



# Keep Your Volunteers Happy with Dynamic Training

*By Greg Procknow*

There's no better way to attract and retain volunteers than to develop an internal knowledge program.

**I**n recent interviews, 13 of 50 food bank volunteers said they were thrown into their positions with little or no training. There's no justification for such a deficiency in any organization.

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Proper training for volunteer positions is the bare minimum of what every organization should provide. Forward-looking nonprofits offer much more than that.

A comprehensive program of education and training, tailored to each person's needs, is a simple way to retain volunteers seeking personal development. When you help people learn, they don't only gain knowledge and skills. They also develop higher confidence and self-efficacy. They have more positive attitudes toward the organization and their role in it. Here's how to be sure your educational program is a success.

## Communicate with Participants before Training Begins

Most volunteer training programs focus on what the organization wants people to learn, rather than what interests the volunteers. Such training is a waste of everyone's time.

For training to be worthwhile, there must be buy-in by the volunteers. To discover what they want to learn, conduct a thorough needs analysis. Ask volunteers detailed questions about what types of training they would like the organization to offer.

Also ask them what they want to gain from the training. This is one of the most important questions of all. It ties learning to the trainees' specific goals and serves as a critical motivating device. During the

training, you can remind participants of their learning objectives to keep them focused and inspired.

Before the training, provide trainees with preparatory information so they know what to expect. Ask them to let you know about any potential barriers or problems so that you can strategize ways to overcome them. For example, if participants have learning disabilities such as dyslexia, you can give them important information orally rather than in written form. If English isn't their first language, you may want to translate materials into the language that's best for them.

## Hire the Right Trainers

Be sure your trainers are flexible, open, and responsive. Find people who are willing to adapt their material to the participants and the situation rather than adhering rigidly to a script.

They should encourage people's input, including questions not directly related to the subject of the training. Ask your trainers to report such questions to you to give you an idea of what's on participants' minds. You may want to create new training sessions based on those interests.

Your trainers, like everyone involved with your organization, should be well versed in diversity and cultural competency. It's imperative to relate well with people of all different ages, cultures, and backgrounds.

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## Use Proven Teaching Principles

Here are some educational concepts you can put into use:

**Massed vs. Distributed Practice.** When trainers use the massed practice technique, they provide one long training session. When they use distributed practice, they break the material into many short sessions, sometimes over a period of weeks or even months.

Studies make it clear that distributed practice affords the most meaningful learning and helps people retain information longer. For any important topic, it's a good idea to provide a series of learning opportunities instead of crowding everything into one long lesson.

Take orientation, for example. Rather than trying to orient volunteers to your organization in just one meeting, consider a multi-tiered approach, which might begin with the volunteer coordinator meeting with new volunteers to talk about the organization and their roles in it. At the end of this session, volunteers might be given several days to read orientation materials. Next, you could discuss the information with them, asking questions to be sure they understand the basic concepts. Then you could book them a time to begin receiving more intensive training in whichever volunteer position they've chosen.

**Whole vs. Part Learning.** With whole learning, a topic is presented in its entirety. With part learning, the information is broken into pieces.

If the topic is relatively simple, whole learning is usually more appropriate. Such training focuses on the big picture, assuming that all the parts will fall into place.

If the topic is more complex, a part learning strategy will be more effective. With such an approach, participants learn material one piece at a time and then eventually combine them.

If possible, a “whole-part-whole” strategy is ideal. With such a technique, trainers begin by presenting the entire framework and show how it relates to the participant's learning goals. Then they introduce the details and processes involved. Finally, they connect those parts back to the whole, showing how participants can use their new knowledge.

**Overlearning.** When people overlearn something, they go beyond merely acquiring the information to a place where their newly acquired skills become second nature. That's the ideal you're striving for, and that's why ongoing training for volunteers is so

important. Continual training strengthens learning and causes material to move from short-term to long-term memory. To solidify important information, repeat it often.

## Follow Up

New learning is unlikely to be retained unless it's reinforced. Soon after every training, do the following:

- Give participants a chance to discuss what they've learned and put it to use in real-life situations.
- Ask for people's feedback about the training and their recommendations for future educational opportunities.
- Check to be sure participants have met their goals and expectations for the training, and have them create new objectives.

As long as they're learning and growing, volunteers will be passionate about your organization and the work they do for you.



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