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Using Non-Extension Volunteering as an Experiential Learning Activity for Extension Professionals

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Abstract: *Extension professionals can gain much-needed competencies in volunteer administration through experiential learning by participating in volunteer activities. Experiential learning is a means of behavior change that allows the individual learner to reflect on, abstract, and apply their experiences to new situations. This article expands on Boyd's list of methods for overcoming barriers to developing competencies in volunteer administration. Extension professionals can participate in experiential learning on demand and for little to no cost, while also creating public value.*

Extension Professionals as Volunteer Administrators

Volunteers are used in every program area of Extension, making the vast majority of county-level Extension professionals administrators of volunteers. However, county-level Extension professionals often lack competency and experience in this role, affecting the impact of programs, participation of volunteers, and risk and liability issues for Extension (Boyd, 2004). While Extension agents do participate in volunteer management professional development programs, they reported spending only 1-5 hours on the subject over a 24-month span (Hange, Seevers, & VanLeeuwen, 2002).

Boyd (2003) conducted a Delphi study that found a consensus between volunteerism experts on ways for organizations to overcome any barriers to the acquisition of volunteer administration competencies. Solutions provided by the jury included offering graduate courses in volunteer administration, offering professional development opportunities, allowing flexible work schedules to obtain training, and making technology and applications accessible to assist volunteer administrators perform their duties.

It is to this list that we suggest the addition of one other item that may be helpful in enabling Extension professionals to build volunteer administration competencies: The use of a non-Extension volunteering activity as a means of experiential learning.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning can be described as the individual process of change that occurs when 1) action creates an experience, 2) the individual reflects on the action and experience, 3) draws abstractions from the reflection, and 4) applies the abstraction to a new experience or action. Empirical evidence has demonstrated the effectiveness of this learning style (Itin, 1999).

Extension professionals seeking to improve their volunteer administration competencies can engage in an experiential learning activity of their own at any time by volunteering their time serving a non-Extension organization, particularly one with which they have little existing connection. The Extension professional will be able to realize a paradigm shift as they begin to see volunteerism through the eyes of a volunteer instead of those of a manager. The experiences gained as a volunteer can be reflected on and abstracted in the hopes of being

applied as new knowledge as a volunteer administrator.

Additionally, Extension professionals may learn by observing the volunteer administrators of other organizations to study what to—and what not to—do. Outside organizations may also serve as a laboratory for small-scale experimentation with new methods of leading and working with others before such techniques are employed in Extension programs.

The Reflection and Application Process

On their own, action and experience do not necessarily create learning. Extension professionals engaging in a non-Extension volunteer activity must be directed to reflect on their experience and encouraged to apply the newfound knowledge to their own volunteer programs in order for the activity to have been worthwhile and effective to the volunteer as a learning experience. The following steps can help with the process of turning a concrete experience into abstract knowledge. These steps can be taken individually or during a group debriefing session.

First, reflect on what happened leading up to and during your volunteering experience. Many states have a preferred volunteer management model, including ISOTURE, LOOP, and GEMS, that would be a helpful tool to reference as a type of checklist (Boyd, 2004). With each step of the model, think about what happened during the volunteer activity and what strengths and weaknesses were evident about the organization or the volunteer administrator. What was done well, and what could be changed about how things were done? How did this organization recruit, train, motivate, and recognize volunteers, and was it done well?

Second, reflect on what the volunteer experience meant. How did each participant feel as a volunteer? Did volunteers feel used to their full potential? Were volunteers thanked or made to feel appreciated? Were they provided with clear direction? Now, how might volunteers in Extension programs feel? Think about Extension programs from the perspective of a volunteer. Coming off of a recent volunteer activity should make it easier to put oneself in an Extension volunteer's shoes to reflect on what it might be like to serve Extension.

Finally, reflect on what actions can be undertaken based on lessons learned. Are there changes that could be implemented in programs that use volunteers? Is there a better way to reward volunteers or could a volunteer recruitment program be instituted? Are there negative practices that could be modified to create a better volunteer experience?

Other Benefits

When an entire county-level office volunteers together, it serves as a team-building exercise or even a fun break, away from the duties of work. Top volunteers from an Extension program may be invited to join in as well, offering an opportunity for Extension professionals and their volunteers to work together on the same level. This new dynamic to the relationship can enable better interactions and stronger bonds between Extension and its volunteers.

Additional benefits for Extension are realized when Extension professionals volunteer in their local community. Volunteering with and for other community citizens and organizations adds to Extension's network, which creates opportunities such as Extension advocacy, recruiting potential volunteers for Extension programs, and discovering subject-matter specialists to utilize.

Finally, Extension budgets may be maximized through non-Extension volunteering. One Extension group in Texas was able to trade volunteer hours in exchange for rent-free use of a facility for holding educational programs. Volunteer time may be leveraged in order to obtain goods or services of an amount greater than the time invested. Many Extension volunteer groups collaborate with like-minded organizations in an effort to maximize exposure and impact. By taking advantage of strategic local volunteering opportunities, Extension can easily and inexpensively increase its community awareness, advocacy, marketing, and diversity. In this scenario, Extension stays true to fulfilling its mission, while actively serving others.

Conclusions

Experiential learning activities can take place at just about any time and do not cost Extension anything in terms of training costs.

Furthermore, volunteerism in outside organizations by Extension professionals can help create goodwill for Extension in the community.

Continued volunteerism by Extension professionals can enhance the opportunities for learning, as they have the opportunity to experience, reflect upon, abstract, and apply competencies in all phases of the volunteer experience. Volunteering for other organizations within the local community can be an important factor in the successful launching of a new Extension professional's career.

Websites such as www.volunteermatch.org and www.serve.gov can help match individuals with local volunteer opportunities. Non-profit organizations such as animal shelters, food banks, civic beautification groups, youth mentoring programs, or home remodeling organizations often have abundant opportunities for episodic volunteers.

Extension professionals serving as volunteers represent a win-win situation for all involved. The community benefits, the individual benefits, and Extension benefits as well.

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