4H 6.11

Engaging Volunteers through ISOTURES: Sustaining Volunteer Programs[1]

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Their niceness will let you recruit a volunteer, but only your competence will let you keep them....

Overview

Given that volunteers are an important component of Florida 4-H and that it takes time, energy and resources to identify and involve volunteers in a program, sustaining these efforts becomes critically important. A research study calculated the monetary cost of these efforts. The cost of losing one volunteer annually is nearly $1,200 (Eisner, Grimm, Maynard & Washburn, 2009). This cost includes staff time, infrastructure, and other costs to support volunteers.

Additionally, a 5 percent increase in strategies to retain customers results in a 25–125 percent increase in business profits (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999). This business concept is applicable to 4-H programs. Think about all of the effort to recruit one volunteer, including faculty and staff time and financial resources to develop and implement a recruitment strategy. Add in the costs associated with screening a potential volunteer, then orienting and training a volunteer for their role, and one can see the

tremendous effort to involve one volunteer. Clearly retention is important!

This article will address: (1) how the volunteer life cycle contributes to sustaining volunteer programs; (2) what 4-H agent attributes are necessary to sustain volunteer programs; and (3) conflict resolution.

Furthermore, the following questions are addressed:

Why do I care about the Volunteer Life Cycle?
How do I become a leader of volunteers?
What are the attributes of an exemplary volunteer program?
How do I resolve conflict?
What conflict resolution tools are available?
What is the Florida 4-H complaint protocol?

The Volunteer Life Cycle Revisited

Earlier in this series, the Volunteer Life Cycle model was used to explain volunteer behavior in a 4-H program (Figure 1). This behavior includes how and when a volunteer becomes aware of opportunities for volunteer involvement, the decision to volunteer

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or not and whether or not a volunteer continues as a volunteer in the Florida 4-H program. Revisiting the model now is important for two reasons:

- First, just because volunteers are currently active in the county 4-H program does not mean they will remain active. Life situations change volunteer interests and this often impacts their volunteer decisions. For example, many club organizational leaders have children that exit the 4-H program for one reason or another. Too often as the child leaves, so does the interest to the volunteer, ending the volunteer life cycle. Both the volunteer and the 4-H program have made significant investments. Rather than let the volunteer abandon the program, provide an alternative volunteer role that matches their current interests. Matching a new role with a new interest will extend the volunteer life cycle.

- Secondly, over time, volunteers will be involved in various training opportunities and other volunteer experiences. This often leads to the development of advanced skills and abilities. Volunteers may be motivated to volunteer for 4-H, but their skills and abilities have changed and so to has their motivations. As the 4-H agent be in tune with volunteers in the program and revisit the role of each volunteer.

Attributes of a Successful Volunteer Program

To make a difference today in the lives of youth, successful 4-H volunteer programs exhibit distinct characteristics. Each characteristic is important to sustain volunteer programs and extend the volunteer life cycle.

Respect for Volunteers

To sustain a volunteer program, 4-H agents must make positive change in the way people view volunteers. To do this, agents should connect the role of volunteers to the mission in both traditional and non-traditional ways. As more volunteers engage in new mission-critical activities, the more the Extension office will view them in new ways.

An example comes from the 4-H club program. For decades, volunteers have organized and coordinated the operation of a 4-H club. In this role, volunteer organizational leaders have guided youth and other volunteers in the club mission. Research has shown that 4-H clubs provide the best opportunity for youth development. Developing new clubs and supporting existing clubs is critical in 4-H. At the same time, other responsibilities demand 4-H agent's time. A new volunteer opportunity would be to develop a volunteer liaison to the community clubs. This middle-management volunteer role would provide support for club development. The result for the 4-H program could be three-fold—first, new clubs would provide opportunities for new 4-H members; next, the quality of existing clubs would be improved through increased support; finally, respect for volunteers would be increased as Extension staff witness the growth in the 4-H program.

Make the Case for the Volunteer Program

One of the most difficult tasks faced by some 4-H agents is convincing the county and Extension office of the value of volunteers and the need to devote adequate resources and respect into the operation of the 4-H volunteer program. The case can best be made by demonstrating how volunteers have helped youth in the county. This includes statistics, success stories, and the ability to quote research studies. Communicating the value and return on investment from volunteers to all stakeholder groups is a responsibility of the 4-H agent, youth, and key volunteers.

