



## Engaging Volunteers through ISOTURES: Utilizing Volunteers by Empowerment<sup>1</sup>

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*"I don't care to be involved in the crash-landing unless I can be in on the take-off."*

—Harold E. Stassen, 25th Governor of Minnesota

### Overview

A key responsibility for Extension 4-H agents is to empower volunteers into expanded involvement in 4-H programs (Schmiesing & Safrit 2007), a concept central to the success of 4-H programs. Up to this point the ISOTURES model has helped accomplish the following:

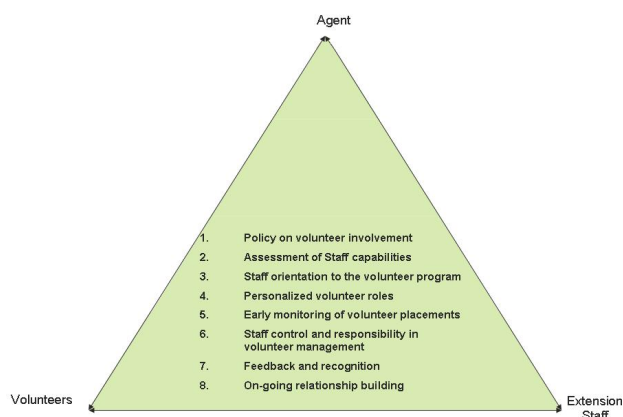
- Identify opportunities for volunteer involvement.
- Select and screen volunteers for a role in the 4-H program.
- Orient them to the 4-H program and their role.
- Train volunteers for success.

It is at this point that volunteers should begin to support youth in the county by being empowered to

use the experience that they bring together with the knowledge and skills developed from orientation and training. In an earlier section of this series, a Triangle was used to illustrate one role of a volunteer administrator (McCurley & Lynch, 2006). The Triangle represents the communication that goes on between 4-H Agent and volunteer, 4-H Agent and other paid staff, and volunteer and other paid staff (Figure 1). During the utilization of volunteers by empowerment stage, communication becomes the single most important role of a 4-H agent. The ability to use communication to become an "enabler" will increase volunteer involvement. All of the other ISOTURES steps up to this point are important, but they are lost if volunteers are not allowed to perform their role. If the 4-H agent or other paid staff are not ready to let volunteers perform their roles, stop and review the other sections of this series. Going forward without this commitment will only lead to frustration and conflict. Empowerment moves volunteers to the Volunteer Activity phase of the volunteer life cycle. If volunteers are not allowed to move to this phase, their involvement will cease and they will exit the 4-H program.

1. This document is 4-H 6.8, one of a series of the Florida 4-H Program, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First published October 2010 on <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>. Please visit the Florida 4-H website at <http://florida4h.org>.
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**Figure 1.** Dynamics of effective volunteer program management

In this section, the focus will be on how to empower volunteers into the Volunteer Activity phase and less on the need for volunteers. At this point in the volunteer development process, the decision to involve volunteers and the willingness to let volunteers contribute to the success of the program should be firmly established. Now is the time to understand the basic principles of volunteer empowerment and address the following questions:

- What is empowerment?
- How is empowerment different from delegating?
- Why is empowerment important?
- What are the six rules of empowerment?

### About Empowerment

In their book *The New Breed: Understanding and Equipping the 21st Century Volunteer*, Jonathan and Thomas McKee tell a story related to empowerment. The story describes a study of two groups of assembly line workers. Both groups received detailed orientation and training. However one group was given the authority to stop the assembly line with a push of a button to discuss the process and the other was not. The group without the ability to stop the process experienced more assembly line stoppages, lower quality workmanship and more grievances with management. The group with the authority to stop the assembly line did in fact stop the assemble line, but for much less time and with higher

quality workmanship and fewer grievances with management. What is significant is the change in attitude of the workers that are not only involved in carrying out the tasks, but also involved in the decision making process.

