Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century

Empowering Volunteers

Volunteers are a valuable asset and it is vital for county Extension agents to understand and appreciate their importance to the organization. In 2009, more than 104,000 volunteers helped AgriLife Extension deliver programs to Texas communities. Empowering each of these volunteers was the key to maximizing their personal satisfaction and their benefit to the organization.

People who choose to serve their communities as Extension volunteers have credibility because they are not financially dependent on the organization. These volunteers help Extension reach more people than would be possible without them, and ensure that programming is relevant because they often serve in their own communities. Extension volunteer administrators need to manage volunteers purposefully if AgriLife Extension is to fully achieve its mission of Improving Lives, Improving Texas.

According to Milton Boyce’s model for volunteer management, volunteers should have appropriate opportunities to put their knowledge and skills into action. Then, Extension faculty can empower volunteers by giving them the responsibility, authority and resources they need to accomplish their mission.

However, empowering volunteers begins before you recruit and select them. Carefully written position descriptions help identify organizational needs and outline the specific tasks a volunteer will be expected to perform. This approach to recruitment greatly improves the probability that volunteers will know what is expected of them and ultimately contribute to program success.

Another crucial factor for empowering volunteers is ensuring that they understand Extension’s culture and how they fit into the organization. Orientation, as outlined in Boyce’s model, includes explaining the expectations, goals and objectives of the volunteer position. According to Best of All: The Quick Reference Guide to Effective Volunteer Involvement by Linda L. Graff, volunteers need three types of orientation.

- **Social orientation** includes introductions to the office staff, a tour of the office and an overview of office procedures.
• **Position orientation** includes an explanation of the volunteer’s role and responsibilities as described in the volunteer position description.

• **System orientation** includes an overview of Extension’s mission, legislative foundations, program areas, and policies and procedures.

Once volunteers clearly understand Extension and what is expected of them, they are more likely to be confident and motivated to fulfill their job responsibilities. However, orientation is not the end of the empowerment process.

Volunteers are truly empowered when they share in program ownership and responsibility. Volunteer administrators need to show trust in their volunteers by giving them responsibilities. Of course, with responsibilities come expectations. Volunteers must know that they represent Extension, that their work needs to be completed on time, and that their work will be evaluated. You can do this evaluation formally by assessing volunteer program outcomes or by giving informal feedback on the volunteer’s accomplishments.

As a county Extension agent, it is part of your job to recruit, train and empower the volunteers who support Extension programs. There are steps you can take to hone your leadership skills and help you position volunteers for success.

• **Understand the concept of volunteering.** Your success as a volunteer administrator depends on experience, training and personal commitment to the concept of empowering volunteers. It is important to appreciate the value of a volunteer’s time. Being unprepared when a volunteer arrives communicates disregard; preplanning communicates respect and professionalism. When you offer volunteers meaningful assignments in advance, they will be motivated to report for duty. This will also let them know that you appreciate their time and are serious about their role within the organization.

• **Give up some control.** It is common to be concerned about delegating responsibilities to volunteers. However, volunteers will have nothing to contribute if you don’t give them meaningful assignments and responsibilities. Ask yourself, “Do I have a volunteer who can complete this task for me?” Though it may be hard to give up control at first, you can spend the time you save on other tasks. Ease any initial concerns you may have by using experienced volunteers to support and guide new ones. Having rookie volunteers shadow experienced volunteers will help them learn how to create, implement and evaluate educational programs. This experience will allow both you and the volunteer to gain confidence. Remember that certain assignments, such as administrative duties, are not appropriate for volunteers.

• **Put volunteers to work.** Volunteers often bring new ideas based on their personal interests or their knowledge of the community. It’s important to listen to their ideas and then supply resources to help them turn their ideas into actions. Volunteers often pioneer new
services and programs because they can be creative and experiment without fear of failure. They can also communicate with decision makers, raise funds, and serve as advocates for Extension.

- **Recognize the efforts of volunteers.** Everyone likes to be rewarded for their work. When volunteers do a good job, the simplest way to recognize them is to say “thank you.” Personal, hand-written notes are appreciated most. When appropriate, you may also recognize their contributions publicly. Get to know your volunteers and learn the types of recognition they enjoy most.

- **Reap the benefits.** When you give volunteers meaningful assignments and the freedom to be creative, they are likely to become more motivated and active. The empowered volunteer is often more enthusiastic and able to develop the leadership skills needed for Extension’s success. These volunteer leaders will dramatically improve your outreach on a broader range of issues.

In spite of your efforts, some volunteers will choose not to be empowered. They may simply lack self-confidence and require approval for every task they complete. By the same token, some volunteer administrators cannot seem to give up control of a program no matter how much they trust their volunteers. Examine your own leadership style and learn how best to empower your volunteers. You can assume any of the following roles when helping volunteers develop leadership abilities.

- **Discoverer**—Discoverers are visionary and flexible. They are continually looking for new ways to accomplish the mission. If you always run committee meetings and write up the minutes, maybe it’s time to recommend a volunteer for these duties. This not only empowers the volunteer, but also frees you up to focus on other tasks.

- **Illustrator**—It is important to stress the goals and mission of Extension. Setting a positive example as an Extension professional gives volunteers a lead to follow. The way you handle obstacles and opportunities will demonstrate your commitment to Extension’s mission.

- **Encourager**—Volunteers need support and reassurance. Take an interest in the volunteers’ successes and use appropriate recognition to show you value their work. It’s also important to acknowledge failures, then make suggestions for improvement and move on. Remember always to critique in private and praise in public.

- **Enabler**—A coach or a team-builder offers a helping hand to increase the chances of success. Make it clear to volunteers that you are available and willing to meet to discuss problems or opportunities. Volunteers will appreciate the extra time and effort.

- **Smoother**—Volunteers need to know they have the backing and resources needed to carry out their assigned responsibilities. You can smooth their way by providing the information, resources and networks volunteers need to do...
their jobs. When personality differences or miscommunications create problems in your volunteer program, it is your duty to resolve the situation quickly and fairly.

Empowering volunteers requires that you also empower yourself. One of the best ways to recruit volunteers is to serve as a volunteer. Serving other organizations shows that you are a team player and a community resource. It also allows you to learn more about your community. Raising your profile in the community will help you to promote Extension and network with potential Extension volunteers.

Interacting with volunteers is an integral part of your job as a county Extension agent. You, your volunteers, and ultimately the Extension organization all benefit from empowerment. Empowered volunteers are more motivated, accomplish more and have a higher retention rate. A carefully managed volunteer program helps define roles, increases organizational commitment among volunteers, and creates a sense of community and cooperation.

Given the size and importance of Extension’s volunteer force, county Extension agents must empower, train and help them meet Extension’s mission of Improving Lives, Improving Texas.

For more information on volunteer management in the Texas AgriLife Extension Service, please visit: http://texasvolunteer.tamu.edu.

Resources


Other volunteerism resources

Online Texas 4-H Volunteer Orientation: http://campus.extension.org Extension publications available from the AgriLife Extension Bookstore

Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century: Orientation of Volunteers (D-1460)

Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century: ISOTURE – A Model for Volunteer Management (E-457)

Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century: Leadership Advisory Boards (D-1452)