Personal Leadership and Personal Power

In order to play a leadership role in creating a successful 4-H volunteer program, 4-H agents must have the ability to influence others. This means having some personal power. Personal power refers to the 4-H agent's ability to influence others through an individual's attributes, in contrast to influencing people through force of the 4-H agent position. Five major sources of personal power impact influence over others. These include:

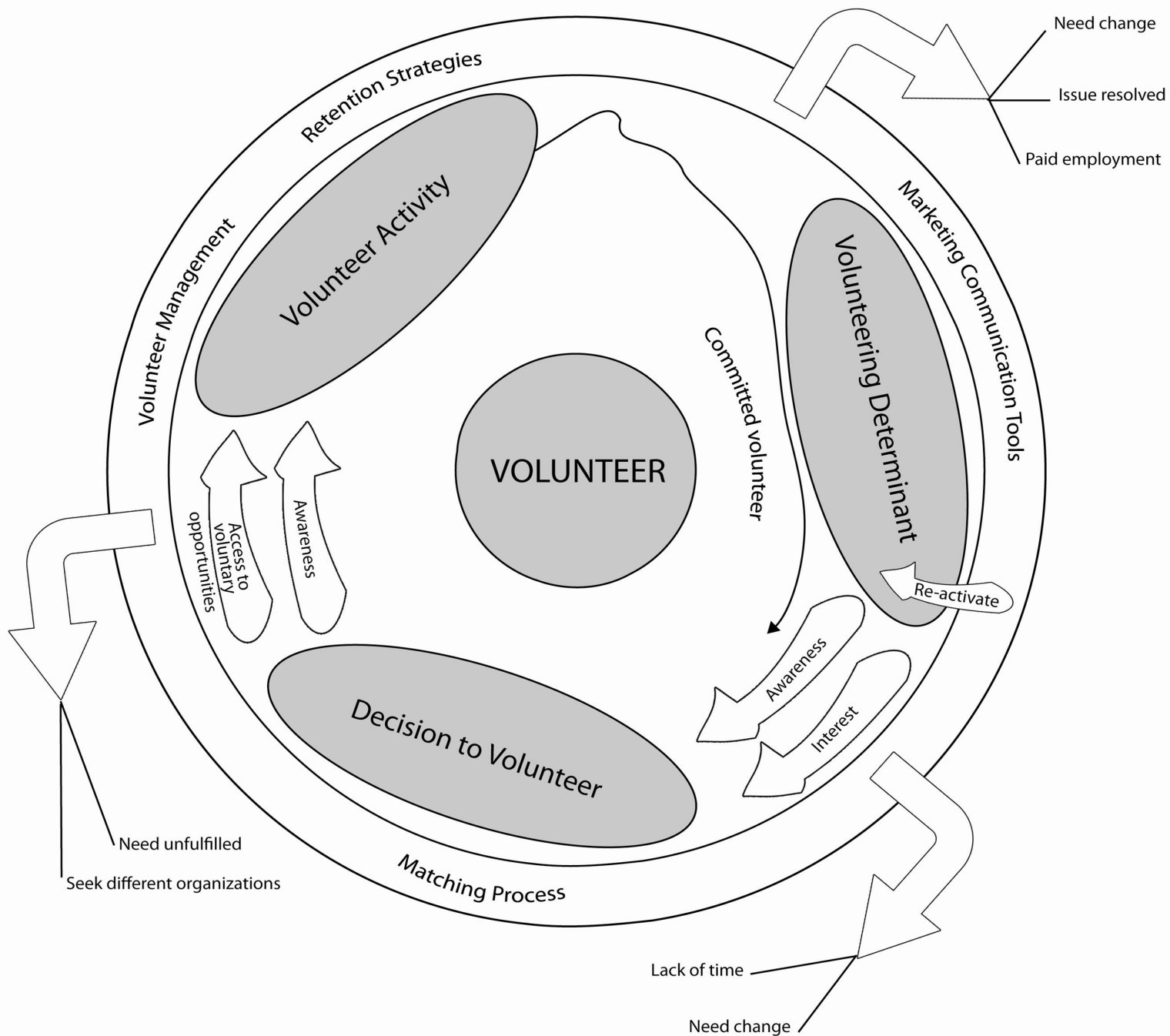1. The power that stems from a 4-H agent's reputation in the field.