The story above describes the concept of empowerment. Empowerment is the delegation of responsibility with the authority to make decisions. Empowerment has two distinct components. First, volunteer(s) must be willing and able to accept responsibility for and authority over their volunteer role. Next, is the willingness to let volunteer(s) fulfill their role. Today's volunteer will take on responsibility in the 4-H program; however they want the authority to do it their way, without asking permission. How is this different from delegation? Delegation usually does not include decision making authority. When a question arises outside of the specifics of a volunteer role, volunteers will refer back to the 4-H Agent. This increases the workload of a 4-H agent and reduces the capacity of the volunteer program.

This puts a great deal of emphasis on the previous concepts in the ISOTURES model. Energy and effort should focus on indentifying opportunities for volunteers, selecting the right volunteer for the right role, orientation, training and providing resources and not micro managing volunteers. This does not suggest that involvement is not needed; however involvement now focuses on enabling volunteers to successfully complete their roles. Failing this logical order, adds more work and frustration to paid staff and volunteers.

The terms empowerment and delegation are not mutually exclusive. It is not a decision between delegation or empowerment. There are times when in the judgment of the 4-H agent a volunteer is not ready for a big role with lots of responsibility and decision making opportunities. For example, a long-term club organizational leader with knowledge of 4-H and the values of the 4-H program might be given more decision making authority compared to a new volunteer. The level of responsibility and authority for the role should be addressed and negotiated between 4-H agent and volunteer during the selection and orientation of volunteers, reinforced

through training. Once the volunteer moves to the activity stage in the volunteer life cycle, the volunteer needs to feel they are in-charge of their role and allowed to fulfill the role. This creates ownership for their responsibility. Ownership will increase the likelihood that the role will be performed successfully and the volunteer will move to the commitment phase of the volunteer life cycle. Re-negotiating during the volunteer activity phase is counter productive for both agent and volunteer.

## Six Rules of Empowerment

McKee and McKee (2008) offer the following six rules of empowerment.

### Don't Take 'IT' Back—Give it Away

A volunteer calls on the phone or sends an email about a problem or issue and the 4-H agent's response is, "Let me think about this and I will get back to you&." The problem or issue will get solved, but look who took immediate ownership of the problem.

The next time a situation like this occurs, ask the volunteer if they have any suggestions to resolve the issue or problem. If they don't, ask them to develop two or three alternative suggestions and make a future appointment to discuss the alternatives. This effectively empowers the volunteer and provides an opportunity for program ownership.

### Label Each "Giveaway" as either Delegation or Empowerment

There is a huge difference between delegation and empowerment, but they have one thing in common – responsibility. Who is responsible for the issue or problem? There are really only two levels of giving away the problem or issue:

- *Level One* – Talk to me first, and then determine the next move. This is the delegation level.
- *Level Two* – Make the next move, and then tell me about it. This is the empowerment level.

Sum up the difference between delegation and empowerment in one question—do volunteers have to

ask the 4-H Agent? Delegated volunteers must ask. They are not empowered to act on behalf of the 4-H program. Empowered volunteers don't have to ask. They make decisions, solve problems and create solutions without running to the 4-H Agent. Keep in mind that all of the effort orienting and training volunteers about the 4-H culture and values is wasted if volunteers are not allowed to make decisions, solve problems and create solutions.

### Create a Check-up Appointment

So it's great to have volunteers making creative decisions and handling problems in the county 4-H program, right? Yes...until things get out of hand. Volunteers can make poor decisions, and then the 4-H Agent can spend extra time unraveling the mess. Empowerment sounds great, is great, and it can be stressful. There is risk to empowerment and 4-H agents have been burned by empowered volunteers. This results in tight controls to supervise volunteers.

The solution to tight controls is to start each volunteer at the delegation level and move them, as appropriate, to the empowerment level. As the 4-H Agent, assign experienced volunteers to mentor and to initially control the decisions of other volunteers. When discussing a problem or issue with a volunteer, go through the options right there, and make a decision. This is an educational moment that will lead to empowerment.

How long does it take to transition from delegation to empowerment? That depends upon the volunteer. Some people are quick studies because of their expertise and experience, and they will be at the empowerment level very quickly. Volunteers new to the 4-H program need time to understand the 4-H values and culture.

