

Lesson 15: **Recruiting, Training and Recognizing** **Volunteers**

All 4-H clubs must have an adult leader. Historically, 4-H has relied upon volunteers to fill this role. 4-H defines a volunteer as anyone who is not paid through the Cooperative Extension System.

If you are starting a 4-H club within another youth serving organization, you may have paid staff to cover this leadership role. However, volunteers can increase the capacity of paid professionals to reach additional youth within the community, and you may find it helpful to enlist parents or other adults in the community who are interested in supporting youth through an out-of school experience and who would be willing to work with your club.

Recruiting, training and supporting volunteers are important tasks for the youth development professional. This is particularly true for the 4-H youth development professional. Often, the most direct contact a 4-H agent has with youth is through the volunteers who work with them. It is imperative, then, that you become skilled in all aspects of volunteer development and that you know the policies in your state regarding registration and training requirements for volunteers. You will need to share this information with staff from partnering organizations as well, and assist them in accessing volunteer training opportunities in your county, area/district and state. If you did not receive this training during your new agent orientation, you will need to contact your state 4-H office to seek out this information.

If you are a youth development professional in an organization other than 4-H, ask your 4-H agent what requirements must be met for screening, training and appointment processes in your state. Find out how to access volunteer training opportunities scheduled in the county, area/district, or state. Because you are not paid through Cooperative Extension, you are eligible to participate in this training and any of the volunteers you choose to involve in your program are eligible as well.

States have adopted their individual processes to identify, select, orient, train, utilize, recognize and evaluate leaders. When using paid staff, partnering organizations may share the responsibility with 4-H to meet the state's policies and proce-

dures for volunteer leadership roles. Often, the partnering organization assumes the liability for their staff in the role as “volunteer” leader for the 4-H club unit. Volunteers and paid staff are required to participate in training for the leadership role they have accepted with the 4-H program.

Recruiting Volunteers

Research tells us that volunteers want to feel that their service is helping the community. Different people may be motivated by different opportunities. To be successful in recruiting and maintaining volunteers, you must always be sensitive to your volunteers’ needs. Most volunteers become involved because they want

- An opportunity to help their families.
- An opportunity to work with youth.
- An opportunity to learn new skills.
- An opportunity to help the community.
- An opportunity to meet and get to know people in the community.
- An opportunity to develop leadership skills.
- An opportunity for community recognition.
- An opportunity to use personal skills and knowledge.
- An opportunity to learn more about community efforts and activities.

Recruiting efforts will be enhanced if you can highlight the way participation as a volunteer meets some of these needs. It will also be important to survey the interests, talents and skills of parents and other potential volunteers. Use this information to match people to volunteer positions.

You will need to have identified the responsibilities associated with the leadership roles you are seeking to fill. People want to know what they are agreeing to do before they volunteer.

If you are forming a single project 4-H club, you may only need a club leader and a project leader to teach the project material selected. If you are forming a multi-project 4-H club, you will need a club leader and project leaders for each of the projects offered.

The following job descriptions for these two leadership positions provide some guidelines in outlining the tasks most commonly associated with these volunteer positions.

Club Leader/Organizational Leader:

The job description of the club leader has become fairly standard across states. The club leader is the organizational leader of the group and works with members and their parents to provide experiences that will support youth in their positive growth and development. The club leader is responsible for three major functions:



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- 1.) Supporting youth. This includes providing encouragement, ideas and learning opportunities to individual 4-H members and the group
- 2.) Recruiting other volunteers to assist with project and club activities as needed.
- 3.) Linking the club to the county 4-H office and program. Every local 4-H club is a part of a system defined by Cooperative Extension. The club leader maintains contact and keeps communication open between the club and the local 4-H office through the 4-H Agent.
- 4.) Bridging the club with the community. Club leaders assure that the 4-H club contributes to and also makes use of community resources. They keep the community informed about the youth development opportunities in which club members are involved. Communities are proud to support 4-H when the activities and goals of the program contribute to the positive growth of their youth and support community goals.

The club leader is usually the first leader recruited when the group is being formed. You may want to identify someone to fill this role before holding your first organizational meeting, although this is not essential.

Project Leader:

Project leaders take on the role of teacher. They focus their efforts on teaching life skills through the content of selected topics. Life skills addressed include concern for others, effective communication, positive self-esteem, responsibility and cooperation. The project leader is responsible for four major functions.

- 1.) Creating a positive learning environments to assure that the needs of all youth involved in the project are met and developing caring relationships with youth.
- 2.) Providing experiences that teach the project subject matter using experiential learning methods.
- 3.) Providing opportunities and processing those experiences to support the development of life skills.
- 4.) Helping youth set realistic goals for themselves within their project and support them in reaching those goals.

In addition to these leader roles, clubs often have an events coordinator, teacher/mentors for club officers and recognition coordinators. Be prepared to explain all of these roles at the organizational meeting held with your new club. At that time the group can determine the leadership roles that they believe they will need.



