

CLD2-9



Sustaining Members, Volunteers and Leaders in Community Organizations

Strengthening an Organization by Building Traditions

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Introduction

Sustaining members, volunteers and leaders and their continued efforts and service to the program is imperative to the continued health and well-being of any community organization. Sustaining adds stability, credibility and continuity to organizations. It strengthens an organization by building the traditions which will eventually be celebrated and will define organizational culture. Sustaining benefits individuals by strengthening the relationship that they have developed with the organization, its programs and staff. This association provides continuity, support and comfort and develops self-confidence and esteem in the eyes of other people and the entire community.

Sustaining, the fourth and final category of the GEMS Model of Volunteer Administration, consists of five steps: **evaluate, recognize, retain, redirect** and **disengage**. Sustaining is often the most overlooked and under-emphasized category. However, once an organizational leader, volunteer administrator or program coordinator has completed the cycle of member, volunteer or leader involvement, the next cycle is easier to complete if the initial group is sustained and becomes re-engaged to serve the program again.

The three primary steps involved in sustaining members, volunteers and leaders are: evaluate, recognize and either retain, redirect or disengage. How well your organi-


zation has been sustained can be answered by considering the following questions:

- What is the average length of membership or service for our organization?
- Is our membership roster growing, maintaining or shrinking?

Evaluate

The first step in sustaining an organization and its members, volunteers and leaders is evaluation. A performance evaluation will determine whether or not goals of both the individual and the organization are being met. Documenting the work and the efforts of organizational participants enables everyone to learn from past accomplishments and mistakes and provides additional opportunities for success. These opportunities are important for members, volunteers, leaders, the organizational leader or volunteer administrator, the community organization and its programs.

Written documentation can provide a framework for decision making in determining new assignments, promotions and recognition as well as providing recommendations for the participant. To be most effective, a written evaluation assessment should be developed and shared during orientation. The organizational leader collects information throughout the year to be used in the evaluation process. Evaluation should be ongoing and should be conducted both formally and informally. Specific types of evaluative information that should be



Leadership is the wise use of power. Power is the capacity to translate intention into reality and sustain it.

—Warren G. Bennis



*No problem
can withstand
the assault
of sustained
thinking.*

– Voltaire

collected include participation numbers, program information and feedback, input from clients and other volunteers and ratings on specific quality indicators that are applicable to the programs in which the volunteer is involved.

Evaluation sometimes seems frightening to volunteers, organizations, program managers and volunteer administrators, especially those with volunteer members and no paid staff. However, the point of an evaluation is not to merely find fault or point out deficiencies; rather, an evaluation is an opportunity to examine a program or performance and determine ways in which to strengthen, improve, expand or refocus.

Strengths, weaknesses, achievements and areas needing improvement as related to the position description should all be included in an effective evaluation. An effective evaluation will also include the open-ended questions:

- How could this program have been improved?
- How could this role have been accomplished more effectively and efficiently?
- What do you like best and least about serving this organization and program?
- How might this organization involve more members, volunteers and leaders?"
- How might this organization expand its outreach and service to the community?

Recognize

Members, volunteers and leaders should be recognized for their positive contributions to the organization and its clientele. Whether formal or informal, recognition helps recipients feel they are making a meaningful contribution to the organization, its programs and clientele. Formal recognition is given publicly and generally

includes a tangible, extrinsic gift, award or memento. Informal recognition is provided either privately or spontaneously and involves a pat on the back, a personal thank-you note or card, a simple phone call, or a few words made in passing. The way that achievements and accomplishments are recognized are an important component of the manner in which the organization celebrates its traditions.

Examples of meaningful recognition that can be provided by community organizations include:

- Hosting a recognition event for volunteers in your organization
- Collaborating with other organizations to coordinate a communitywide volunteer recognition event
- Writing and publishing in your newsletter or on your website an article about a volunteer or leader's contributions
- Contacting a local reporter to promote the idea of writing a story about a volunteer in your organization
- Recognizing volunteers along with your clients
- Asking volunteers to share some of their most meaningful memories or experiences about their volunteer service and sharing those memories or experiences throughout the community
- Asking volunteers to share their volunteer experiences with others at a Chamber of Commerce or a civic organization's meeting

To be most effective, recognition should fulfill the individual's motives to continue service to or involvement with the organization. For example, achievement-motivated individuals will likely want to be recognized publicly with a tangible reward. Affiliation-motivated individuals will want to be recognized with the group that they affiliate with or with all of the

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individuals involved in that organization. Power-motivated individuals will want to be in charge of the recognition event and have their photo printed in the newspaper along with a noteworthy individual.

Consider the contributions of five different people in your organization. Ask yourself these questions:

- Have each of these five individuals made the same contribution to our organization?
- Should all five individuals be recognized in the same manner or receive the same type of recognition?
- In what ways would each of the five most enjoy or appreciate being recognized?
- Some people claim that they never want to be recognized. Do you believe that this is true? Why or why not?