Figure 1. Volunteer life cycle (Bussell & Forbes, 2003)

2. The power that stems from a 4-H agent's ability.

3. The power that stems from a 4-H agent's clarity of personal objectives.

4. The value that volunteers place on the relationship with the 4-H agent.

5. The power that stems from communication

6. The optimism that stems from a 4-H agent's self-confidence and self-esteem.

Power of Reputation

One aspect of personal power is the 4-H agent's professional reputation. If the 4-H agent has developed a reputation for excellence in the volunteer field, respect will be developed and given by other 4-H agents in the state. Reputation power is primarily established at the county level by people who are proactive and go beyond what is expected. When a 4-H agent succeeds at improving the quality of 4-H program by empowering volunteers, a reputation is developed. Likewise, providing more opportunities for youth by expanded volunteer involvement strengthens a 4-H agent's reputation.

Get involved in state and national initiatives related to volunteerism. The value of the networking and training will outweigh the time invested and will increase the power of the 4-H agent's reputation. Remain connected with the State Volunteer Specialist and the Regional Specialized agent responsible for volunteerism. They would be more than happy to collaborate on these opportunities.

Power of Ability

Having the ability to coordinate, manage, and lead volunteers that can be relied upon will influence others. Become an expert in the volunteer field and this will have influence over others with less expertise. Others will see this leadership and trust will be established.

To develop ability power, continuous self improvement is necessary. Leaders with ability power are always trying to gain new knowledge they can use. They further their education through reading, attending seminars, and training. They are not afraid of applying new knowledge and can be relied upon by others to help solve problems.

Too many times complacency sets in and improvement will cease. Lack of knowledge related

to current issues in volunteerism undermines the 4-H volunteer program and the personal influence of a 4-H agent. 4-H agents are a source of information and expertise only if they maintain that expertise.

Power of Direction

Perhaps the most common source of personal power a 4-H agent can have is the influence that derives from having a vision for the county 4-H program. People respond positively to someone with a clear sense of direction and purpose. Leaders have a strong personal identity and desire to accomplish a purpose.

The influence that comes from direction starts with the ability to influence oneself. McCurley and Lynch (2006) suggest:

It begins with quiet self-assessment of where one wants to go and what impact one wants to make. It begins with setting clear goals that burn within and fuel the desire to succeed.

Have passion about volunteer involvement. Failure to have passion will prevent a 4-H agent from inspiring others to have passion for the 4-H program. Successful 4-H agents have a passion for the mission of 4-H and a passionate belief that volunteers can make a difference in accomplishing the mission of 4-H.

Power from Relationship

Another source of personal influence comes from the value that paid staff and volunteers place on the relationship with the 4-H agent. Increasing personal power comes from developing positive relationships with paid staff and volunteers. Positive relationships come from finding the good in people and not dwelling on mistakes.

One technique often used is validation. Validation is making positive statements about a person's qualities. It is different from recognition in that recognition focuses on an act and validation puts the focus on the person. Leaders build relationship power by making people feel welcome, valued, and cared about. Volunteers only care for and value the relationship when they feel valued and cared for.

Power from Communication

Paid staff and volunteers will follow and be inspired by a 4-H agent that articulates a message that they want to hear. Communicating a belief that paid staff and volunteers already have is inspiring. For 4-H this message centers on the development of youth. It is difficult for people associated with the 4-H program to disagree with the mission of helping youth. Connecting paid staff and volunteers in the vision of helping youth succeed is role of the 4-H agent. Power will result from this shared vision.

Developing good communication skills is essential. Communication skills are verbal and non-verbal words, phrases, voice tones, facial expressions, gestures, and body language that are used in the interaction between people. Verbal communication is the ability to explain and present ideas clearly, to diverse audiences. This includes the ability to tailor the delivery to a given audience, using appropriate styles and approaches, and an understanding of the importance of non-verbal cues in oral communication. Oral communication requires the background skills of presenting, audience awareness, critical listening, and body language. Non-verbal communication is the ability to enhance the expression of ideas and concepts without the use of coherent labels, through the use of body language, gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice, and also the use of pictures, icons, and symbols. Non-verbal communication requires background skills such as audience awareness, personal presentation, and body language.

Power from Optimism

One of the more important elements of personal influence is optimism. Leaders inspire confidence. Pessimism does not inspire confidence. 4-H agents should focus not only on the future, but a better future. Keeping the hopes and dreams of people associated with the 4-H program alive. Remaining focused on the future of the 4-H program will inspire confidence in others.

