

Training Volunteers

By Ann C. Logue

The Junior League Wants You!

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Mary Harriman was a rich, young New Yorker who decided that she wanted to do more than just be a socialite. So, she and a few friends started volunteering at a Lower East Side settlement house. But they quickly realized that unless they had training, there was really nothing they could do.

In 1901, Harriman founded the Junior League for the Promotion of the Settlement Movement, now known simply as the Junior League—a not-for-profit women’s group whose mission is to “improve the community through the effective action of trained volunteers.” Although it has the image of a

traditional, even old-fashioned, philanthropy, it is a modern training organization that helps its members become community leaders.

This year is the centennial of the Junior League and the United Nations International Year of Volunteers. It seems like a good time for trainers to look at training volunteers.

Despite Harriman’s work to make the training of volunteers a priority, many people with good intentions still struggle with wanting to make a contribution without knowing how, while many organizations waste time managing volunteers who don’t know what they should be doing. The lesson? Training is just as important in the not-for-

profit world as it is in the corporate world. In fact, the training and experiences people receive while doing community service can be extremely useful in their corporate lives.




Why train volunteers?

People want to help. But as with a job, it may take years of training before someone is qualified to run a fundraising event, build a house for a homeless family, or serve effectively on a board of directors. In the meantime, a volunteer may quickly become frustrated without a real assignment. Stuffing envelopes, though a necessary task, doesn’t give volunteers a long-term sense of satisfaction or provide organizations with enthusias-

How to Get Involved

If you’re looking for training for your not-for-profit organization...

These Websites can point you to local resources:

- International Year of the Volunteer  www.iyv2001.org
- Energize Inc.  www.energizeinc.com
- National Center for Nonprofit Boards  www.ncnb.org

- United Way  www.unitedway.org

In addition, local Junior League and United Way offices often provide training to community agencies or make referrals to organizations that do.

If you’re a trainer who wants to volunteer...

Start by calling an organization that interests you and find out what its needs are. Or call your local United Way office; many run volunteer and board-matching services. Another option is to call a community organization to see whether it needs trainers for in-house or external projects.

Some community groups have special membership requirements. The Junior League admits only women, but (contrary to past practices and common perception) will admit any woman who is interested in membership. Rotary International admits men and women, and it tries to have a diversity of occupations represented by its members. Consequently, new members must be invited,

though some local clubs seek people to invite or have projects that use non-Rotary volunteers.

People who want to volunteer can call the local chapter of a group that interests them to see whether there are recruitment efforts underway. If not, the group may be able to refer you to a group that is looking for new members.

Most not-for-profit organizations are thrilled to find people interested in volunteering and are reluctant to turn anyone away even if there’s nothing to do at the time. It’s important to ask whether a group needs your skills. If it doesn’t, ask it to refer you elsewhere. Your time is valuable, so donate it wisely.

tic volunteers. That's why orientation and training are important. They help volunteers understand what the recipient organization does, why it does it, and how they can work most effectively while preparing for greater challenges.

Mona Williams, the executive director of Variety Children's Charities of Northern California, believes in training for volunteers at all levels of the organization. It's necessary to train anyone who mentors children, and, she says, "The worst thing you can have is board members who don't know what you do." Williams has also found that training helps weed out volunteers who are less committed—before they start working with clients.

Large volunteer projects are often operated by people with limited time and who work in several locations, with each location handling small parts of the whole. The appropriate training can ensure that everyone knows what's expected beforehand and can help bring the various parts together.

"If you're clear about your expectations, that increases the likelihood of success," says Deborah Hanson, an active member of Rotary International and dean of the School of Business at the University of Great Falls, Montana. Her Rotary experiences include managing international exchange programs and youth leadership awards for high school sophomores. Both projects involved large groups of people handling different assignments and whose results had to be seamless if either project was going to be credible and effective.

Jane O'Sullivan, Rotary International's division manager for membership development and support, says that training members to do an effective assessment of community needs, instead of relying on perception, has helped the Rotary be more effective. Most members are employed professionals, but that doesn't mean they don't need training in volunteer work. Not only does training help

volunteers work better, but it also helps motivate them to donate time. Many people view volunteering as a way to network, round out their professional skills, develop new expertise, or maintain competence while taking a break from paid employment.

How to train volunteers

Susan J. Ellis is the president of Energize, Inc., an international training, publishing, and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism. She says, "The principles of good training are the same in any setting." But Ellis notes that there are some differences in training volunteers. Foremost is that the skills they typically bring are varied, and volunteers aren't recruited and assessed as are hired employees. Because volunteers give time because they want to, not-for-profit firms tend to respect the donated time more than a manager who's used to paid employees.

"Unfortunately," says Ellis, "some agencies perceive training as vaguely insulting. That's especially true when they have corporate volunteers." Still, even a CEO with an M.B.A. needs some training to be truly effective as a volunteer.

For a simple, one-day project, training can be just a handout of instructions. For example, for a park cleanup, volunteers should receive a sheet telling who's organizing the cleanup and why, as well as what the volunteers should look for, what they should do with the trash they collect, whether they should wear gloves, what they should do if they come across a camp of homeless people, and other information relevant to the task.

For larger assignments, Ellis recommends an orientation session for all volunteers, followed by training specific to the assignment. The orientation session should cover the agency's history and mission, its executives, its fundraising techniques, and other information that

will help the volunteers understand their role with respect to the agency.

Next, volunteers should receive training based on what they'll be doing. That could mean instructions at a brief meeting or in a university-level course. Someone who is running a fundraising event may receive training by serving on a committee under people who've done a similar project. People learning how to train seeing-eye dogs could need classroom lessons before actually having hands-on experience. A volunteer firefighter must go through rigorous physical training.

