

Supporting the Volunteer Life-Cycle

In **Supporting the Volunteer Life-Cycle**, Minnesota Office on Volunteer Services Volunteerism Consultant, Paula J. Beugen shares wisdom for anyone supervising management volunteers. . . or any volunteer!

We who cherish the contributions of volunteers work very hard to keep these special people on our team. We celebrate the emergence of experienced, successful volunteers.

Each of us is a unique human being. We enter into most new situations with a touch of enthusiasm and anticipation, hope and fear. This also is true for volunteers who are new in their positions.

Those of us who "have been around" for awhile have an important role to play. Some of us are formally responsible for providing support to volunteers. Others may choose to take on this responsibility. Every person involved is in a position to influence the climate of an organization and the well-being of volunteers.

This article is about helping volunteers to grow in their volunteer positions and within their organizations. It is based upon my own observations and experience while working with volunteers over the past 10 years.

In order to be supportive, we must be sensitive to each volunteer's **feelings and needs** at any given time. This is not a simple task and no one can do it perfectly. By thinking about the course of a volunteer's experience as a volunteer life-cycle, perhaps we will be in a better position to identify how we can be helpful. I believe there are three primary stages in the growth of a volunteer. They are the Exploratory, Developmental and Mature Stages (Stages I, II and III). Usually, within each stage there are steps as illustrated.

I want to emphasize that no two people or situations are exactly alike. Many volunteers will experience some variation to the described stages and steps. However, I suspect that much of what I have to say may feel familiar to many of you – because you have been there.

Stage I – Exploratory Stage. This is the time when the volunteer is becoming more familiar with your organization and expectations. An initial commitment has been made to volunteer; however, this commitment has not yet crystallized.

The volunteer is eager to get started – but is feeling unsure. He/she wants to know as much as possible about the purpose and background of the organization, as well as the specific tasks which he/she will be required to perform. You can help by providing the volunteer with a thorough orientation where questions and comments are encouraged.

At this point, the volunteer will probably find these thoughts running through his/her mind: "Is this a reputable organization?" "Is this a worthwhile way to spend my time?" "Am I competent enough to do a good job?" "Do I belong here?"

This is a critical period. About now, the volunteer is feeling anxious and may consider backing out. With your encouragement and reassurance he/she is likely to hang on a little longer. **Communicate with this person now.** Point out that most people feel uncertain when they start volunteering.

Educator Response: Provide encouragement and reassurance.

Once this first hurdle has been jumped the volunteer has committed to give the position a serious try. He/she is very curious about what the experience will be like and what he/she needs to know.

Educator Response: Provide orientation and general overview training to get the person started. Be careful not to overwhelm the new volunteer.



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It is time to help the volunteer start to dig in. **General** training that is not overwhelming will offer a needed foundation upon which to build even further instruction. Providing opportunities to observe others in a similar position can be extremely beneficial.

The volunteer is ready to try to do the role. The first time is the scariest. Again, he/she needs your acceptance. This is another major hurdle which must be jumped. One way to help is to offer an opportunity to practice a skill before it is actually applied "for real." Perhaps **one key person** can be identified to assist the volunteer as the need arises.

Cheer for the volunteer. Recognize his/her courage and risk-taking for trying a new task and following through on a commitment. Although the volunteer is probably feeling frustrated, knowing that he/she is genuinely needed may be enough for him/her to "stick to it." The volunteer is keenly aware that until now he/she has been receiving more than giving.

As a result of careful instruction, close monitoring, communication and on-going encouragement, the volunteer has done a reasonably good job from the very beginning. He/she is striving for excellence while accepting that imperfection is to be expected at first. Most of all, a valuable volunteer has been retained through several attempts at carrying out an important task.

Hooray for you! **You** have helped a volunteer to move through STAGE I – the Exploratory Stage.

Stage II – The Developmental Stage. The volunteer really has a growth spurt here. It is an exciting time and the volunteer is hungry for information and specific techniques.

There are many ways to support a volunteer during the Developmental Stage. This is a perfect time for specific in-service training. The volunteer wants to know how to do an even better job and is busy analyzing and testing different ideas and approaches. You will want to reinforce accurate or positive behavior. Comment on the volunteer's strengths and show him/her ways to do things effectively. Coach the volunteer.

Feelings of satisfaction from the volunteer position usually begin to emerge now. The volunteer realizes that his/her performance is constantly improving and that he/she is a **contributing member of the team**. Support sessions where peers in like positions get together to exchange ideas and experiences can be particularly valuable and exhilarating during Stage II. The presence of a knowledgeable facilitator or advisor is often worthwhile.