Retain, Redirect or Disengage

The final step in sustaining individuals in an organization includes one of three options: retain, redirect or disengage. At the conclusion of the cycle, an individual may enter only one of these three steps. Retaining must be planned for and contributes both strength and continuity to the program. Individuals must be retained from the moment of entry through the beginning of their next service engagement. The first-year experience usually will determine whether the individual will continue his or her service to the program.

Retention is best accomplished by meeting individual needs, serving continuation motivations and providing a fulfilling relationship with the organization, its clientele, other volunteers and the organization's professional staff. This approach is accomplished by first identifying and determining the needs of the individual through the initial interview process. Ask the following questions:

- Why do you want to join/serve/lead this organization?

- What do you hope to gain from your association with this organization?

Identifying the motivation to continue serving an organization is determined by coaching and interacting with the member, volunteer or leader and by observing the individual throughout the year. Questions to consider include:

- What factors motivate individual to continue their relationship with the organization?
- How can these motivational factors be fulfilled?

Finally, members, volunteers and leaders must experience a fulfilling relationship with the organization in order to continue their association. The level of fulfillment may be determined by asking them the following questions:

- What do you most enjoy about your association with the organization?
- What types of activities would you prefer to do more often?
- What do you least enjoy about your role with the organization?
- What would you prefer to do less often?
- What traditions do you most enjoy in this organization?

Organizational leaders, volunteer administrators and program coordinators should never assume that an individual will want to continue serving in the same role in the organization. Making such an assumption requires that the volunteer administrator is making a decision on behalf of the volunteer. This is both inappropriate and insulting. However, the volunteer administrator or program manager can actually compliment the individual by asking, at the conclusion of the evaluation, if he or she would like to continue the relationship with the organization by serving again. This conversation presents a good opportunity to highlight and share some of the contributions that the individual has made that have impacted the program, its clientele and ultimately the community organization.



An individual may be retained in the same capacity or redirected to another role within the organization. In some cases, an individual needs a change of pace or a fresh perspective due to burnout. In other cases, the person has not been placed in the role providing the best fit for his or her individual strengths, skills and interests and the needs of the volunteer role.

Whether retained or redirected, a volunteer may continue through the Education category. If retained, the individual benefits by acquiring additional skills to carry out their responsibilities. If redirected, the volunteer should be encouraged to participate in orientation again to receive new position responsibilities, knowledge and the skills necessary to perform effectively. Redirection may be a sensitive issue, so the organizational leader should be sensitive to the feelings and interests of the individuals being redirected. It is quite likely that redirecting is taking place because the individual was either not placed in the best position originally or because there has been a change in the life of the individual. When considering redirecting an individual, ask the following questions:

- Has the member, volunteer or leader been placed in the role providing the best fit their individual strengths, skills, interests and abilities?
- Can the individual be better utilized in another role in our organization?
- What role will provide the best fit for the individual, based upon interests, skills and abilities and the needs of the organization?

In some cases, even after redirection, a member, volunteer or leader may disengage from the organization. An individual may choose to leave the organization for any of a multitude of reasons, many of which are positive and are a natural evolution of human development. At other times, an individual may need to be disengaged from the organization in order to protect the organization, its clientele, staff, members, volunteers or leaders. The process should be clearly defined and handled objectively. Volunteer administrators and program managers should remember that disengagement is a natural component of all organizational relationships and should plan to make this phase as positive and smooth as possible. Indeed, disengagement is a natural and very real aspect of every relationship in which every person shall be involved. **Organizations should plan for membership turnover, volunteer disengagement and leadership succession. Not to do so will result in an organization that will one day self-destruct.**

Individuals who choose to disengage from an organization should be allowed to do so with dignity and respect. They should not be made to feel guilty about their decision. Situations involving individuals who are asked to disengage from the organization should be handled discretely and with respect. Research the situation thoroughly and take the necessary steps to make a good and fair decision. Acknowledge the contribution of the individual; identify the factors involved in the decision and the ultimate reasons for the disengagement. Be polite and firm. Don't discuss, mediate or compromise. The decision has been made and must be communicated.

When faced with disengagement, consider the following questions:

- Is the situation or offense well documented?
- Has the situation or offense been thoroughly researched?
- Has the organizational leader or volunteer administrator tried remediation, intervention, or supervision?
- Could the individual be re-motivated, reassigned, retired, retrained?"
- Is disengagement the only remaining or best option?

Conclusion

Sustaining members, volunteers and leaders and their continued efforts and service to the program is imperative to the continued health and well-being of any community organization. Sustaining strengthens an organization by adding stability, credibility and continuity. Additionally, a sustained membership, volunteer force and leadership base enables the organization to focus its efforts on programs and clientele rather than devoting a considerable amount of time to re-creating its own infrastructure.

While it is unrealistic to believe that every individual will want to continue his or her association and involvement with the organization, much can be done to strengthen and extend that relationship and continue the individual's service to the organization. In the end, building a tradition of service will result in a stronger, more viable organization that is better able to more effectively accomplish its mission, fulfill its vision and achieve its objectives, goals and action steps.

References

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