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Sustaining Members, Volunteers, and Leaders in Community Organizations

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Sustaining Members, Volunteers, and Leaders in Community Organizations

Abstract

Community organizations must be self-sustaining in order to remain active, viable, and strong. The three primary steps involved in sustaining members, volunteers, and leaders include evaluate, recognize, and either retain, redirect, or disengage. A volunteer performance evaluation will determine whether individual and organizational goals are being met. Whether formal or informal, recognition helps volunteers feel they are making a meaningful contribution to the organization and its programs and clientele. The final step in Sustain includes one of three options: retain, redirect, or disengage. At the conclusion of the cycle, a volunteer may enter only one of these three steps.

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Introduction

In order for community organizations to remain active, viable, and strong, they must be self-sustaining. No organization can effectively serve a community if most of its time, energy, and resources are devoted to regenerating itself annually. Sustain, the fourth category of the GEMS Model of Volunteer Administration (Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998) consists of five steps, including evaluate, recognize, retain, redirect, and disengage. Sustain is often the most overlooked and underemphasized category of the GEMS Model. However, once an Extension professional has completed the cycle of generating, educating, and mobilizing member, volunteer, or leader involvement, the next cycle is easier to complete if the initial group is sustained and becomes reengaged to serve the program again.

Sustaining members, volunteers, and leaders and their continued efforts and service to the program is imperative to the continued health and well-being of any community organization. Sustaining adds stability, credibility, and continuity to organizations. The three primary steps involved in sustaining members, volunteers and leaders include *evaluate*, *recognize*, and either *retain*, *redirect*, or *disengage*.

Evaluate

The first step in sustaining a volunteer program is evaluation. Evaluation is an important component of Extension and volunteer programs (Culp, Brown, Hall, McDonough, Ragland, Weaver, & Whitson, 2009). A volunteer performance evaluation will determine whether individual and organizational goals are being met. Formal evaluation will be more successfully implemented if volunteers are involved in developing the process, establishing criteria, and setting goals (Peterson & McDonald, 2009).

Documenting work to learn from past accomplishments and mistakes is important for volunteers, the volunteer administrator (Extension professional), and the community organization and its programs. Written documentation can provide a framework for decision making in determining new assignments, promotions, and recognition, and providing recommendations for the volunteer. Evaluation should be ongoing throughout the four GEMS categories (Generate, Educate, Mobilize, and Sustain) and should be conducted both formally and informally. Hart (2005) reported that evaluation should be part of ongoing supervision, not saved for certain times of the year or done only when projects have been completed.

Strengths, weaknesses, achievements, and areas needing improvement, as related to the previously identified volunteer position description, should all be included in an effective evaluation. Finally, an effective volunteer evaluation will also include the questions: "How could this program be improved? How could this volunteer role be accomplished more effectively and efficiently? What do you like best and least about volunteering for this organization and this program?"

Recognize

Volunteers should be recognized for their positive contributions to the organization and its clientele. Kwarteng, Smith, and Miller (1988) defined recognition as formal or informal attention given to the volunteer to provide a sense of appreciation, security, and belonging. Whether formal or informal, recognition helps volunteers feel they are making a meaningful contribution to the organization, its programs and clientele. Formal recognition is given publicly and generally includes a tangible, extrinsic gift, award or memento (Culp & Schwartz, 1998; Stillwell, Culp, & Hunter, 2010). Informal recognition is provided either privately or spontaneously and involves a "pat on the back," a personal thank-you note, card, phone call, or a few words made in passing (Culp & Schwartz, 1998; Stillwell, Culp, & Hunter, 2010). Fritz, Karmazin, Barbuto, and Burrow (2003) corroborated findings by Culp and Schwartz (1998), who reported that the most meaningful recognition that Extension professionals could provide was to foster opportunities for 4-H members to express appreciation to volunteers.

Retain, Redirect, or Disengage

The final step in Sustain includes one of three options: retain, redirect, or disengage. At the conclusion of the cycle, a volunteer may enter only one of these three steps. Retaining volunteers must be planned for and contributes programmatic strength and continuity. Volunteers must be retained from the moment of entry through the beginning of their next service engagement. The first-year experience usually will determine whether the volunteer will continue service to the program. Retention is best accomplished by meeting volunteer needs, serving continuing motivations, and providing a fulfilling relationship with the organization, its clientele, other volunteers, and

professional staff.

Extension professionals should never assume that a volunteer will continue serving in the same role in the organization. Making such an assumption requires the volunteer administrator to make a decision for the volunteer. This is both inappropriate and insulting. However, the Extension professional can actually compliment the volunteer by asking, during the evaluation, if he or she would like to continue serving the organization again. This conversation presents a good opportunity to highlight and share some of the contributions the volunteer made that have impacted the program, its clientele, and ultimately the community organization.

A volunteer may be retained in the same capacity or redirected to another role within the organization. In some cases, a volunteer needs a change of pace or a fresh perspective due to burnout. In other cases, the volunteer has not been placed in the role providing the best fit for his or her individual strengths, skills, and interests, and the needs of the role. Whether a volunteer is retained or redirected, as illustrated in the GEMS Model (Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998), a volunteer may proceed through the spiral into the Education category. If retained, the volunteer benefits by acquiring additional skills to execute responsibilities. If redirected, the volunteer will reenter the GEMS spiral at the orientation step, receiving new position responsibilities, knowledge, and the skills necessary to perform effectively.

In some cases, even after redirection, a volunteer may disengage from the organization. If this is necessary, the process should be clearly defined and objective (Culp & Doyle, 2011). At other times, a volunteer may choose to leave the organization for any of a multitude of reasons, many of which are positive and are a natural evolution of volunteer development. White and Arnold (2003) found that the two primary reasons that 4-H volunteers left their role were that their child was no longer in 4-H and that time demands increased. Extension professionals should remember that disengagement is a natural component of volunteer involvement and should plan to make this phase as positive and smooth as possible. Indeed, disengagement is a natural and very real aspect of every relationship.

Conclusion

Sustaining members, volunteers, and leaders, and their continued efforts and service to the program is imperative to the continued health and well-being of any community organization. Sustaining adds stability, credibility, and continuity to organizations. Additionally, a sustained membership, volunteer force, and leadership base enables the organization to focus its efforts on programs and clientele, rather than devoting a considerable amount of time to recreating its own infrastructure. While it is unrealistic to believe that every member, volunteer, and leader will want to continue his or her relationship with the organization, much can be done to strengthen and extend that relationship and continue the individual's service to the organization. In the end, this will result in a stronger, more viable organization that is better able to more accomplish its mission, fulfill its vision, and achieve its objectives, goals, and action steps.

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