

Competencies, Benefits and Limitations for Volunteer Resource Managers Utilizing Volunteers as Middle-managers within a Volunteer Organization

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Abstract

The impact of a volunteer resource manager is greatly increased when volunteers are utilized in mid-management positions to significantly expand organizational and programmatic outreach. Determining the competencies necessary to successfully develop and utilize mid-managers within a volunteer group is a key component of volunteer administration. This study utilized a Delphi technique to determine competencies needed to be a successful Master Gardener Administrator, as well as the benefits and limitations associated with these volunteer programs. The results of this study provide insight into effectively utilizing volunteers as mid-managers, along with advantages and limitations of doing so. This list is applicable to volunteer resource administrators of all types in helping effectively utilize their time, energy and resources for maximum impact and program success.

Key Words:

volunteers, master gardeners, Cooperative Extension, middle-managers, competencies

Introduction

Volunteer groups and associations support the mission of Texas Extension through their education and service (Burkham & Boleman, 2005). They are facilitated through Texas AgriLife Extension and partner with Extension to achieve

organizational goals. Boleman and Burkham (2005) noted that volunteers are one of Texas AgriLife Extension Service's most valuable assets, and that they help Extension reach more clientele, ensure the relevancy of programs, deliver Extension education and interpret the value of

Extension to stakeholders. Much of the needed help that volunteers give Texas Extension stems from their own interests and experiences. Volunteer talents are enhanced as they receive training from experts in various disciplines. This develops a system where volunteers are improving their own skills while helping others. Master volunteer programs were first utilized in United States Extension education efforts in the 1960's (Wolford, Cox, & Culp, 2001). These volunteers are local people with an interest in a particular subject. After participating in educational classes to increase their knowledge, they use that knowledge to work as volunteers within their community. Today, the Cooperative Extension program in the United States utilizes volunteers as an essential part of the delivery of its educational programs (Boyd, 2004).

Master volunteer associations comprise an important segment of Texas Extension volunteer programming (Burkham & Boleman, 2005). Extension master volunteers are unique volunteers that receive a specified number of training hours with a commitment to return a designated number of hours in volunteer service. The minimum standards for Texas Extension master volunteers are 20 hours of training and 50 hours of service. Master volunteer programs provide Extension with several advantages by multiplying expertise in a subject area, building a support base, allowing agents to have time for advanced programming, enabling Extension professionals to focus on issue based programming, increasing self-esteem of volunteers, and providing for volunteer support to Extension programming (Laughlin & Schmidt, 1995).

"Master Gardener" is one type of Extension master volunteer association. Master Gardeners are local community members with an enthusiasm about

gardening. These volunteers support Extension programming efforts by participating in different projects throughout the year. Projects include, but are not limited to, answering gardening phone calls at the county Extension office, working with 4-H youth, planting community gardens and conducting workshops (Welsh, 2004). Master Gardeners augment the County Extension Agents' efforts to help fulfill the mission of Extension of providing quality, relevant outreach and continuing education programs and services to local citizens.

Review of Related Literature/Conceptual Basis

Previous studies have researched various aspects of volunteerism, such as motives, benefits, reasons for remaining a volunteer and competencies needed by volunteer administrators. Much time and research efforts have gone into developing volunteer management models such as ISOTURE (Boyce, 1971), L-O-O-P (Penrod, 1991), GEMS (Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998), and PEP (Safrit & Schmiesing, 2005). However, related to volunteer management models or lists of professional competencies needed by volunteer resource managers, there is no written list of competencies needed for volunteer resource managers desiring to utilize volunteers in middle-management positions within a volunteer organization.

The authors have defined middle-management positions within a volunteer organization as leadership positions where volunteers are accountable to a volunteer resource manager while being utilized to fulfill roles in the areas of coordinating, leading and/or supervising in the context of organizational projects or committees. Middle-management positions within a volunteer organization refer to leadership positions within an organization where volunteers are accountable to a volunteer

resource manager while being utilized to fulfill roles in the areas of coordinating, leading and/or supervising in the context of organizational projects or committees.

Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem, and Gliem (2005) outlined competencies for contemporary volunteer administration. In this study, data were solicited from members of the International Association of Volunteer Administration regarding their perceptions of the importance of components of contemporary volunteer administration. A result of this research was the listing of 62 specific competencies needed for effective volunteer management and administration.