During the latter part of the Developmental Stage the volunteer is blooming! He/she is starting to assert his/her views and observations. This is healthy. The volunteer wants to apply higher level skills and is feeling decreasingly dependant on others. Now is an important time to restate and clarify the goals of the volunteer position. You may want to suggest resources to the volunteer that correspond to the philosophy and approach of the organization. Perhaps opportunities to interact with key leaders or staff members will reinforce the values and methods of the organization.

Sometimes the volunteer will feel undervalued or even unappreciated during Stage II. People around him/her are engrossed in their daily activities. His/her skills and efforts may go unnoticed by others. The volunteer may not have a complete understanding of the "total picture" yet.

Educator Response: Provide continuous encouragement. Communicate via telephone or personal visit to address concerns and answer questions.

You can increase the volunteer's sense of belonging by communicating frequently, respecting his/her feelings and ideas, noticing progress toward established goals, and



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perhaps arranging for a social gathering to celebrate the volunteer's recent accomplishments.

Congratulations! Once again you have stood by a volunteer. At the same time you have helped to ensure quality services within your organization. The volunteer chooses to stay, not knowing he/she is on the verge of moving from STAGE II to STAGE III.

STAGE III – The Mature Stage. This can be the most fulfilling of the three stages. The volunteer is often giving more than receiving, even though he/she is receiving a lot!

The mature volunteer is frequently unassuming or even modest. He/she has become comfortable in carrying out responsibilities, intuitively knowing what to do and how to do it. This is an extremely skilled person who often is unaware of the extent of his/her high-level abilities.

Sometimes a mature volunteer unconsciously feels under or over involved. A symptom may be an apparent loss of enthusiasm.

Educator Response: Consider other levels of involvement, e.g. middle management role, 4-H Council, special events or festival manager.

By reflecting on the situation, you might interpret whether or not the volunteer's skills are being fully utilized. He/she may be ready for some form of advancement within the organization. Or, on the other hand, the organization may be becoming overly dependent on this single volunteer and, therefore, the volunteer is getting tired. A place to start is to affirm the value of the volunteer's current contributions. Recognize and communicate about **specific** qualities, competencies, and accomplishments which have been an asset to your organization. Explore whether or not the volunteer is willing to share his/her experience with others, or desires a change in responsibilities.

There are two steps in the Mature Stage. The first step in the "sharing step" and the second stage is the "leading step." Some people leave the volunteer community before reaching the "sharing step."

The "sharing step" can be characterized as a time for exchanging ideas and experiences with others (often in addition to continuing with previous responsibilities). For example, the volunteer may be willing to offer one-on-one support to another volunteer on an informal basis. Or, he/she might participate in a support session with volunteers in the Developmental Stage to offer insights. The volunteer who is in the "leading step" would take this even further. Perhaps he/she would be a mentor for another volunteer (provide long term emotional support and practical advice which would help another volunteer to achieve desired goals). Or, serve as a consultant to a support group request. Or, become the chairperson or president of a key group.

The mature volunteer is especially precious. He/she is the leader, advisor or mentor within your organization – the one you rush to consult with when a problem or challenge arises.

Because you have continued to care, a volunteer has blossomed and matured. Your final major task is to encourage your organization to fully draw upon the skills and experience of the volunteer whom you have supported. Stress the value of leadership development experiences such as participation in training sessions sponsored by other organizations; opportunities to hold teaching, advising, or advocacy positions; and offers of responsibilities which will propel the volunteer along a career path. Create situations which stimulate public visibility for this steadfast volunteer who can serve as a role model for others to follow.

In the final analysis **your success** in helping one volunteer grow from strength to strength will be passed on, and on, and on . . .



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SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Where is the balance between delegation, support, coaching, and directing?

The appropriate leadership style is also based on the individual's level of competence and commitment for the task. You can "grow leaders" within your organization if you use the proper leadership style for their individual level and help them to move on to another level.

Competence is an individual's knowledge and skills which are gained through education, training, and/or experience.

Commitment is a makeup of an individual's confidence and motivation for doing a job.

DEVELOPMENT LEVEL	APPROPRIATE LEADERSHIP STYLE
D1 Low Competence • High Commitment	S1 DIRECTING Structure, control, and supervise
D2 Some Competence • Low Commitment	S2 COACHING Direct and support
D3 High Competence • Variable Commitment	S3 SUPPORTING Praise, listen, and facilitate
D4 High Competence • High Commitment	S4 DELEGATING Turn over responsibility for day-to-day decision-making

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