

Designing and Structuring Volunteer Training

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HOW TO DESIGN VOLUNTEER TRAINING

Determining the actual content of a training program is usually the easy part. Designing an effective outline to communicate the content is often more complex, and delivering the material in an interesting and compelling manner is what most non-professional trainers find most challenging of all. Here are some basic tips on volunteer training design and delivery.

- **Assess the learning needs of participants.** Ask questions such as these:
 - What do participants already know about the topic at hand?
 - What do participants need to know that they do not already know?
 - What is the average age or age range of the participants?
 - What do you know about the learning styles of participants?
 - Are they participating willingly or are they being compelled to attend?
- **Involve participants in the training design as much as possible.** For example:
 - Poll participants about their learning needs and interests.
 - Integrate their needs and interests in to both content development and the delivery plan.
 - Accommodate their schedules, other work requirements, and energy levels.
- **Develop clear and realistic learning objectives** that define the changes in knowledge, skills, and attitudes that participants should expect to experience as a result of their involvement in the training. Best practice recommends moderation in objectives. Avoid the mistake of trying to accomplish too much and/or delivering too much content. Adults have limits to what they can absorb.
- **Build learning activities into the delivery plan.** This allows participants to explore the content in more depth and shape it in a way that will make it more meaningful to them. Opportunities to discuss key concepts, think about applicability to their own setting or work site, express their own thinking and opinions, and reflect on the opinions of others are all useful mechanisms in the learning process.
- **Develop learning activities that encourage application of session learnings.** Because adult learning is both facilitated by and cemented through practical application of key concepts, the provision of opportunities to apply the knowledge can dramatically increase retention. Define specific learning objectives for each session. Provide training content in segments with time between to practice and apply what has been covered.
- **Plan the session flow.** Many trainers create their training design by dividing their session into three parts: the beginning, the middle and the end. This is a useful template for structuring each session.

HOW TO STRUCTURE A VOLUNTEER TRAINING SESSION

Experienced trainers know that training designs are most successful when customized to specific learning objectives and the needs and learning styles of participants. Following is a standardized three-part volunteer training outline that can be modified as necessary:

Beginning of Session

- Introduce yourself
- Briefly outline purpose of session
- Review learning objects and key concepts
- Lead introduction of participants, either in a simple round, or using an ice breaker or other introductory exercise
- Review logistics – time, breaks, washroom locations
- Review ground rules, e.g., participation encouraged; disagreement acceptable; movement about the room for stretches and refreshments permissible; etc.
- Review more detailed agenda

Middle of Session

- Deliver main content, including big ideas, key concepts, knowledge and skill development in logical order, layering understanding and capacity building on foundations thoughtfully sequenced
- Reinforce main points with quick recaps, bullet point summaries, exercises, use variety of training methods throughout this section to respond to different learning styles among participants, maintain attention, and reinforce learning

Closure of Session

- Review main content
- Engage participants in discussion of their learning and how they intend to apply it
- Provide opportunity for final questions
- Assign homework, additional readings, or ongoing learning activities
- Distribute evaluation form and allow time for completion
- For younger participants, ensure everyone has an arranged pickup or safe transportation home