

Growing With Volunteers!

More than forty six Cornell Cooperative Extension community horticulture programs rely on volunteers, predominantly Master Gardener Volunteers, to support and deliver programming in communities throughout New York State. The following pages highlight three main areas of volunteer program management, as well as providing tips for using them.

There are three main components of volunteer development:

- Recruitment
- Supervision/coordination
- Retention

Retention

Though it may seem logical to end with retention, we begin with it to emphasize its importance. It does not matter if you are able to recruit one hundred volunteers a month if, by the end of the month, only ten volunteers are still involved and contributing.

“The best recruiter in the world will get burned out if a revolving door has new recruits that enter, become disillusioned, and leave.”

Most volunteers have a cluster of motives for volunteering, not just one. The reasons why people continue to volunteer may be different than what attracted them to the organization in the first place. It is the responsibility of the program leader/coordinator to help volunteers remain committed, challenged, and engaged. Volunteers want to feel a sense of accomplishment for the things that they are doing and to be recognized for them as well.

5 ways to increase a sense of belonging and accomplishment in your volunteers:

1. Volunteers are motivated when they gain in some way—a new skill, a new relationship, a feeling that what they do makes a difference. Help volunteers understand how their task fits into the bigger picture, how their effort is important to the organization and how others are counting on them.
2. Ask volunteers for frequent feedback through discussion at meetings, quick email questions, written short surveys or other ways. Summarize their suggestions, give them to decision makers, and let volunteers know what response or change will follow.
3. Give responsible volunteers jobs with increasing authority and an “important” title. Establish written policies that allow for planned replacement and upward mobility of the volunteers.
4. Keep track of each volunteer’s contributions so you can give specific details and examples when you praise or recognize them.
5. Give volunteers regular chances to interact with other volunteers and professional CCE staff. This allows them to share what successes they have had as well as to get ideas from others with a similar mission.

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7 ways to recognize the contributions of your volunteers:

1. Develop a “rising stars” list. Groom the most talented and committed volunteers and encourage them to move into positions with more responsibility and leadership.
2. Thank volunteers personally or with a note using their name (always avoid “Dear Volunteer”).
3. Introduce volunteers to important people within your organization and the community.
4. Let the community know the benefits of including volunteers and the contributions that they have made to your organization. List volunteers and their accomplishments in press releases, newsletters, feature articles and other publications.
5. Name an event or a scholarship after them or nominate them for a local, regional or national award.
6. Make volunteers feel “special”. Give them small gifts (a book, a plant), hold regular social events where they can mix with CCE staff and board members and hold regular volunteer banquets where their accomplishments are highlighted.
7. Include volunteers in meaningful roles in workshops or trainings.

Coordinating/Supervising Volunteers

Volunteers should be provided with everything that they need upfront. A volunteer coordinator should never assume that a volunteer knows how to perform an assigned task or knows how to get what they need to complete the task.

“The best managers are the ones that make sure that the people they supervise are on the right job and are given the right tools that they need to succeed.”

Orientation and Training:

It is very important for a volunteer coordinator to spend time orienting and training volunteers prior to the start of their volunteer service. A brief written orientation packet for volunteers to take home and review and refer to when they have questions should be created. The best packets will contain things such as the CCE mission statement and organizational policies, a description of what the Master Gardener Volunteers will be expected to do as well as the time they will be expected to commit. Include information on CCE’s responsibility to volunteers and explain any technical jargon or acronyms to volunteers so they won’t feel left out of conversations. The CCE’s Volunteer Involvement Policy and Procedures (<http://staff.cce.cornell.edu/vip>) is a good resource for helping create your orientation packet.

Task Assignment:

It is essential that volunteer coordinators think through program needs and identify where volunteers can effectively contribute. This preplanning should be done prior to recruiting

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volunteers. It is critical to have meaningful work for volunteers from the day they begin. Having the wrong volunteer for a job can often be worse than having no volunteer at all. Focus effort on matching tasks with volunteer's abilities and interests.