Setbacks in the volunteer program will occur. With any setback, the role of the 4-H agent is to focus on the future and not on the setback situation. Successful 4-H agents will focus on three key

elements in a time of setback. Focus on goals of the 4-H program. It is easier to see adversity as temporary that will be overcome tomorrow, when the focus remains on goals. Focus on learning. Any situation is an opportunity for learning. Incorporate the learning aspects of a setback rather than blame and recrimination. Finally, be persistent. 4-H volunteer programs do not fail until people quit trying. During difficult times, optimistic people are more likely to persevere compared to pessimistic people (Peterson, 2000).

Conflict Resolution

Conflict is an interesting phenomenon. Almost everyday people encounter conflict. Conflicts can occur in one's personal life, in the Extension office, or within a 4-H program. Given how common conflict situations are and how frequently individuals deal with conflict, one would think that conflict resolution would be easier. The reality is that most people report little confidence in addressing conflict.

Conflict involves differences between individuals and/or groups. Three common definitions that describe conflict are:

- an open clash between two opposing groups or individuals.

- opposition between two simultaneous but incompatible feelings.

- a state of opposition between persons or ideas or interests.

A review of these definitions, identify characteristics that describe conflict. These include people, emotions, and interests. Conflicts occur when what someone wants is different from what someone has. In general, someone has what somebody else wants or is keeping someone from getting. Often, when this happens, the focus shifts from the "issue" to the people involved. For many the outcome they seek is:

If they can't get what they want,
I can get what I want.

A Technique to Manage Conflict

Effectively managing conflict in a 4-H program when it occurs is a two-step process that starts with:

1. How conflict is assessed, followed by

2. What action (or inaction) is taken.

Success in managing conflict is how well we:

1. Creativity and insightfully diagnose the cause of conflict;

2. Skillfully take action to resolve the conflict.

A popular technique to resolve a conflict is by using the Circle of Conflict. The Circle of Conflict is a tool that identifies and categorizes the underlying causes of a given conflict. It categorizes the causes into categories: Values, Relationships, Externals/Moods, Data, Structure, and Interests. The simplicity of this tool is that by categorizing the conflict gives the ability to direct the focus of the conflict from Relationships, Values, and Externals/Moods to Data, Structure, and Interests to Common Interests.

What is important to understand is that conflict rarely goes away on its own and part of be successful is skillfully resolving conflict. For a complete guide to using the Circle of Conflict tool visit the Florida 4-H website or contact the RSA in your district or the state volunteer specialist.

Complaint Protocol in Florida 4-H Programs

On occasion, conflicts and complaints cannot be resolved in an informal procedure. In these situations, a formal process has been established.

4-H Protocol for Handling Concerns — For Agents

As with any organization, challenges will arise, and Florida 4-H is not immune. However, when there are clear guidelines for handling those concerns, the result can end in a more positive outcome. In Extension, customer satisfaction surveys collect data to improve Extension programs and maintain or recruit a clientele base. Complaints can be used as a part of those data.

The following are suggestions for handling complaints and are Best Management Practices published by the Federal Benchmarking Study Team, who studied ten large companies and sixteen government agencies.

• Make it easy for members/volunteers to complain and they will make it easy for program personnel to improve. Don't take it personally, listen, apologize that they have had a negative experience, show genuine concern, truly understand what the problem is, and take notes.

• Respond to complaints quickly and courteously with common sense, improving loyalty and respect.

• Resolve complaints on the first contact. If there is a written policy that governs the complaint, take a moment, find it, and clear up the situation as soon as possible. Return calls in a timely manner. Have an appropriate response or inform the member/volunteer that their concern has been forwarded to the appropriate person and provide contact information.

• Utilize technology. Track complaints, how many complaints are of the same nature? Track emails, phone calls, voice mail messages, times, dates, office visits, etc. Utilize this information to improve programming. If the Agent cannot make the final decision to rectify the situation by use of the conflict protocol, then forward the data to the decision makers.

• Always maintain a professional attitude. While acknowledgement that some incidents are awkward and at times hurtful, Dr. Suzette Haden Elgin, in her book The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense at Work, advises, "Defending yourself from verbal abuse—calmly, professionally, and successfully—can be crucial to on-the-job success."

Steps for Handling 4-H Member or Parent Complaints Within the County

It is recommended that each 4-H Agent assemble a small committee of leaders, members, volunteers and staff, (by random selection), to serve as a Review Board to assist with issues that cannot be quickly resolved within the County Extension office. 4-H members and volunteers may appeal to this Review Board but be aware that the Review Board's decisions are final, even if the Agent does not agree with the decision. Unless issues are illegal or involve discrimination, they should not be forwarded to the District Extension Director, the State 4-H Program Leader or County Officials. However, the respective County Extension Director, District Director, and Regional Specialized 4-H Agent should be kept informed of these issues. (4-H Agents and County Extension Directors should contact the District Extension Director or the State 4-H Program Leader for clarification of county or University of Florida policies).

