4-H Volunteer Leader Training

Why is it important and what actions can promote effectiveness?

Introduction

Training is integral to quality 4-H volunteer leadership (77). The 4-H Youth Development Program needs a trained corps of volunteers who possess the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations needed for the leadership roles they fill in working with youth (5, 62). Leadership development/training opportunities must be available at the beginning of volunteers’ tenure and continue periodically to support them (45, 68, 76) in building and developing competencies to carry out the responsibilities they assume (76). Though 4-H volunteers may take on many organizational functions¹, the focus of this review will be on the volunteer leader’s work in leading youth educational programs in 4-H clubs and after-school programs and building strong adult-youth partnerships through such programs.

Successful leadership training (45) has been shown to lead to greater retention (36) and a more positive volunteer experience (21). Quality training experiences increase volunteers’ confidence and their sense of personal achievement (26). For many,² training sessions, seminars, and conferences are rewarding (61) and serve as a meaningful form of recognition (39). On the other hand, lack of training for volunteer youth workers is a serious concern, resulting in poor education for 4-H youth, discontent for the volunteer, and increased difficulty in recruiting future volunteer leaders (12).

Training must meet recognized needs (12, 28), engage the intended audience (84), and lead to application (8, 79). 4-H educators must take responsibility for clearly defining learning goals and objectives (76) that lead to appropriate volunteer leadership development.

¹ 4-H volunteers may be involved in different tasks related to various countywide events, serving in policy making roles, completing administrative duties, fundraising, and more
² 89.2% of the respondents in one study (61) found training sessions, seminars, and conferences rewarding or somewhat rewarding
Research to Practice Points

- **Select training topics wisely.** Training should complement strengths and overcome weaknesses (62). It should orient volunteers (19, 43) to Cooperative Extension and the 4-H Youth Development Program, and help them understand the responsibilities of their role (12). Training should provide veteran leaders with knowledge and skills (7) that move past the basics. All 4-H leaders need solid grounding in positive youth development (PYD) (1, 5, 18, 23, 52, 57, 62, 65, 69, 85) and in areas of competence related to their roles. When selecting topics, educators should consider interests identified by their volunteers (28) and needs suggested by volunteer performance reviews (35).

- **Don’t neglect “unpopular” topics.** Evaluation (67), risk management (28), and conflict resolution (24) may be considered “dry” or “boring” but they must be handled well to keep 4-H strong. Target training specifically to those who need to know (77) and focus on application (62). A mentoring approach with a well-developed plan (23) allows training to be timely and relevant. Weaving short snippets on topics such as these into other trainings allows for inclusion of important information without turning off your audience.

- **Plan volunteer leadership development strategically.** Diverse volunteers bring richness to 4-H programming along with complexity. Frequency and extensiveness of training (3) will vary depending on the experience and backgrounds of the participants as well as the content being introduced. A series of sessions, rather than a single meeting, may be needed to build needed skill and confidence (25, 47, 72, 73). County-wide group meetings continue to be a traditional and preferred (12, 28) training format, with interactive (65) and hands-on (14, 32) activities and roundtable discussions (6) improving their effectiveness. In program delivery trainings, “best practice” is for volunteers to experience the same methods that they will use in teaching (47): show, don’t tell. An urban 4-H science program in San Diego arranged training opportunities that provided participants with college credit (71), not easy to accomplish but very rewarding for volunteers. Training through mentoring (12, 23) of new (or less experienced) volunteers by experienced leaders has shown the added bonus of improved retention of mentees (23). Don’t assume that training must always be face-to-face, though. Written materials such as a newsletter series (31, 86), a notebook with written guidelines (12, 34), or downloadable planning aids (17) have been effective. Both online modules and email (28) have inherent flexibility, which makes these training delivery modes advantageous to those who are able and willing to access them. To be optimal, trainings may employ multiple approaches. Volunteers using a “total package” of

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3 Suggested comprehensive volunteer competencies are identified in 18, 53, 54.

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combined training formats\textsuperscript{4} (3) have responded favorably (85). Some venues such as volunteer forums can bring in speakers who motivate, educate, and inspire both new and experienced volunteers\textsuperscript{5} (14) and set the stage for workshops that appeal to volunteers of all experience levels. Though diverse volunteers can learn from each other, trainings for specific audiences may be advisable at times, such as when the participants have limited fluency in English and/or limited understanding of the Euro-American culture (40).

- **Find the best instructors.** Even though the 4-H educator or volunteer “middle manager” who is responsible for training must assure the quality of training (26) and that it supports volunteers (59), that person need not do all of the training. Helping the volunteer to access lesson plans, books, seminars, and conferences are just a few of the potential supports (82) that the person responsible for volunteer training can offer to meet individualized needs (5) without doing training. Moreover, Extension staff may find that volunteers, even youth,\textsuperscript{6} (30) are the experts on some topics (66, 68, 85). Depending on the topic and delivery mode, time, money, and resources (57) could be saved by simultaneously meeting common training needs\textsuperscript{7} for Extension educators, volunteers, and parents. To stretch resources even farther, multiple counties may be able to use standardized volunteer orientation and trainings (75) and to conduct them on a multi-county basis.