In 2004, Boyd examined volunteer management functions by conducting a study to determine specific “competencies that would be required by administrators of volunteers in the coming decade” (p. 54). Boyd’s study utilized a Delphi technique with experts consisting of administrators of volunteers, directors of regional volunteer centers, Extension volunteer development specialists, and university faculty members from across the nation to develop group consensus. Ultimately, 33 competency statements divided into five constructs were retained by the expert panel. The five constructs included organizational leadership, systems leadership, organizational culture, personal skills and management skills.

A study was conducted by Cooper and Graham (2001) utilizing Arkansas Extension personnel to identify and describe competencies needed to be successful county Extension agents and successful Extension administrators. The participants of this study labeled thirty-nine competencies as highly important for success. These competencies were divided into seven categories as follows: 1. program planning, implementation, and evaluation, 2. public relations, 3. personal and professional development, 4. faculty/staff relations, 5.

personal skills, 6. management responsibility, and 7. work habits. Specific competencies cited that related directly to the use of volunteers as mid-managers were: develop volunteer leaders, ability to delegate, and give others freedom to perform the job.

Volunteers provide a greater diversity of Extension contacts to targeted groups that may not be reached by other methods (Laughlin, K.M., 1990). County Extension agents enjoy greater program visibility and positive image-building activities through volunteers. Volunteers often have resources and traits such as time, talents, diverse ethnic backgrounds and previous experiences that allow them more access to and identification with audiences than a single county Extension agent would have. Laughlin (1990) noted that volunteers can often provide a “special quality of contact no Extension professional has time for.” She proceeded to state that for Extension clientele, volunteers can be “credible, comfortable, and unintimidating mentors” (p. 57).

Snider (1985) pointed out that there are opportunities for volunteer coordinators to give volunteers more program ownership when the agent allows volunteers to perform specifically identified program management tasks. Master Gardener administrators who capitalize on the skills and talents of veteran Master Gardeners enhance the overall quality of the Master Gardener program while offering Master Gardeners more ownership in the program and providing options for continued involvement (Van Der Zanden, 2001).

Purpose and Methods

The purpose of this study was to identify best management competencies, benefits and limitations for county Extension agents who are Master Gardener administrators. The results of this study will

provide volunteer resource managers a list of competencies and successful practices needed for utilizing volunteers within their organization as mid-managers of other volunteers. This list will help volunteer resource managers to most effectively utilize their time, energy and resources for maximum impact and program success. This was accomplished using input from veteran Master Gardener administrators throughout the Texas. Study participants were identified as expert Master Gardener administrators by the State Master Gardener Coordinator of Texas and confirmed by District Extension Administrators.

The Delphi Procedure

The Delphi technique is the research strategy that was utilized to develop group consensus in this descriptive research design. The Delphi's purpose is to solicit reliable responses from a panel of experts regarding a specific problem or dilemma (Stitt-Gohdes & Crews, 2004). Guidelines for conducting this Delphi study followed those proposed by Linstone and Turoff (1975) and Turoff and Hiltz (2006).

A Delphi study is typically conducted in a number of rounds. In the first round, a questionnaire is sent to panel members to complete and return, and their responses are analyzed. A new questionnaire is then created based upon the previous responses, and then sent to panel members. The goal of the series of questionnaires is to achieve consensus of opinion by allowing members to contemplate and re-rate their opinions regarding items in the questionnaire. The Delphi method is reliable when an expert panel has at least 15 members and is a true representation of the expert community (Dalkey, Rourke, Lewis, & Snyder, 1972).

Instrumentation

A sequential series of questionnaires was completed by a panel of Texas AgriLife Extension county Extension agents involved in managing Master Gardeners. Responses from each round of questionnaires were collected and analyzed. Common and conflicting viewpoints were then identified. Responses from Round I were used to create Round II, and responses from Round II were used to create Round III.

Data Collection

The initial round asked the panel of experts to respond to three open-ended questions. The panel was asked to respond with as many statements as they desired to the following questions: 1. What competencies do you need to be an efficient and effective Master Gardener Coordinator? 2. What are the perceived advantages of being a Master Gardener Coordinator? and 3. What are the limiting factors (problems) of being a Master Gardener Coordinator?

Round I.

The Round I questionnaire was sent electronically twice following Dillman's (2000) technique. The responses made by participants to the three questions in Round I were analyzed and coded using qualitative research methodology outlined by Dooley and Murphy (2001). Fifteen of the original 20 members of the expert panel responded to the first round (response rate = 75%).

Round II.

