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Nancy Shelstad
University of Idaho

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Fulfilling Needs in County 4-H Programs with Volunteer Facilitation Coaches

Abstract

University of Idaho Extension 4-H professionals have learned to work with volunteers in new ways to expand capacity and continue to build the quality of the 4-H program in Idaho. This article identifies how defining new position descriptions for volunteer facilitation coaches addressed two program needs, expanded capacity, and provided a higher quality experience for new 4-H families. If Extension staff invest time in selecting, training, and mentoring volunteer facilitation coaches, other volunteers are better able to fulfill important roles related to meeting specific needs of the 4-H program.

Keywords: [volunteers](#), [building capacity](#)

Nancy Shelstad

Regional Youth
Development Educator
4-H Youth
Development
University of Idaho
Boise, Idaho
shelstad@uidaho.edu

Introduction

In an effort to expand capacity and build the quality of Idaho's 4-H program while preserving resources, University of Idaho Extension 4-H professionals explored ways to better use volunteers' skills and abilities. To help us meet this goal, we delegated certain responsibilities to volunteers we recruited to serve in a middle-management position (Cassill, Culp, Hettmansperger, Stillwell, & Sublett, 2012) titled "facilitation coach." These middle-management volunteers organize and manage specific program components on behalf of Extension personnel. Aspects of the position include mentoring or coaching other volunteers and supporting new families when they enroll in 4-H.

Facilitation Coaches' Roles and Responsibilities

Facilitation coaches serve as liaisons between county 4-H professionals and other volunteers. The Extension professional and facilitation coach both sign the position description, which identifies the purpose, responsibilities, expectations, qualifications, and term of the facilitation coach position. The description emphasizes teamwork and the constant communication required between the facilitation coach and the Extension professional.

Two implementations of the facilitation coach position help illustrate the varied purposes and responsibilities that can be involved in the role.

- One county identified a need to provide short-term projects in areas such as veterinary science, robotics, and shooting sports. In this case, the facilitation coach's first task was to help existing project volunteers plan, organize, and implement short-term 4-H projects, thereby expanding Extension's capacity to accommodate a variety of participant needs. Also in this county, some volunteers leading ongoing projects expressed the desire to continue volunteering but the need to do so on a short-term basis. At the same time, many parents of youths who participated in single-day camps wanted longer term programming. These needs merged into 6-week project sessions. For this scenario, facilitation coaches worked with the project volunteers to organize multiple sessions and communicated to the Extension office regarding challenges, successes, and general progress.
- Another task of facilitation coaches has been to work with families new to 4-H, mentoring them through their first year in the program. New 4-H families typically have questions and sometimes feel lost or disconnected during the first year of enrollment (Astroth, 1985). The facilitation coaches stay in regular contact with these families, keeping them informed of procedures and upcoming events, offering advice, and serving as their contact person for answering questions. All the while, the facilitation coaches keep the Extension office apprised of any concerns.

Additional opportunities for facilitation coaches have been identified but not yet implemented. Two categories of roles identified include one-time event coordinator for community or public relations events and ongoing activity coordinator for programs such as day camps.

Selection and Training of Facilitation Coaches

We have focused on inviting existing 4-H volunteers to fill facilitation coach positions on the basis of their knowledge of the 4-H program, organizational skills, ability to work in teams and effectively delegate, and sound communication and human relations skills. We learned that existing volunteers who have a good base knowledge of 4-H and know other volunteers can more easily handle the facilitation coach role. They are able to manage aspects of the program assigned to them, knowing how their piece fits into the bigger picture and building on preexisting relationships with other volunteers.

Whether informal or formal, orientation for the facilitation coach is important for his or her success, although by being existing volunteers, the coaches we have recruited have needed very little 4-H training beyond a review to ensure that they are current on general 4-H policies and procedures and risk management. An area for which we did not anticipate the facilitation coaches needing training was working with and recruiting other volunteers—specifically understanding that volunteers are more likely to agree to help when they receive a personal request as opposed to a general request via mass communication. The mentoring/coaching nature of the role and the need for constant communication with the Extension office are aspects of the position that do necessitate training. This training has included reviewing the roles and expectations outlined on the position descriptions, defining communication expectations, and providing necessary resources, such as organizational tools, contacts, facilities, and program information.

Reflections

Our use of a facilitation coach for short-term project delivery helped project volunteers share certain responsibilities. Whereas previously multiple project volunteers had each worked with two or three youths per club across the county, one or two volunteers were able to address the same projects for the entire county with

10 to 15 youths at one location and time. Offering more short-term projects brought new youths into the 4-H program, with many of them going on to join a community club to engage in additional projects and opportunities. As this outcome of incorporating facilitation coaches increased enrollment, it counteracted some of the existing club volunteers' initial resentment about the addition of facilitation coaches and concern that the short-term project delivery method would draw members out of their clubs. Instead, new youths were recruited.

Selecting coaches carefully and matching position requirements with an individual's skills were keys to our successes. After the first year, the new-family facilitation coach position was adopted for use in additional counties to improve communication and relations between the 4-H program and new 4-H families. Short-term projects continued into the third year, and the majority of the offered projects reached enrollment capacity.

Adopting the facilitation-coach model required an in-depth look at how volunteers were being used in programs, what the existing areas of work within a program were, and how a volunteer could meet community needs in the future. Developing position descriptions and selecting the right volunteers for the positions (Culp, 2013) required an investment of time and training, with the payoff being greater program capacity and additional ways to disseminate information.

Summary

Although we developed the facilitation coach concept in the context of 4-H youth development programming, there is good potential for this concept to be applied to other Extension program areas. Considering the volunteer base and extensive programming of the master gardener and food safety advisor programs, the facilitation coach concept may help supplement limited Extension personnel time in these realms as well. Capacity may be increased by identifying specific programming areas that could be managed by a volunteer with applicable training. Examples may include using volunteer facilitation coaches for coordinating one-time community events such as farmer's markets or health fairs or organizing short-term programs such as junior master gardener offerings or hand-washing education.

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