- **Make sure the training “answers” the right “question”?** Though it may seem obvious, it is important to confirm that the right issue has been identified before planning the training. Training only improves performance if there is a learning deficiency (8). If the “problem” is a lack of interest or capability, training is not the answer. For example, if volunteers find it more rewarding to ignore the paperwork than complete it, training on how to complete the forms will not improve performance. VanWinkle, Busler, Bowman, and Manoogian (79) discovered that, even when new information was needed, providing that information wasn’t necessarily enough to bring change. For example, in one study where volunteers highly rated the knowledge they gained in how to plan a club program (79), 6-9 months later, fewer than half actually applied the information and planned a yearly club program. So, it is crucial to follow up with volunteers to see that the intended purposes of trainings are being realized. And, in addition to knowledge and skills, that attitudes needed for effective volunteer performance (35) are being addressed.

\textsuperscript{4} For example, California’s written 4-H Leaders’ Project Digest paired with online modules that support key topics from the digest. The 4-H Science, Engineering, and Technology (SET) Volunteer Training Model (3) includes traditional face-to-face training, asynchronous online training modules, synchronous web-based sessions, and self-directed learning resources to prepare volunteers in a program area where volunteer leaders who are providing program delivery need a depth of competency and confidence.

\textsuperscript{5} Volunteer forums may also serve as training venues for staff and parents as well

\textsuperscript{6} Teens are often strong in technology content (30).

\textsuperscript{7} For examples, see 19 and 79

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Inspiration and motivation (84) are important elements of effective adult-centered learning and help learners move new knowledge and skills into practice.

- **Consider volunteer needs.** Effective training for adult participants (28) is learner focused, demonstrates productive behavior and effective life skills, celebrates personal and group achievements, and inspires and motivates. (Wise and Ezall (84) give many practical examples of how to incorporate these characteristics into the training.) However, a top-notch training isn’t effective unless it is accessed by the intended learner. Research shows that most volunteers work full-time and volunteer for one or two additional organizations (54), which means they have busy schedules (13, 26), so how will training fit into their lives? Lack of flexibility in meeting training needs can be a disincentive (26), so accommodating volunteers to the greatest extent possible is crucial. Distance to sessions and related training costs (62) must be considered as well to have optimal participation in the planned development opportunities. While online options offer flexibility, lack of computer skills, accessibility, and confidence in navigating websites are deterrents for use of online modules (45, 85) by some leaders, so this isn’t the answer for all. Because of a strong desire for affiliation (79), many 4-H volunteers want in-person training. Keep in mind that, in addition to stated organizational/programmatic goals, leaders have personal goals that they seek to meet that may not be completely understood or recognized. Meeting new people and spending time with friends may be among those goals. Opportunities to help volunteers grow personally (68) that are not tied strictly to organizational/programmatic needs may be important in order to attract and retain volunteers (78).

**Conclusions:**

**What We Know**

Even though leaders often are viewed as not being interested in training, they do recognize and appreciate the need (12, 45, 68). Interests, motivation, educational backgrounds, previous work with 4-H and Cooperative Extension affect what volunteers need to be competent in their roles. Personal preferences and abilities along with scheduling issues and other commitments are factors that determine how readily volunteers will access training opportunities.

Planning is needed to systematically put into place a comprehensive set of development opportunities/training resources that will effectively address the needs of volunteers and 4-H. There are lots of excellent choices for training, but neither the organization nor the volunteers can do it all. Needs assessment involving key stakeholders and including consideration of goals and objectives in light of mission can help establish priorities and arrive at an appropriate training plan.

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What We Don’t Know

4-H educators and volunteers should gather local data to aid in deciding on the best training strategy for their 4-H Youth Development program. They should try to answer the following questions.

- How can 4-H volunteer administrators enhance application of training to volunteer practice?
- Do certain training delivery methods lead to greater program impact than others?
- Should some leader competencies be given higher training priority for 4-H organizational leaders? For project leaders? For activity leaders? For resource leaders?
- Are there ways to insure greater usage of current available online resources?
- Is the increased effectiveness of training through the combination of formats such as multiple training sessions, written materials, online resources, etc. great enough to offset the human and material investment?
- Are there effective training methods to improve identified attitudes and aspirations of volunteer leaders?
- Are there “dos” and “don’ts” on what topics should be covered in simultaneous professional staff and volunteer leader trainings?
- In what ways can 4-H staff from various counties/regions/states collaborate to be more efficient and cost-effective in meeting volunteer leader training needs?

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Selected References


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