisal were:

- Held at a neutral location,

- Formal and written,

- Face-to-face,

- Purpose of evaluation known ahead of time, and

- Evaluator is knowledgeable about the volunteer's involvement

Input for a performance appraisal was very important as well to participants. The following sources of input to the performance appraisal were identified as important elements: self-evaluation, Extension agent, club leader, other leaders, business representatives, and youth members. Self-evaluations via a survey from the agent, either paper or on-line, were also suggested as methods for having evaluations performed. One-third of those interviewed indicated that Community Club leaders could evaluate project volunteers.

Three uses of performance appraisals were identified by participants and placed into categories as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Uses of Performance Appraisals

Improvement	Recognition	Accountability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify ways to improve our program • Identify strengths and weaknesses • Opportunity to identify areas to improve • Receive constructive criticism • Opportunity to give and receive feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify goals achieved. • Set future goals • Get to adjust our game plan • Keep company goals in mind • Appreciate opportunity to know what is expected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a cross check on what is being done • Keep things running smoothly • Can track what people are doing • Keep workers accountable to the company • Helps keep the company in mind

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide guidelines for improvement and continuing programs • Be more efficient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive updates on changes • Identify continuing programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep everyone on the same page • Keep from getting stagnant
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Discussion

The study of 4-H volunteers reported here provides a method to identify trends, concerns, and potential outcomes of performance appraisals. The emerging criteria identified in the study are similar to the best practices previously identified by researchers and volunteer specialists. These practices include an accurate position description; an outline of goals and specific objectives; specific steps to meet them; and an evaluation process that reviews the past, analyzes the present, and plans for the future.

4-H volunteers want to do a good job. They volunteer for programs because they want the best possible experience for the children involved in the programs. As a result, volunteers are keenly interested in the opinion of the 4-H professional, other volunteers, and the youth members.

Extension professionals who wish to implement a formal evaluation process will be more successful if they provide volunteers the opportunity to be involved in the development of the process, including the establishment of criteria, setting of goals, and outlining of the process. Involving the advisory board or council in the development of the performance appraisal process may also increase the likelihood of success. Using a pilot process, implementing the process gradually, and being inclusive can also lead to a more successful performance appraisal process.

Based on our findings, the agent who wishes to implement a volunteer evaluation program should consider providing volunteers with an opportunity for input into the development of the appraisal instrument and/or the specific questions and criteria that will be used during the process. In addition, training needs to be provided to mid-management volunteers if they are to evaluate the volunteers they supervise.

While volunteers did identify many of the same volunteer competencies identified by researchers, the volunteer was more likely to state the competency in measurable terms. This adaptation is significant from the volunteer point of view. While Nestor et al. (2006) state the competency as "Communication," participants in this study were more likely to state that construct in more concrete terms, such as: "Do I share information with families? The Extension Office? Other volunteers? The community? How often do I share this information? Is the information complete?"

Conclusion

In conclusion, participants in the study expressed a desire that can be summed up by one quote, "to make their best, better." Participants were willing to be involved in developing a performance appraisal process; identify criteria and setting goals for themselves and their fellow 4-H volunteers; and act as performance appraisers. Care is advised when making generalized statements based on such a small sample size as used in the study; however the conclusions can contribute to the knowledge base of the 4-H volunteer field and are consistent with current best practices.

Volunteers are willing to take the time and effort to provide valuable input and insight into the development of a review format that will affect them directly. They also want to know the purpose of the review, whether for program improvement, for personal development, for performance evaluation, or to recognize their achievements.

As with many people, volunteers may view performance appraisals or reviews with trepidation. It is important for the professional volunteer manager to alleviate any negative attitudes as much as possible. One way this can be accomplished is by giving the volunteer sufficient time to prepare, letting them know the purpose of the appraisal, conducting the review face-to-face, and providing written documentation to the volunteer. It is further recommended that the review be conducted by someone who is knowledgeable about the volunteer's situation and work.

Last, the criteria upon which the review is based must be published in writing, easy for volunteers to access, and related specifically to the volunteer's position description and role. The criteria for review must be clear and measurable. The Extension professional who manages volunteers will avoid many hurdles and issues in their program by following the suggestions offered in this article.

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