Training and Supporting Volunteers

As soon as volunteers have been secured, training must be offered to prepare them for the roles they will be expected to fill. It is not fair to ask someone to assume a responsibility without adequate preparation for the task. Your job as a youth development professional is to assure that youth and volunteers find their experiences in your organization to be fulfilling and growth producing. Certainly, a 4-H Club will not be successful if the adult leaders do not feel confident about their ability to carry out their functions and assured that they are contributing to the program. Because 4-H relies heavily on volunteers, a wealth of material has been developed over the years to assist agents in recruiting, training and supporting volunteers.

Training

Training opportunities for volunteers will focus on the skills and attitudes that have been shown to characterize effective leaders as well as on the delivery of opportunities to develop life skills.

Training addressing skills and attitudes of leadership skills will focus on preparing leaders to

- Have an understanding of youth development principles.
- Take responsibility as a leader – set limits and provide guidance.
- Share age appropriate responsibilities with youth.
- Have high expectations and hold youth accountable.
- Exhibit sincere interest in what youth think and want.
- Exhibit respectful behaviors toward youth and their ideas, feelings, skills and fears.
- Recognize the accomplishments of young people.
- Encourage cooperation and refrain from comparing youth with one another.
- Behave with fairness and objectivity and never show favoritism.
- Maintain professionalism and not attempt to be “one of the kids”.
- Be honest and sincere in all interactions with youth.
- Have the ability to facilitate teamwork and leadership.

Training addressing life skill development often occurs as training for specific project delivery. The 4-H project materials produced through the Cooperative Curriculum System include leader guides that review the use of hands-on teaching experiences for youth in specific subject matter and include directions for facilitating and processing those experiences to foster the growth of personal life skills. It will be important to provide a hands-on training experience in the use of these materials to all project leaders. The involvement in a group training experience assures that leaders understand the



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content and the experiential learning method used to deliver that content. Providing adequate training also serves as a form of recognition.

Ongoing support throughout the year is important to the successful performance of the volunteer. Support can be provided by

Maintaining contact with volunteers through the year.

People are motivated to achieve when they feel their efforts are respected and that help is available when needed.

Assuring that meetings involving volunteers are clearly focused and relevant to the needs of the volunteers.

Reflecting on your communication style (face-to-face, phone, email, etc.) and assessing its effectiveness in connecting you with others. Assure that your communication skills demonstrate that you value your volunteers.

Skillfully handling conflicts that arise. Disagreement within an organization is to be expected, because people bring differing ideas to a situation or task. Disagreement can lead to new ideas and creative ways to approach situations when dealt with openly and honestly. When ignored or handled poorly it can escalate to unnecessary levels of conflict. Youth development professionals must become skilled in helping volunteers work through differences and reduce the potential for conflict. They must also gain skills in moving people through the conflicts that arise.

Recognizing Volunteers

Encouragement and recognition are essential for active involvement of youth and volunteers in 4-H. Everyone likes to be appreciated for doing a good job. The kinds of recognition that are meaningful vary from individual to individual. It will be important to find out what forms of recognition are rewarding to the volunteers in your program.

Recognition activities need not be formal or expensive. The following list of informal and inexpensive recognition ideas for 4-H volunteers provide some ideas to work from. This list is just a start. As you learn to know the volunteers who work in your 4-H program you will be able to identify the kinds of recognition that are most meaningful to each individual.

- Find opportunities to publicly thank volunteers and acknowledge their contributions. For example, write a news article for the local newspaper or your newsletter highlighting a volunteer's contributions or impact.
- Involve volunteers in providing input into the programs, coordinating programs or events, presenting workshops,



- etc.
- Invite volunteers to participate in staff meetings and conferences.
 - Know the special interests of volunteers and design volunteer opportunities to capitalize on those interests and talents.
 - Ask a volunteer to speak on behalf of the program to an outside agency or to a donor.
 - Promote a volunteer to expanded or higher-level responsibilities.
 - Write a letter of reference.
 - Nominate volunteers for community, state or national awards.
 - Encourage youth to send thank-you notes to volunteers who have helped them.
 - Feature volunteers in print or media promotional publications.
 - Provide recognition tokens such as plaques, certificates, pins, etc.
 - Offer perks such as free admission, parking, reserved seating, etc.
 - Have a Volunteer of the Month Award.
 - Host a banquet, luncheon, party or reception in the volunteers' honor.

4-H looks at volunteer leadership as a continuous process which begins with identifying a need which a volunteer can fill and ends with a decision to either renew the volunteer commitment, transfer into another volunteer role or discontinue volunteer service. The goal of the youth development professional is to both keep and further the growth of volunteers within the organization. This goal is accomplished by providing the training needed to be successful, offering ongoing support in the performance of the volunteer role, and providing recognition for the work.

1. Adapted from: *Ohio 4-H Volunteer Fact Sheet #40*