The researchers examined the statements identified in Round I to find commonalities among them and to combine similar statements. Combining similar statements resulted in 67 competency statements, 31 statements of benefits, and 22 statements regarding limitations. These statements were used to create the questionnaire for Round II. In Round II, the

expert panel was asked to rate their strength of agreement with each statement on a six-point Likert-type scale, where 6 was assigned to “*Strongly Agree*,” 5 was assigned to “*Agree*,” 4 was assigned to “*Somewhat Agree*,” 3 was assigned to “*Somewhat Disagree*,” 2 was assigned to “*Disagree*,” and 1 was assigned to “*Strongly Disagree*.” Round II data were analyzed using SPSS 12.0 for Windows software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize data. All 15 panel members who responded in Round I also responded in Round II.

Round III.

The purpose of Round III was to develop consensus among the panel members. The panel members were sent a third revised instrument and asked to re-evaluate each statement using the same six-point Likert-type scale, where 6 was assigned to “*Strongly Agree*,” 5 was assigned to “*Agree*,” 4 was assigned to “*Somewhat Agree*,” 3 was assigned to “*Somewhat Disagree*,” 2 was assigned to “*Disagree*,” and 1 was assigned to “*Strongly Disagree*.” This allowed participants to either retain or revise their initial score. Participant’s scores were not revealed to the entire group, only to the participant who owned the score. The 120 statements that were sent in Round II and rated by the panel were once again sent to the panel along with additional information for a final rating. The additional information was the mean score that each statement received from the panel in Round II, the percentage of the panel that gave that particular statement a “5” (*agree*) or “6” (*strongly agree*) rating, and the rating that they as a panel member gave each specific statement in Round II. Consensus was derived with 15 of the 20 experts questioned responding to all three rounds of questionnaires.

Findings and Conclusions

The expert panel found consensus on 64 of the 67 statements in Round III related to question one, “What Competencies Do You Need to be an Efficient and Effective Master Gardener Coordinator?” All of these competencies have an effect on the overall program and the success of its volunteers; however, 16 of these competencies relate directly to the successful use of volunteers as mid-managers within the organization (Table 1).

Volunteers utilized as mid-managers have the potential to be a powerful tool in an organization if volunteer resource managers devote the time and energy needed to develop and support these leaders. Volunteers need the guidance of volunteer resource managers who can focus their efforts toward productive outcomes (Boyd, 2004; King & Safrit, 1998; Wolford *et al.*, 2001). Participants in this study concurred with these thoughts, as 100% (n=15) of them gave a rating of “*agree*” (5) or “*strongly agree*” (6) to the following competency statements: “leading with a shared vision and shared purpose” ($M=5.73$, $SD=.46$); “leadership skills” ($M=5.73$, $SD=.46$); “people skills” ($M=5.73$, $SD=.46$); and “management skills” ($M=5.73$, $SD=.46$); (Table 1). Other competency statements in this study that support this theme and reached consensus with 86.67% (n=13) of the panel members giving each statement a rating of “*agree*” (5) or “*strongly agree*” (6) include: “expecting volunteers to follow through with what they say they will do” ($M=5.33$, $SD=.72$) and “ability to identify volunteer’s strengths and weaknesses and see where they would best function within the organization” ($M=5.20$, $SD=.86$) (Table 1).

Table 1
Statements Reaching Consensus related to Competencies Needed for Successful Utilization of Volunteers as Mid-Managers

Statement	Panel Mean Rating*	SD	No. Rating 5 or 6	% Rating 5 or 6
Ability to inspire your volunteers to rise to the challenge	5.73	.46	15	100
Leading with a shared vision and shared purpose	5.73	.46	15	100
Willingness to let volunteers plan and implement programs, yet be involved enough to provide guidance, assure accuracy of information, and compliance with Texas AgriLife Extension requirements	5.73	.46	15	100
Leadership skills	5.73	.46	15	100
“People” skills	5.73	.46	15	100
Management skills	5.73	.46	15	100
Ability to effectively enlist the assistance of your Master Gardeners	5.67	.49	15	100
Allowing tasks to be completed in ways that you would not have personally done them	5.60	.51	15	100
Trusting volunteers to complete tasks given to them	5.60	.51	15	100
Avoiding micro-managing the volunteers	5.60	.51	15	100
Ability to give the volunteers the proper amount of responsibility within the organization	5.53	.52	15	100
Expecting volunteers to follow through with what they say they will do	5.33	.72	13	86.67
Knowing your volunteers and their life experiences and respecting them as professionals	5.33	.72	13	86.67
Ability to identify volunteer’s strengths and weaknesses and see where they would best function within the organization	5.20	.86	13	86.67
Ability to develop the proper balance of ownership of the Master Gardener program between the volunteers and the Extension Agent	5.40	.99	12	80
Ability to delegate work	5.27	.96	12	80

