

Generating Potential Solutions for Dealing with Problem Volunteers

Abstract

Extension agents are often required to work with challenging volunteers or to problem-solve difficult volunteer scenarios. However, many Extension agents receive little to no training in conflict management. At the 2013 Extension Master Gardener Coordinators' Conference, a breakout session was held to discuss the management of difficult volunteers and related issues. Master Gardener Coordinators were given several potential "problem volunteer" scenarios to discuss, so that potential solutions could be developed and shared. Although we were not able to measure the efficacy of the potential solutions, they represent the combined wisdom and experience of Master Gardener coordinators from across the country.

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Introduction and Need

Culp, McKee, and Nestor (2007) identified 32 core competencies that volunteers need to effectively deliver Extension programs. Unfortunately, volunteers sometimes step into or are placed into roles where their skills are not a good fit for the task.

When a volunteer's actions, behaviors, or words have a negative impact on Extension programs, swift action is needed. However, Extension agents are usually trained primarily in their disciplinary domain, with little to no training on how to handle conflict or work with difficult volunteers (Boyd, 2004). The consequences of a delayed or lack of response can lead to greater issues, including:

- Decreased volunteer and employee productivity
- Decreased volunteer and employee morale
- Loss of good volunteers

- Negative public impressions of Extension programs

Master Gardener Coordinators Discuss Problem Volunteers

The planning committee of the 2012 National Master Gardener Coordinator's Conference scheduled a breakout session to discuss the management of difficult volunteers. Several scenarios were developed, based upon actual volunteer issues encountered by Master Gardener coordinators. Approximately 35 Extension Master Gardener coordinators participated in the session. Coordinators worked in small groups to review the scenarios and discuss what they would do in each situation. The information was then presented to the whole group, discussed, and documented. The concluding statements were emailed to the group for a member check.

Three of the eight scenarios used in the breakout session, as well as the potential solutions developed by the coordinators, are summarized below.

Scenarios do not represent actual Master Gardener volunteers, but are instead an amalgamation of common issues. Fictitious names are used in some scenarios to provide a better narrative.

Problem Scenario #1: Volunteer Leaders Overstep Boundaries

Two officers of a local Master Gardener Association are unhappy about decisions that their Extension agent has made, including how the next training class will be conducted, how hours will be reported, and how money was spent on a recent demonstration garden. The volunteers believe they have the authority to stop or change projects at their discretion, because they are elected officers.

While an ineffective volunteer may negatively affect a few people, an ineffective officer negatively impacts an entire chapter (Usability Professionals Organization, n.d.). It is a mistake to assume that volunteers know their roles within the organization (Cummings, 1998). Specific guidelines and job descriptions can alleviate confusion related to the authority of a volunteer to make decisions.

The solutions offered at the breakout session included the following.

- Engage a facilitator to meet with the Extension agent and volunteers. The facilitator should emphasize the Extension's mission and the agent's role as the lead on decisions.
- Create flow charts that delineate roles and make it clear to all.
- If officers can't stay within the rules, suggest that they step back from their roles.

Problem Scenario #2: Bossy Volunteer

"Janice" is an experienced project manager who eagerly steps into leadership roles. However, she likes things done "her" way, and isn't open to ideas or approaches that contradict her own. She sometimes responds with harsh or terse words when challenged. Because of this, volunteers are wary of working with Janice. Instead, Janice is allowed to persist in leadership roles, because no one steps forward to take over a project for fear of hurting her feelings or angering her.*

The solutions offered at the breakout session included the following.

- Develop a written record of project details, so the responsibility can be more easily passed on to others.
- Match volunteers who have personalities that work well together on specific projects.
- Talk to project manager privately about how she impacts others' feelings. Be blunt and direct. Individuals are sometimes not self-aware and need to know how their language/behavior impacts others.
- Train volunteer leaders to work with volunteers who may have different ideas or ways of doing things.
- Washington State University 4-H has a "Positive Talk Zone" poster. Use the poster as an aid to remind the group of the ground rules of discussion.
- Encourage peers to share the impact of the words. "It hurts my feelings when you speak that way." "I'm having a hard time working with you when you speak that way."

Problem Scenario #3: Volunteers with Alzheimer's

"Margaret" has a long history in your Master Gardener Program and has always been a reliable and top-notch volunteer. Recently, however, you're beginning to suspect that she may have Alzheimer's or dementia. She finds it difficult to communicate and to concentrate and shows up to work at events for which she is not trained. Her answers to the public's gardening questions don't reflect her historical commitment to high-quality responses. Her husband, also a Master Gardener, notes that being an active volunteer is extremely important to Margaret.

The specific solutions offered at the breakout session included the following.

- Limit her solo interaction with the public. At Master Gardener events, pair Margaret with her husband or another volunteer that is compatible and has patience.
- Consider granting her 'emeritus' status, which requires little to no volunteer service, but recognizes her important and long-term contributions.
- Place her in less demanding duties, such as collecting tickets or doing prep work. Do not place her in jobs that require remembering details or specific information. If she currently works in these types of jobs, slowly transition her to more appropriate volunteer duties.
- Communicate with and work closely with immediate family members to find out what Extension can do to support and help this volunteer.
- Have a group meeting with the couple and other witnesses. Ask the couple for suggestions. What types of activities and what frequency of volunteer work would work well for them?

Conclusion

In addition to the potential solutions reported here, many suggested that coordinators document issues as they surface and engage higher administration as needed.

Although we were not able to measure the efficacy of these potential solutions, they represent the combined wisdom and experience of Master Gardener coordinators from across the country. Indeed, understanding that other volunteer coordinators struggle with challenging situations and volunteers was one of the most important outcomes of this breakout session.

References

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