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Abstract

4-H professionals working with volunteers need a feedback process that opens communication and troubleshoots potential problems. The article demonstrates how the New Jersey 4-H Volunteer Review Process is an effective evaluation tool to address this need, as well as to provide an ideal forum for expanding volunteer roles through leadership development and goal setting. The process allows the volunteer and supervisor to engage in dialogue and work together to determine areas that may need improvement and build on strengths and achievements. By investing in the time taken to conduct the interview and by showing an interest in volunteer leaders, 4-H agents and staff help to promote continued and expanded volunteer efforts and programmatic successes.

Keywords:

4-H, volunteers, evaluation, interview

Volunteer development is an ongoing process, whether a volunteer is newly recruited or has been with an organization for 50 or more years. Each volunteer deserves individualized attention throughout his/her volunteer career. The New Jersey 4-H Policy and Procedure for Staffing with Volunteers utilizes the I.S.O.T.U.R.E. (Boyce, 1971) Volunteer Development System as the basis of its structure. The seven-phase process consists of: Identification, Selection, Orientation, Training, Utilization, Recognition, and Evaluation. The E - 'Evaluation' portion of this model is often the most difficult to implement. It can be seen as negative, confrontational, and requires conflict management skills. The authors, along with the Volunteer Management Committee were

challenged to dispel these ideas and create a positive method of communication to 'evaluate' the volunteer.

Because volunteers are essential to the successful delivery of 4-H programs to youth, a periodic evaluation of their performance is a critical element of program planning. Without some form of meaningful evaluation, how will one ever know if his/her efforts are having the desired effect determined in the objectives? (Baillere & Mozenter-Spiegel, 2001). Feedback obtained through a formalized evaluation process should be considered key to improving and expanding 4-H programs.

The New Jersey 4-H Volunteer Review Process was designed to serve as the E, or evaluation in the I.S.O.T.U.R.E. model. The title "review" was chosen to replace the term

“evaluation” in order to seem less threatening to the volunteer, as well as to support the goal to review the entire situation, from both the volunteer and staff’s perspectives. The process incorporates both formal and informal techniques, while effectively promoting constructive feedback to help shape the overall performance of the volunteer.

The goals of the New Jersey 4-H Volunteer Review Process are to: 1) maintain communication and open dialogue; 2) provide a method to discuss and address concerns; 3) validate the experience of the new, as well as, the more experienced volunteer; 4) gain volunteer input for the overall 4-H Youth Development Program; 5) follow a consistent process and system for evaluation (that may be used to document the efforts made to resolve volunteer performance problems); 6) guide the volunteers who need or want help in their volunteer roles; and 7) provide an opportunity for volunteers to set goals for the coming year(s).

The review process was first piloted in seven of the 21 New Jersey counties. Paid staff and volunteers utilized the *Review of Volunteer Contributions* form and process, and participated in a follow up survey. Results verified the effectiveness and value of the review process. Staff felt the process opened lines of communication that may not otherwise have occurred. This led to more follow up with volunteers and greater support of volunteer efforts. Because the review also gave volunteers an opportunity to comment on training, office support and other related topics, it allowed paid staff to identify ways to improve support and resources for volunteers. When there were specific issues, problems, or concerns that needed to be addressed, all paid staff participating in the pilot study felt that this process enabled them to address these issues

and create open dialogue. Staff also reported that all volunteers participating in the review felt it was a positive experience.

The *New Jersey 4-H Review of Volunteer Contributions* form includes questions on general information, training, satisfaction, resources, and goals. A series of 44 questions are scaled to a five item Likert-type scale of “None of the Time”; “Some of the Time”; “Most of the Time”; “All of the Time”; “Does not apply”; as well as a check for “*Goal for Next Year.*” Topics include: Club Management; Club Activities; Member Projects; Inclusion; Foster Team Work; Meet Deadlines; Communication; and Leadership.

The New Jersey 4-H volunteer review process is designed to be conducted at the end of a volunteer’s first year to validate his/her personal experience and to determine what help, support, or guidance is needed or desired to make the volunteer experience more enjoyable and rewarding. The review is also conducted with those volunteers who have completed five years (and then every five years thereafter) in their role. The purpose of the periodic volunteer review is to help shape the volunteer’s overall performance. The volunteer and supervisor set goals together for areas that may need improvement. When necessary, follow-up can then be done through a formal meeting or an informal discussion.

The county 4-H agent can conduct the review of the volunteers or delegate this responsibility to a 4-H Program Associate, 4-H Program Assistant or other 4-H staff member who has been trained on the process, goals, and philosophy of volunteer reviews. To effectively conduct the review, the interviewer initially contacts the volunteer to set up an informal meeting. Prior to the interview, the volunteer receives the appropriate forms and documents. These include a letter explaining the process, a *New Jersey 4-H Review of Volunteer*

Contributions form, and a *How Effective is Your Club?* checklist. These should be completed by the volunteer and brought to the meeting.

When setting aside time for the meeting, it is important to allow adequate time to address the needs and concerns of the volunteer. Ideally, the meeting would take place in person, but a telephone interview is also acceptable. If possible, this meeting should take place in an informal, relaxed setting. The 4-H staff person should bring the *NJ 4-H Volunteer Appointment Agreement* which details the standards of behavior, any related position description, and other related paperwork or resources that would make the session effective and successful.

The atmosphere at the meeting should be relaxed and informal while establishing ground rules for listening and interacting. The staff person should ask the volunteer to share a self-assessment related to volunteer contributions and club effectiveness. The volunteer often is harder on him/herself than is the reviewer. Based on this, the interviewer should be prepared to provide positive feedback; identify agreed upon performance levels; encourage and help the volunteer set performance goals; and listen to concerns that the volunteer expresses.

After the meeting, the staff member should make sure to follow up with the volunteer any requests for materials, training, etc. If there are performance

problems that have not been resolved with informal guidance and supervision, staff refer to the *Formal System for Resolving 4-H Volunteer Personnel Issues* for more information.

This process allows the volunteer and supervisor to set goals together for areas that may need improvement, and to build on strengths and achievements. In addition, this method of performance measurement provides feedback that helps to strengthen the 4-H program's quality and effectiveness. By investing time to conduct the interview and by showing an interest in volunteer leaders, 4-H agents and staff help to promote continued and expanded volunteer efforts. This is a win-win process where both the volunteer and the supervisor greatly benefit.

References

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