

how to hang on to volunteers

Julia Gamon

Turnover Is Expensive



In Extension, volunteer leader turnover is expensive in terms of time and energy spent recruiting and training. It's also expensive in terms of program performance. For example, Extension Council members are elected for one term, but may serve two. We find that those who stay on for the second term generally do a better job. I remember one man who in his second term went over the expenditures with an eagle eye. We appreciated his interest and he became one of Extension's most loyal supporters.

4-H volunteer leaders who stay on do a better job of program support. A study done in Iowa using the "Indicators of Quality" instrument found that of the 141 4-H Clubs observed, the 17 clubs with first-year leaders consistently ranked lowest in the areas measuring educational quality.¹

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Reducing Turnover

In the business world, reducing worker turnover means increasing job satisfaction. In addition to the obvious method of increasing remuneration (more money!), you can make the hours more convenient, the surroundings more pleasant, the work load more reasonable, and provide training and opportunities for advancement. Let's look at how these could be implemented in Extension.

(Better Hours)

First, how do we make the *hours more convenient*? One of my co-workers uses volunteers very effectively in educational workshops. He schedules a state or area specialist, or a video

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tape, and supplements those resources with individuals who are local people. During swine days or the beef facility programs, the most convenient time for the volunteer panel of farmers usually is also the best time to reach the audience. But in the case of the estate planning series, the volunteer lawyers have a different busy season, and that must be considered.

In the 4-H program, we try not to schedule programs on ASCS election day or the opening day of deer season. If a leader has a regular club meeting, we try not to schedule a leader training meeting or special program meeting on top of it. Several times a year, I schedule clubs for home economics judging or basketball playing times. When I do, I think of the club leaders involved, how far they live from town, what their children and spouses may be doing at that time, and whether they have chores to do. If something has to be inconvenient for someone, I alternate who gets the raw deal each time.

Pleasant Surroundings

In addition to convenient hours, *pleasant surroundings* promote job satisfaction. In the business world, this usually means an attractive office, capable supervisors, and congenial co-workers and clientele. In the world of the volunteer, the office is likely to be a box under the bed or a drawer in the buffet. The co-workers are parents, neighbors, and friends; the clientele are unpredictable kids and the supervisors are the Extension staff. A motley crew, but still reachable.

Let's start with ourselves. Our secretary knows most of the volunteer leaders by name and goes out of her way to help them. She anticipates their needs and overlooks their weaknesses. I've known Extension staff to get upset at volunteers who lose returnable cards and hand in late reports or no reports at all.

I don't judge the worth of a volunteer by how well he/she fills out forms. I try to make the clerical part of being a volunteer as easy as possible. Filling out forms is frustrating for almost everyone. If I resent the paper work required in my job, how do the volunteers feel about the paper work required of them? Give the volunteers the time to do the important, rewarding jobs.

A neighboring home economist told me her Home Economics Committee didn't want to take grocery stuffers around to the grocery stores in their communities. They wanted to help develop and evaluate programs, not be errand boys for promotional or educational flyers. I wonder how many volunteers have felt that way, but haven't expressed their dissatisfaction. Instead they just quit, increasing volunteer turnover.

(Reasonable
Work Load)

Another method of reducing volunteer turnover is making sure the *work load is reasonable*. I remember a leader training meeting scheduled for the month of December. Each volunteer was asked to call all of his/her older members plus the Extension office before the meeting. He/she was expected to bring five things ranging from a tablecloth to a recipe. That's just too much.

A tip for recognizing an unreasonable work load is people's reluctance to serve. If 15 people have to be called to find 1 person willing to serve as food stand superintendent, the job should be divided so more people can share the responsibility.

Sometimes the work load isn't too heavy, it's just too unpleasant. I recall the Extension Council chairman who found his job stressful. He was a friendly and sociable person, and because of his position as Extension Council chairman he had to serve as chairman of one of the council's committees and the fair board. He chose not to run for reelection.

(Advancement
Opportunities)

An area often overlooked is a volunteer's *opportunities for advancement*. Extension can be proud of its training program—we train people well for the jobs they're doing. Do we also train them for advancement, and provide them with the opportunities? Every year my supervisor asks about my short- and long-term career goals. How many of us have ever asked a volunteer if he/she would like to be considered for a bigger job? Most of us don't even know what opportunities a volunteer has for advancement!

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Recently our procedure for replacing committee people broke down and while looking for a new member, I thought it would be nice to have a fresh, young face, someone unfamiliar with the program and full of new ideas and enthusiasm. But then I thought, "What does it do to long-time faithful volunteers when they're passed over in favor of someone from the 'outside?' " It does the same thing that it does to people in industry who are passed over when a person from outside the ranks is brought in to fill a vacancy. It hurts . . . and makes people less anxious to do their best.

(Better
"Pay")

The last method for increasing job satisfaction is giving *adequate remuneration*. (There are many ways besides money to pay people.) Public thank-you's and praise qualify as "pay." I have a leader who knocks herself out helping disadvantaged

kids in her community. 4-H doesn't have any medals or certificates for that kind of effort, but she's doing a terrific job and I tell her so.

A 4-H leader once complained that, even though many of her 4-Hers had won awards, their leader's name was never mentioned at the awards banquet or in the newspaper stories. I make an effort when choosing people for newspaper, radio, and TV interviews to choose leaders and/or leaders' children. A leader who has donated hours of time to other people's children deserves to have his/her own child's picture in the paper.

Putting volunteers in teaching roles brings them respect and prestige—another form of pay. Volunteers often have skills that surpass those of Extension personnel. If we can get over our feelings of insecurity, we can reap benefits by getting help from them.

I remember one of my first 4-H leader training sessions. I was fresh out of college and trying to show the women how to strip varnish. I started in on my chair without too much success, and at that point one of the leaders began stripping her chair. She was an expert furniture refinisher. The crowd watched her, leaving me with a sticky mess, feeling foolish, and wishing I had asked her to be the teacher. (The admiration of the other leaders would have been her pay.)

Jealousy can be a problem in all fields where professionals and paraprofessionals, such as volunteers or paid aides, work together. Brown had an interesting article in the *Professional and Guidance Journal* that dealt with the reluctance of professionals to delegate responsibility.²

Volunteers enjoy the prestige of leading groups on tours and exchanges. When a 4-H group from Canada visited last summer, no Extension staff member was along. Volunteers who have nice trips with Extension and other good experiences are more likely to be enthusiastic supporters who stay on.

Summary

(Turnover, as business well knows, should be avoided. It's costly.) The volunteer who quits is likely to be ²⁻¹⁸⁻⁶⁸ sour on Extension programs in general. Conversely, (the experienced volunteer has the basics under control and is ready for creative expansion.) (Another benefit of having experienced youth volunteers is that the "old" leader usually has a group of loyal followers. This gives a club a nucleus of junior leaders, potential county officers, and participants in out-of-county events.)

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Footnotes

1. Bill Bogue, *A Research Instrument to Look at 4-H Program Quality* (Ames: Iowa State University, Cooperative Extension Service, 1977).
2. W. F. Brown, "Effectiveness of Paraprofessionals: The Evidence," *Professional and Guidance Journal*, LIII (December, 1974), 257-63.