1. When a member or parent has a complaint, the first step is to inform the 4-H club volunteer.

2. If the 4-H Club Volunteer cannot resolve the issue, it should be reported in writing to the County 4-H Agent. The County Agent should alert the CED.

3. If the County 4-H Agent cannot resolve the issue, then it should be brought to the County Extension Director (the issue should be stated in writing before being presented to the CED).

4. If the County Extension Director cannot resolve the issue, then it should be referred to the Review Board. Review Board decisions are final.

The State 4-H Program Leader, the five District Directors, and the County Officials who oversee the county 4-H program would like to provide all 4-H members, volunteers, and staff the opportunity to handle all issues internally, in an effort to promote growth and build stronger, more cohesive units within the counties.

It is further recommended that each county inform all members, leaders, and volunteers about this policy at the beginning of the 4-H year, or whenever they become affiliated with the program.

Steps for Handling Complaints Against 4-H Volunteers

From time to time complaints arise as to the manner in which 4-H volunteers conduct their duties. To the extent possible, disagreements should be handled informally through discussion with the parties involved.

• A complaint against a county level volunteer should normally be in written form and signed by the complainant in order for an official inquiry to proceed. The 4-H Agent will review the complaint to determine if the complaint has substance and whether further action is necessary. The agent will want to consult with the County Extension Director / District Director for guidance in making a decision.

• Complaints arising out of a volunteer's service beyond the county level, including those in which they are serving as a county volunteer at multi-county events, will be handled through the State 4-H Program Leader, 4-H Youth Development Program or a designee in consultation with the respective District Director and Regional Specialized 4-H Agent. Complaints must be in writing and signed by the complainant. The State 4-H Program Leader (or designee) will review the complaint to determine if it has substance and whether further action is necessary.

There is no further recourse for the Volunteer. The decision made by the Extension Agent, CED, or State 4-H Program Leader is final and cannot be appealed.

Pursuant to University of Florida Rule 6C1-3.0031, Volunteer Services may cease, at anytime, at the request of the volunteer or at the discretion of the Extension Agent. If an Extension Agent, CED, or the State 4-H Program Leader determines that a volunteer's services should be terminated as a result of the complaint(s) filed or

otherwise, he/she should notify the volunteer, in writing, of the effective date of termination.

Reassigning Volunteers to Another Responsibility

Sometimes, even through the best practices of recruitment, screening, placement, and training of volunteers, we still cannot prevent a situation in which a volunteer must be reassigned, restricted in certain activities, or dismissed.

Before terminating the services of a volunteer, depending on the nature of the complaints, faculty should determine whether or not the volunteer's services might be better in another role or position. Giving individuals a different role may better match their skills, abilities, or interests. If this is not the case, services can be terminated using the following procedures.

Terminating Volunteer Services

Regardless of whether the volunteer is initially informed by mail or in person; there are some tips to remember. Preserve the dignity of the volunteer whose services are being terminated by being discreet. Share the details only with that volunteer. Once the decision has been made to terminate a volunteer's services, be firm, direct, and unequivocal. Only include information about the decision; reasons and background information are no longer relevant. Announce the decision rather than discuss the decision. There is no going back. If the volunteer wants to vent, allow that, but "keep cool" and be quiet. Don't counsel the volunteer as to what they should have or could have done. This may have had value earlier, but not at this juncture.

Volunteer whose services have been terminated in person should receive a follow-up letter. The letter need only state the date of termination and "housekeeping" matters (i.e. return of equipment, teaching supplies, etc.).

Inform other volunteers, faculty, and 4-Hers who need to know of the change of status of the volunteer. Do not elaborate. "Mrs. XYZ is no longer the leader of the West Whatever Club. The new leader is Mr. ABC. We thank them for their service to youth through 4-H."

Conclusion

Florida 4-H is fundamentally a volunteer led organization. The partnership between the 4-H program and volunteers will determine the success as an organization. Therefore, sustaining volunteer programs is an important responsibility for 4-H agents.

This factsheet addressed: (1) how the volunteer life cycle contributes to sustaining volunteer programs; (2) what 4-H agent attributes are necessary to sustain volunteer programs; and (3) conflict resolution.

Furthermore, the following questions were also addressed:

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