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Retaining 4-H Volunteers by Effectively Delegating 4-H Program Responsibilities

Deb Jones, Volunteer Development Specialist

There is an old adage of “work smarter, not harder.” An effective leader/manager has to be able to motivate others to be involved. All too often, we attempt to do it all ourselves, thinking we can do it more quickly than taking time to explain to another person. By effectively delegating, we can involve many more people in the tasks at hand and in the end, come out with a better product with a larger, more motivated workforce behind it.

By effectively matching a volunteer’s talents and interests with the appropriate position in 4-H, we can avoid some of the common reasons people choose to no longer work with an organization. Keep volunteers happy in what they’re doing and they will stay with us; they may even talk others into volunteering.

Common reasons people choose to no longer continue working with an organization include:

- Boredom-routine. Is a volunteer ready to be promoted?
- Discontent: personality differences
- Idleness: fluctuating workload, inefficient staffing structure
- Lack of interest in work
- Ill-defined assignments
- Inadequate supervision
- Misunderstanding of policies and their purposes
- Resentment, overload, or unrealistic deadlines
- Poor communication within work team
- Emotional stress and personal difficulties
- No respect, appreciation, recognition for what they do

Like all of us, volunteers want to be treated with respect, and to be given the appropriate information and tools with which to do their jobs. No one wants to come to meetings and hear only what has happened and will happen. Each member of the committee or council must be actively involved in the projects in some fashion. People will stay involved in groups where they are given responsibilities and made to feel an integral part of the team. Some people think that volunteers need to be catered to; that we shouldn’t ask too much of them. Discard this notion. Volunteers become involved and continue to stay involved if they feel what they are doing is useful and appreciated. Lifestyles are way too hectic to be bothered with “busy work” and attending meetings where nothing happens.

By taking time, at the outset, to explain a project, you will end up with more time to handle additional projects. Define the assignment in terms of expected results – be sure the person understands the end result, and don’t be too concerned about how they will achieve it. You may give them an example of how it has been done in the past to get

them going, but have faith in their methods, even if they're different from the way things have traditionally been done. You may learn some time saving techniques.

Define how much authority the volunteer has in carrying out the task. If you are familiar with the person and his/her skills, you may have him/her carry out the task and report back to you. If you have doubts, you may ask how he/she would carry out the task and report to you with the strategy prior to implementation.

Be sure you inform the volunteer of any relevant policies, guidelines, etc., within which the job must be done. For example, with a livestock show superintendent, there may be participant contracts, tagging/weigh-in dates, fair premium book guidelines, etc., that must be followed. The volunteer must be aware of these as s/he assumes the role of show superintendent.

If you know of any **other resources** that would make the job easier, let the volunteer know. It could be files from previous events or people who have served in the role previously.

If you're looking at an overwhelming task, such as recruiting 48 people each month to provide refreshments, **divide the work into small increments.** Rather than recruiting 48 people yourself, recruit eight people who are willing to be in charge once a month. They would each recruit six people, who would each donate one refreshment a month.

Establish time lines or deadlines for certain parts of the assignment if necessary, and maintain regular contact with the volunteers to see how they are progressing. These contacts may be more often if you are unfamiliar with the volunteer's work, and less often once you feel comfortable with his/her skills and work styles.

The goal of delegation is to clearly establish responsibilities and deadlines so that you can let go of control and empower others to carry out the task. If you're new at delegating, it may take a while to become comfortable with turning over aspects of the program. As you put the right people in place for each task and become used to their work style, you'll find that you rely on them taking responsibilities that will now free you to manage the overall program. In many cases, there are things that you do not particularly enjoy doing each year. Find a volunteer who enjoys that role, give him/her the needed information and resources, keep in touch regarding progress, and let the volunteer assume the responsibility. You may find individuals with particular skills who are more suited to the role than you are. Our communities contain a wealth of skilled volunteers who are willing to share their expertise with us, if only they are asked. A good evaluation of 4-H programming is not to see how much one person has accomplished individually, but how many volunteers the Agent involved in accomplishing the many tasks inherent in the program.

Resources:

TAXI (Taking Anybody into Expanded Involvement), National 4-H Council, 1994.

McBee, Shar, Volunteer Management Review, Feb. 12, 2003, "Overwhelmed? Take it Easy."

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