CLD2-7

KELD

Kentucky Extension Leadership Development

Educating Members, Volunteers and Leaders in Community Organizations

Empower Your Group by Developing Leadership

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Introduction

Educating (or empowering) members, volunteers and leaders is an important component in volunteer and community development. All too often, too little attention is given to educating, empowering and equipping participants to perform the tasks and roles which they have agreed to fulfill. However, once an organization has generated new members, volunteers and leaders, it is essential to begin the process of educating them. Educating includes developing personal leadership skills as well as providing information about the specific roles, duties and responsibilities that they have accepted in order for them to be most successful in the organization.

Educated, empowered members, volunteers and leaders are more effective in serving any community organization. Educating adds stability, quality and effectiveness to organizations and the programs. Participants who understand their duties, roles and responsibilities will not only serve the organization more effectively, but also the clientele with whom they have contact.

Finally, those individuals who are well-equipped to serve the organization effectively will have a more positive experience with the organization. The four components involved in educating members, volunteers and leaders include: **orient**, **protect**, **resource** and **teach**. When planning for

education in your organization, ask yourself these questions:

- What would newcomers to organization need to know in order to feel welcome?
- What would newcomers need to know in order to fully participate in our organization and its activities?
- What would new members, volunteers and leaders need to know in order to be successful in our organization?

Orientation: Providing an Overview of the Organization

The initial step in educating is **orient**. Orientation provides an overview of the organization's programs and activities, policies, procedures and programs. In addition, the roles and responsibilities of paid and volunteer staff, organizational leadership structure and ways that individual can serve the organization should be covered. Orientation should be presented to all newcomers, both paid and volunteer.

Orientation is an overview of the entire organization and is necessary for every newcomer. It places the work into context and allows for consistent introduction of policies, procedures, rights and responsibilities. Orientation provides an opportunity to become acquainted with the role, organizational culture and environment. Orientation provides generalized informa-

> *Choosing to act on what matters is the choice to live a passionate existence, which is anything but controlled and predictable.*
>
> —*Peter Block*

tion and a big picture profile of the organization and its programs.

People generally come to their new role with varying levels of knowledge about the organization and its programs. An effective orientation program introduces newcomers to the organization as a whole and to their specific job responsibilities. Orientation can be beneficial in assuring that individuals have accurate information regarding the organization's purpose, programs, policies and expectations.

When planning for orientation, the program coordinator should consider the questions:

- What would someone need to know to feel comfortable and competent in serving in this position?
- What information should new members, volunteers and leaders know about our organization?

The answer to these question should lead the program coordinator to design an effective volunteer development program, the initial step of which is orientation.

An effective orientation program enables individuals to more effectively represent the organization and provides them with the resources necessary to conduct their service activities. Volunteers often assume roles with a public profile on behalf of a community organization. Clientele who participate in and benefit from participation in programs administered by community organizations often have their greatest contact with volunteers, leaders and members. Informed volunteers will represent the organization positively, carry out their responsibilities effectively and possess a positive attitude toward the organization for which they are volunteering.

Orientation may be presented in a variety of ways. These include a personalized, individual conversation, in groups in a classroom setting, on-line, or as a take-home information packet. Ideally, orientation should include a tour of the facilities, a program inventory and a list of available resources. Finally, everyone should understand how the role of members, volunteers and leaders contribute to the workings and productivity of the organization.

Protection: Reducing Liability by Managing Risk

Following orientation, volunteers, leaders and members enter the **protecting** phase. During the protecting phase, volunteers learn about risk management strategies such as appropriate and acceptable behaviors, conflict resolution, personal liability and confidentiality issues.

Public officials face a variety of liability lawsuits that have contributed to skyrocketing insurance costs. For many communities, these costs forced them to seek other forms of liability coverage, close parks, or remove playground equipment. The same exposure to risk holds true for many community organizations. Risk management education for members, volunteers and leaders includes explaining the concept of risk management, developing an awareness of potential liabilities and alternative methods of insuring losses and developing procedures to minimize liabilities.

In today's service arena, an overview of protection standards and risk management strategies are essential for volunteers, leaders and members. Individual members, volunteers and leaders should be protected from potentially dangerous or embarrassing situations and from individuals who might want to discredit them or do them harm. This information is presented during the protecting phase. To assist in determining how best to protect members, volunteers and leaders from assuming liability and encountering risk situations, consider the following questions:

- In what ways could the organization protect our members, volunteers and leaders?
- What specific types of activities will result in risky situations?
- How can these risky situations be avoided or addressed?
- What types of behaviors are acceptable for members, volunteers and leaders?
- What types of behaviors are most likely to result in a risky situation and how can they be avoided or dealt with?

Without guidance, volunteers can waiver from satisfactorily completing their job task and feel frustrated.

Resourcing: Providing Information, Materials and Facilities

The **resourcing** phase in this category includes providing individuals with the resources necessary for them to complete their leadership, membership and volunteer service duties. These can include human resources (identifying other individuals who can provide support, skills, or services), educational resources such as curricula, and materials, financial resources such as the identification of sources of funding, budgetary guidelines, and fund-raising strategies and technological resources such as computers, software packages, internet access, wireless service, etc.

Leaders, members and volunteers should not be expected to provide their own personal resources in order to serve the community organization. The organization should provide the resources necessary to perform the duties and responsibilities of the role. Additionally, these resources should be current, up-to-date, easily accessible and ready to use.

To successfully plan for resourcing, the program coordinator should consider the following questions:

- What resources will individuals need in order to gain the most from this experience and their relationship with the organization?
- What are the most effective ways to make these resources available to those who need them?

Teaching: Developing the Skills Necessary to Serve the Organization

Additional **teaching** or learning opportunities related to specific skills and knowledge can assist members, volunteers or leaders in carrying out their responsibilities. Additionally, teaching opportunities should be presented that will develop personal leadership skills. Education should be conducted in a variety of ways (individually, through group meetings, workshops or classes or on-line) and address multiple learning styles. One reason that contributes to volunteer turnover is insufficient learning opportunities. Without education, volunteers, members and leaders may not be able to perform their assigned tasks well.

People more effectively respond to any task they are given if they feel they understand the task and have been taught how to do it. This same concept applies to volunteers. Without guidance, volunteers can waiver from satisfactorily completing their job task and feel frustrated.

Volunteers, leaders and members recognize the importance and need for continual education about the program. The challenge is to use the most innovative teaching tools to reach them. One effective method of identifying and differentiating the educational needs of members, volunteers and leaders is to simply ask them:

- What do you need to know in order to more effectively serve the organization?

The program coordinator could use the KELD (Kentucky Extension Leadership Development) series as a list of topics to be offered.

Conclusion

Educating members, volunteers, and leaders about their role in and service to the organization is beneficial to the community organization, but also its staff, clientele and the volunteers, leaders and members who serve it. Educating adds stability to organizations and enables and empowers its membership, leadership and volunteers to more effectively represent, lead and serve. Finally, well-informed volunteers, leaders and members represent the organization more positively and effectively in the community. They are therefore more likely to

be retained in their role and expand the outreach of the organization and its programs to audiences who would otherwise not be served.

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