

## **Engaging Volunteers and Encouraging Group Cohesion through Training**

Like most activities, it is best to plan and be well prepared for volunteer training. As you build your agenda, consider the comfort of the group, ways to build group cohesion and unity, and how to encourage full participation by the volunteers. Remember, “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

### **Ensure Group Comfort**

- The room set-up can be a key to the success of the training:
  - For those programs that facilitate smaller trainings, a “u shape” table/chair set-up is best. The facilitator should be positioned in the center of the “u shape.”
  - For those programs that facilitate larger trainings, the facilitator should be somewhere in the middle of the room set-up and should be able to walk freely through out the room. This style of facilitation lends to a more personalized approach as the trainer is able to make direct eye contact with each of the individuals being trained as he/she walks through the room.
- During a training, it is nice to have snacks on the tables.

### **Build Group Unity**

- Many times at trainings, the same volunteers will sit together. To alleviate this, when the volunteers arrive, you can give them a number from 1-6 (or whatever number you want). Then at the beginning of the meeting, ask all the number 1’s to sit together, all of the number 2’s to sit together, and so forth. This encourages the volunteers to get to know different groups of people rather than sitting with their friends.
- Ice-breakers or warm-up activities are important ways to set up the training topic and/or encourage group cohesion. An ice-breaker that can help everyone feel a little more comfortable should include the whole group. Ask the volunteers to: stand up if you have been a volunteer for 10 years or more, five years or more, etc.; stand up if you were born in a different country than the USA; stand up if you went to college; stand up if you are married; stand up if you have children; stand up if you have a pet, etc. You can tailor the questions to your group. Volunteers enjoy this activity and it is interesting to see who stands up.

### **Facilitate Group Discussion**

- When you start a meeting with either a small or large group, set some ground rules. Remind everyone to be polite when someone is talking and listen to what they have to say; be respectful and raise your hand instead of just talking.
- The facilitator needs to keep discussions on track. It is very common to have individuals go off on tangents, want to “take the floor” etc.; the facilitator needs to acknowledge the individuals passion for the topic but request input from the other individuals in the room.

Independent Living Working Group  
Promising Practices

- Brainstorming can be effective when trying to come up with ideas or solutions to an issue. Remember that when brainstorming, you want to list everyone's ideas (no matter how far-fetched –no judgment!) and then start narrowing the choices.
- Remember to ask open-ended questions instead of “yes/no” questions. For example, you can ask “What do you enjoy about being a volunteer?” instead of “Do you enjoy being a volunteer?” This helps facilitate a dialogue.
- When asking open-ended questions, be sure to leave plenty of “wait time” so people can collect their thoughts and respond, before you begin talking again.
- Plan to ask follow-up questions to the answers given on the open-ended questions. Sometimes, the follow-up questions will spark input from other individuals leading to a more inclusive training.

We hope these planning suggestions will make your training a success!

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