The Junior League's approach, emulated by many organizations, is to have each volunteer spend his or her first year as a provisional member in an intensive training program that covers the league's history and objectives as well as specific community projects of the local league. In addition, the provisional member is expected to help organize and participate in fundraising and volunteer activities under the guidance of experienced, active members.

The combination of classroom learning, mentoring, and experience helps prepare new members for full participation. Ongoing members are required to attend seminars and meetings on topics that range from providing aid to the homeless in the local community to preparing an effective PowerPoint presentation. Members who become committee chairpersons or officers often spend a year as chair-elect, learning the ropes from the current office holders, and they attend local or regional leadership training seminars.

"The concept of a trained volunteer is [at the] core of what the Junior League is," says Jane A. Silverman, executive director of the Association of Junior Leagues International. Of course, not every volunteer group has the size and resources of the Junior League, nor the time to devote to training. If training is secondary to a group's mission, it may not want to spend a year training people.

There are many other options.

Some volunteer organizations band together with other local groups or with area chapters of the same organization. Leigh Higinbotham is a semi-retired consultant and former telephone company executive who handles the annual Northwest Presidents-Elect Training Seminar for the incoming presidents of 550 Rotary International clubs in northeastern Russia, western Canada, the northwestern United States, and Alaska. One reason he organizes such a

Volunteer Opportunities

Direct service. How about giving your time to do just about anything an organization needs, including client services, office support, and fundraising? Volunteers work under the supervision of other volunteers or paid employees.

Board service. A board of directors oversees general administration of a not-for-profit organization, including hiring an executive director to handle day-to-day operations. Boards provide strategic guidance and ideas, but their primary function is fundraising. Volunteers are legally responsible for overseeing a charity and often are expected to donate money.

Community organizations. These groups organize around common backgrounds or interests, with partially or exclusively charitable activities. Examples: the Junior League, Links Inc., the National Council of Jewish Women, and Rotary International. Members participate in a variety of community and fundraising projects. Membership often appeals to people who want to get involved in their communities but aren't sure what they want to do.

large group is to justify the expense of high-end speakers and trainers, which the participants find exciting.

"There's no money to pay, so we always have to work on motivation," says Higinbotham, who believes that experience is the best way for volunteers to learn and stay motivated. When he was a local club president, he found that the members "remembered the hands-on projects when they were covered in mud while building a new playground—not the ones when we presented a check in front of a lectern."

Many organizations ask current volunteers to share their mentoring skills and lessons learned. An organization can also hire a trainer as an employee or a consultant. Then there are low- or no-cost community resources. In many cities, the United Way arranges training, particularly for not-for-profit board members, to help them understand their fiduciary responsibilities and to give them tools for marketing, managing conflicts, and raising money. In some cities, the Junior League has expanded its training mission—offering consulting on marketing and development, training for members of local nonprofit boards of directors, and train-the-trainer seminars for league members and nonmembers.

What volunteers bring to the job

Most volunteers have jobs elsewhere. Even the Association of Junior Leagues International, which might be expected to have a more traditional membership than other organizations, reports that 58 percent of its members are employed outside of the home. Furthermore, many members who aren't currently employed view volunteering as a way to maintain or improve skills and contacts for when they do return to the workforce. Unfortunately, many employers mistakenly view community activities as potentially sapping

an employee's energy from his or her job.

Volunteers pick up specific skills related to their assignments and such leadership skills as public speaking, motivating others, and being aware of different viewpoints. When you think about how much time and effort companies put into presentation seminars, team building events, and diversity workshops, it's a wonder more companies don't encourage up-and-coming employees to join community groups.

Renee N. Tucei, president-elect of the Junior League of San Francisco and executive vice president and controller at California Federal Bank, says her experience handling finances for a not-for-profit organization expanded her accounting skills.

"Volunteer work has helped me be a more patient person and a much better listener," says Tucei. "Sometimes, people just want to know that their side is being considered." She also says that the leadership and management training offered by the Junior League has given her skills that are readily applicable to her job. "At work, you get so busy on everyday operational things that you don't have time to hone [leadership and management skills] as much you might like."

Michele Sparks, a manager in the actuarial consulting practice at Ernst & Young in Chicago, concurs. She's a member of the Junior League of Chicago, where she has worked with teenage mothers in the LeClaire Hearst housing project to help them stay in school and delay a second pregnancy.

Says Sparks, "I've had to get up in front of a large number of people and ask them for ideas or convince them to work on my project." That, notes Sparks, has made it easier for her to give presentations to prospective clients at work. She also says community work has made her more open-minded, noting that she's

constantly reminded that not everyone is the same as she is. “That helps in interpersonal relationships at work.”

Sparks also finds that volunteer experience has given her great ideas for motivating her staff. After all, you can't offer volunteers a raise or threaten to fire them—two common ways corporations try to motivate employees.

Employees aren't the only beneficiaries. Ellis points out that volunteerism can benefit a corporation on many levels. First, it gets employees involved with people of different backgrounds, which gives them a better appreciation for diverse co-workers and customers. Second, the volunteer experience can serve as management training by helping employees develop leadership and project-management skills that their job classifications don't include. Volunteerism can also contribute to team building. Working together on a beach cleanup or a Habitat for Humanity house can be a satisfying use of a group's time, more than playing paintball, and it can generate goodwill for the company in the community.

Among people with corporate and community interests, “doing well while doing good” is a cliché. There is truth to it, as with most clichés. Community service and training are symbiotic: Good training helps people be more effective volunteers; volunteering gives people new skills that can help them be better employees and open up more career options.

Training volunteers is as important in 2001 as it was in 1901. TD

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