The volunteer coordinator should work with volunteers to break projects or assignments into clearly defined groups of tasks and create a timeline and bench markers for monitoring progress toward goals. Also take time to review these items together on a regular basis to help reinforce a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

Working as a Team:

The most successful volunteer coordinators use team building techniques whenever possible to help volunteers develop the capacity to work together rather than in isolation. It is the responsibility of the coordinator to establish "mutual respect" rules from the outset. These would include civility, confidentiality, and respect of others work styles and feelings. Regular volunteer meetings can be an ideal opportunity for coordinators to model good communication, conflict resolution and team effort.

Delegation:

Volunteer coordinators need to have confidence that they selected quality volunteers capable of doing a good job. Learn to create thoughtful plans and to delegate well. Avoid the temptation to micromanage.

Supervision:

The most effective volunteer coordinators define the volunteer relationships and expectations from the outset by providing volunteers with a written position description/contract listing their duties/responsibilities as a volunteer. The position description/contract should clearly state the time and skills required for the volunteer position as well as the training and supervision that will be provided. For help with job descriptions consult CCE's Volunteer Involvement Policy and Procedures (<http://staff.cce.cornell.edu/vip>).

<p>“Volunteers want staff to be strong leaders and educators with effective communication and organizational skills.”</p>

Lack of a clear contact between volunteers and leadership often leads to forgetfulness, misunderstandings, and unclear expectations. A schedule of regular contact (meetings, phone calls or emails) should be established between volunteers and volunteer coordinators. In larger organization key volunteer leaders might be trained and responsibilities to mentor and stay connect might be delegated.

Volunteer coordinators might also compliment position descriptions/contracts with individual plans for each volunteer. Plans can include a listing the volunteer's interests, projects, successes and challenges. Individual volunteer plans should be reviewed at least annually.

Negative Evaluation:

Confronting the nonperformance of a volunteer can be the greatest challenge of volunteer coordinators; however it is leadership's responsibility to address the issue so others don't suffer. Coordinators might be tempted to just do the work themselves to avoid confrontation but this is

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rarely a successful long-term solution. It can also reinforce inadequate work and send the wrong message to the specific volunteer and the whole the group.

There are many reasons why volunteers are not functioning in the ways that they should, including their tasks aren't a good match for their interests and skills, other "problem" volunteers are interfering with their work, or personal reasons. Working with the volunteer to identify what is the root of the poor performance can be the first step. How you handle the situation from there will depend on whether the issue is a result of interpersonal or organizational issues. At times it may be appropriate to contact your supervisor or campus leadership for suggestions.

Although many leaders are reluctant to do so, you can fire a volunteer if attempts to resolve the poor performance repeatedly fail. Just because a volunteer is not salaried does not mean that leaders should expect a lesser performance from them.

Recruitment

Currently many nonprofits are competing for volunteer's time, talents, and energy. Simply advertising a need for volunteers will not get volunteer programs the right people for the job. Volunteer coordinators need to take the time to recruit volunteers who have skills that their programs need. Note that these skills do not need to be related to gardening as programs may greatly benefit by recruiting volunteers who have expertise in marketing, public presentations or technology. It is also critical to recruit people who can genuinely, knowledgeably, and enthusiastically represent the organization and its programs.

Volunteer coordinators also need to consider that people volunteer for many reasons including affiliation/socialization, challenge, creativity/self-expression leadership, power/prestige, recognition, security, self-improvement, sense of duty, and variety in their lives.

Volunteering is a leisure time activity. When people commit to volunteering, they are not giving up chores or work. They are giving up things like going to out to meals or the movies, spending time on other hobbies, visiting with friends, and taking naps.

When recruiting keep in mind why a person might want to volunteer their time in your organization and what your program can offer in return for their volunteer commitment. Do you provide opportunities for volunteers to make new friends, to make a difference in their community or in other people's lives, to feel satisfied by what they are doing, to have fun or benefit in other ways not offered through their paying jobs or other activities?

People like to be part of a popular and active organization. Focus on highlighting these aspects of your organizations when recruiting the volunteers you need.

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