Using the Independent Living Curriculum Exercises to Engage Reticent and New Volunteers

Dear Training Guru:
I find that I still have many Senior Corps volunteers who do not seem to talk or participate much during the training sessions. Any ideas on what I should do?
Too quiet in Texas

Dear Too Quiet:

The exercises in the independent living curriculum modules are designed to solicit discussion and actively engage volunteers. For example,

- Volunteers share ideas from their own experiences and learn from other volunteers;
- Volunteers get to know each other through small group exercises;
- Volunteers come up with creative solutions from brainstorming in small groups, and;
- Volunteers are less shy about asking questions around possibly touchy or embarrassing situations with clients.

Ideally, you want all volunteers to participate but there will always be some who are hesitant. In a paper by William W. Wilen[1] on encouraging reticent students' participation in classroom, the principles that apply to students can also apply to seniors in a training session. Here are few ideas to open up the discussion to those reticent and new volunteers who have not had a chance to participate as fully:

- Reiterate the importance of everyone contributing to the discussion because participation and sharing will provide valuable input for all volunteers. Acknowledge that while everyone has a preferred style of learning, you encourage participants to stretch their style. Those who are typically quiet are encouraged to "step up" and speak. Likewise, those who are typically talkers are encouraged to "step back" and listen.
- To broaden participation and perhaps generate new perspectives, those who have not participated in the discussion, as a general rule, should have priority over previous contributors.
- Call on reticent volunteers who you know have been attentive during the discussion.
- Request that all volunteers write out one question they would like to have answered about the information or perspectives that have been presented so far; then call on one of the reticent or new volunteers to share their question.
- Have volunteers write down topics and issues they would like discussed during the training.
- Organize pairs of volunteers to devise discussion (open-ended) questions.

[1] William W. Wilen is an editor and writer who has published extensively on effective teaching topics, including questioning skills for teachers.

- Encourage volunteers to share their questions with a partner and “rehearse their thinking”.
- Foster a feeling of connection among the group such as, “We all are volunteers working towards a common cause.” This will give volunteers a sense of belonging and a sense of being a part of the group.
- Emphasize that everyone, without exception, has something valuable to contribute.
- Balance large group discussion with small group discussions. Use small groups to achieve large group discussion goals. Group volunteers by discussion ability or confidence level so that small groups made up of volunteers who are shy and reticent will have the opportunity to develop and practice communication skills.

The facilitator should also understand why some senior volunteers may be reticent when it comes to participation.

- Seniors may be new to the concept of volunteerism and are unsure of their roles.
- Seniors have been out of the classroom setting for many years.
- Seniors may be uncomfortable participating for fear of appearing uninformed.
- Seniors may be from cultural backgrounds which value a quieter style.

The facilitator should maintain a training environment that provides respectful treatment of the participants. If the facilitator is enthusiastic, passionate, and open-minded, volunteers are more likely to follow suit and engage and participate fully in the training session.

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