* Scale ratings are as follows: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Somewhat Disagree*, 4 = *Somewhat Agree*, 5 = *Agree*, 6 = *Strongly Agree*

These data support the statements of Snider (1985) and King and Safrit (1998) that Extension programs are most impactful when Extension professionals and volunteers have a partnership and a balance of program ownership. Consensus within the panel was found when 100% (n=15) of the panel gave a rating of “agree” (5) or “strongly agree” (6) to the following competencies needed to be an effective and efficient Master Gardener Coordinator: “Willingness to let volunteers plan and implement programs, yet be involved

enough to provide guidance, assure accuracy of information, and compliance with Texas AgriLife Extension requirements” ($M=5.73$, $SD=.46$); “Ability to effectively enlist the assistance of your Master Gardeners” ($M=5.67$, $SD=.49$); “Allowing tasks to be completed in ways that you would not have personally done them” ($M=5.60$, $SD=.51$); and “Ability to give the volunteers the proper amount of responsibility within the organization” ($M=5.53$, $SD=.52$). Another statement reaching consensus among the panel with a rating of “agree” (5) or

“strongly agree” (6) by 12 (80%) of the participants was the “Ability to develop the proper balance of ownership of the Master Gardener program between the volunteers and the Extension agent” ($M=5.40, SD=.99$). Each of the 64 competencies that the expert Master Gardener coordinators agreed are essential for effectively coordinating a group of Master Gardener volunteers are all competencies that coincide with the standard volunteer management models such as ISOTURE (Boyce, 1971), L-O-O-P (Penrod, 1991), or GEMS (Culp et al., 1998). Furthermore, many of the 64 competencies reaching consensus of agreement within this study have also been identified as essential

competencies for managing volunteers in previous research studies. The prior studies of Cooper and Graham (2001), Boyd (2004) and Safrit *et al.* (2005) mentioned previously in this manuscript as having studied competencies for volunteer administration and competencies needed to be successful county Extension agents and administrators, contained needed competencies that related to the empowerment and use of volunteers in middle management positions within volunteer organizations. A comparison of the findings of these competencies is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2
Statements related to Competencies Needed for Successful Utilization of Volunteers as Mid-Managers Found in Four Articles

Statement	Lockett (2007)	Boyd (2004)	Cooper & Graham (2001)	Safrit et. al. (2005)
Ability to inspire your volunteers to rise to the challenge	*	*	*	*
Leading with a shared vision and shared purpose	*	*	*	*
Willingness to let volunteers plan and implement programs, yet be involved enough to provide guidance, assure accuracy of information, and compliance with Texas AgriLife Extension requirements	*			
Leadership skills	*	*	*	*
“People” skills	*	*	*	*
Management skills	*	*	*	*
Ability to effectively enlist the assistance of your Master Gardeners	*	*	*	*
Allowing tasks to be completed in ways that you would not have personally done them	*		*	
Trusting volunteers to complete tasks given to them	*	*		
Avoiding micro-managing the volunteers	*			
Ability to give the volunteers the proper amount of responsibility within the organization	*	*		
Expecting volunteers to follow through with what they say they will do	*			
Knowing your volunteers and their life experiences and respecting them as professionals	*			
Ability to identify volunteer’s strengths and weaknesses and see where they would best function within the organization	*	*		*
Ability to develop the proper balance of ownership of the Master Gardener program between the volunteers and the Extension Agent	*	*		
Ability to delegate work	*		*	*

* Indicates that the competency statement was directly stated or implied in that article.

Table 3
Statements Reaching Consensus Regarding Benefits of Being a Master Gardener Administrator Related to Utilizing Volunteers as Mid-Managers

Statement	Panel Mean Rating	SD	No. Rating 5 or 6	% Rating 5 or 6
Increase Extension's impact in community	5.80	.41	15	100
Expands the reach of the agent	5.67	.49	15	100
Satisfaction of helping people grow in their knowledge	5.53	.52	15	100
Ability to address more issues	5.40	.63	14	93.33
Develops leaders	5.47	.74	13	86.67
Positive advocates of extension willing to interpret benefits to decision makers	5.27	.70	13	86.67
Ability to conduct large educational endeavors	5.00	1.25	13	86.67
Additional help to address programming needs	5.27	.80	12	80
Having volunteers who can help with the program area requirements	4.80	1.32	12	80
Reaching audiences not typically addressed due to lack of time	4.93	.88	11	73.33
Increased contacts	4.80	1.01	10	66.67

* Scale ratings are as follows: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Disagree, 4 = Somewhat Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree

The second question that the expert panel was asked to respond to was, "What are the perceived advantages of being a Master Gardener coordinator?" Data analysis revealed that consensus was reached on 19 of the original 31 statements regarding perceived benefits of being a Master Gardener coordinator, with 11 of these directly relating to benefits of utilizing volunteers as middle managers.