As key volunteers move to the empowered level, create checkpoints with them. This is the "tell me about it" phase. A 4-H Agent does need empowered volunteers to report and discuss decisions made in the 4-H program. Create a systematic approach for meeting with empowered volunteers. For example, meet with each of the key, empowered 4-H middle managers on the first Tuesday of the month. The idea is to establish a consistent meeting time for agent and volunteer. This gives the agent and volunteers the

opportunity to provide updates, develop strategies, and keep the volunteers empowered without losing control. It is imperative that 4-H agents and empowered volunteers regularly discuss what's happening. Continuous feedback is essential as a motivator, and it's an effective method for determining the strategy of the county 4-H program.

Keep in mind that some 4-H volunteers will remain at the delegation level. For some, this is exactly what they want. For others, they will want to move to the empowered level. They may not express it as "I want to be empowered" necessarily, but they are looking for expanded opportunities. Recall the overlapping circles from *Understanding Volunteer Management in 4-H*—it is the 4-H agent's responsibility to match the interests, skills, and ability of a volunteer with a role in the 4-H program. For some volunteers, this means moving them toward the empowerment level. Furthermore, it is probably the only way a county 4-H program can provide expanded opportunities for youth.

### **Break Tasks Down into Manageable Goals**

Even when empowered, a volunteer may make mistakes if the tasks of a volunteer role are too overwhelming. An example is with 4-H Organizational Club Leaders. This can be an overwhelming role for many volunteers. So as a 4-H Agent, what can be done with big roles that volunteers will encounter? Well, a 4-H agent could just do the big roles themselves, let a volunteer sink or swim on their own, or...establish manageable goals. Providing direct service to youth in forty 4-H clubs, ten afterschool clubs, a Tropicana public speaking program in the public schools, residential camp, etc. is too much for even the best 4-H agent. Allowing the volunteer to sink or swim will almost always cause a volunteer to exit the program. The best strategy is to establish manageable goals with empowered volunteers. For 4-H organizational club leaders the steps to a successful club have been established. Provide support with other volunteer leaders or a mentor to ensure each manageable goal is attained until the organizational leader is confident and can manage all tasks. The result will be a

functioning 4-H club, and a successful, happy 4-H organizational club leader.

### **Don't Take 'IT' if Nothing Can Be Done with 'IT'**

This rule of empowerment helps the 4-H agent determine if an issue is worthy of resolution. Even if someone is two inches shorter than somebody else, there is no height problem. Why, because nothing can be done about a difference in height. Advisory committees are notorious for providing opportunities for 4-H Agents. Once a 4-H agent says I will think about 'IT,' the agent has taken responsibility for "IT." To volunteers, this translates into a viable project for consideration. For a 4-H agent, this translates into time and energy. If nothing can be done with IT, communicate with volunteers immediately that IT is not an option and why. It might be that a 4-H agent does not have time for new projects. If that is true, then explain so to the volunteers. They always have the option to take IT; in which case, IT becomes their responsibility and they become empowered volunteers.

### **Develop Skills to Avoid Disaster**

Bad habits have disastrous results. When juggling one object, one can get away with bad habits like procrastination, tardiness, disorganization, or lack of planning. A 4-H Agent has multiple objects that are being juggled at any one time. When juggling multiple projects, responsibilities expand and bad habits result in conflict, concern, and complaints by volunteers. Good volunteers are less likely to help poorly run 4-H programs.

### **Conclusion**

Empowerment with respect to volunteerism is about allowing 4-H volunteers to use their knowledge and skills developed in orientation and training to take responsibility for and make decisions associated with a volunteer role in the 4-H program. Empowerment is different from delegation in that empowered volunteers do not have to ask the 4-H Agent for permission to make decisions. Empowered volunteers remain committed to 4-H because they have ownership in the program.

Empowerment has two distinct components. First, volunteer(s) must be willing and able to accept responsibility for and authority over their volunteer role. Next, the 4-H Agent must be willing to let volunteer(s) fulfill their role. Expanded involvement by volunteers that create opportunities for youth will only occur when both components are working simultaneously.

Don't take problems or issues, give them away. Label each give away as delegation or empowerment. Break tasks into manageable goals for volunteers. Create check-points for empowered volunteers. If nothing can be done about a situation, do not accept responsibility. Finally, develop interpersonal skills to enhance empowerment.

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