Some of these statements reaching consensus referred to the benefit of increased Extension programming. The two statements that received 100% (n=15) agreement from the panel pertaining to this topic are: (Master Gardeners) "Increase Extension's impact in community" ($M=5.80$, $SD=.41$), and (the Master Gardener Program) "Expands the reach of the Agent" ($M=5.67$, $SD=.49$) (Table 3). Other statements attaining consensus related to expanding Extension programming include: "Ability to address more issues" ($M=5.40$, $SD=.63$, $n=14$, 93.33%); "Ability to conduct

large educational endeavors" ($M=5.00$, $SD=1.25$, $n=13$, 86.67%); "Additional help to address programming needs" ($M=5.27$, $SD=.80$, $n=12$, 80%); "Having volunteers who can help with the program area requirements" ($M=4.80$, $SD=1.32$, $n=12$, 80%); and "Reaching audiences not typically addressed due to lack of time" ($M=4.93$, $SD=.88$, $n=11$, 73.33%) (Table 3).

Consensus of agreement was found within the participants in this study regarding the capacity for program area expansion and increased educational program delivery options.

The expert panel came to an agreement about two limiting factors related to coordinating Master Gardeners. One of these items was that coordinating a Master Gardener program takes a great deal of time ($M=5.27$, $SD=1.33$), and the other is that an increased workload for the county Extension agent comes along with coordinating a Master Gardener group ($M=5.13$, $SD=1.46$) (Table 4).

Table 4
Statements Reaching Consensus related to Limiting Factors (Problems) of being a Master Gardener Administrator with Volunteers as Mid-Managers

Statement	Panel Mean Rating	SD	No. Rating 5 or 6	% Rating 5 or 6
Takes a great deal of the agent's time	5.27	1.33	13	86.67
Increased workload	5.13	1.46	12	80

* Scale ratings are as follows: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Somewhat Disagree*, 4 = *Somewhat Agree*, 5 = *Agree*, 6 = *Strongly Agree*

These data indicate that there are many benefits to having a Master Gardener program; however, these benefits come at a significant cost and time commitment and a perceived increased workload for the county Extension agent.

Implications for the Profession

Volunteerism is a growing trend in America and an important function within the Cooperative Extension system. The potential for Master Gardener volunteers to enhance and expand county Extension agent programming efforts is enormous; however, for this potential to become a reality, Extension personnel must be equipped with the competencies needed to successfully coordinate volunteers. Most notably, volunteer resource managers in Extension must be willing to have a shared vision and empower volunteers to implement programs.

A Master Gardener program's success or failure is often dependent on the Master Gardener administrator. If Master Gardener coordinators desire wisdom in the arena of Master Gardener management, it is imperative that they understand the competencies needed to work effectively and efficiently as a Master Gardener coordinator. This study utilized an expert panel of Master Gardener coordinators to develop a list of best management competencies and successful practices for county Extension agents who are Master Gardener administrators, and thus volunteer resource managers. Furthermore, this study revealed perceived benefits as well as

limiting factors (problems) of being a Master Gardener administrator.

A definite conclusion drawn from these data is that the use of volunteers as mid-managers is a worthwhile and profitable use of a volunteer resource manager's time and efforts. The benefits appear to outweigh the limitations. When these data are compared to other research studies, the similarities in findings indicate that the competencies, benefits and limitations of utilizing volunteer mid-managers cut across most all volunteer organization scenarios. The findings within this manuscript have positive implications for insight and education into a greater understanding of effective Master Gardener management.

Volunteer middle management and these study findings apply to and can benefit volunteer organizations other than Cooperative Extension. Most volunteer groups complete projects or annual events where volunteer middle managers fulfilling leadership roles can relieve volunteer resource managers from work that is very time consuming. This enables volunteer resource managers to focus their efforts on reinforcing other projects or beginning new projects. This is also the case when volunteer middle managers help with fundraising efforts and resource development. Furthermore, utilizing volunteers as middle managers is a way to keep volunteers engaged and excited about the organization of which they participate.

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