Conducting a Needs Assessment

The first step in building a volunteer program is to determine what role volunteers will play in the organization. Before volunteers can be recruited, the volunteer administrator must help the organization identify the roles volunteers can fill to help the agency achieve its vision. The first step in generating volunteers is to conduct a needs assessment.

What is a needs assessment?
A technical definition of needs assessment is a systematic investigation of an audience to identify aspects of individual knowledge, skill interest, attitude, and/or abilities relevant to a particular issue, organizational goal or objective. On a more simple level, a needs assessment is an analysis of the gap between where the organization is today and where it wants to be in the future. It involves determining what needs to be done to fill that gap. In many nonprofit organizations, it means determining what role volunteers can play in helping the organization pursue its mission and achieve its vision.

Needs Assessment Tools

There are many methods for conducting a needs assessment – each depending upon the goals set by the planning team. A brief discussion of the more common methods follows.

Brainstorming
Needs assessments do not have to be elaborate. Often an organization just needs to generate a list of solutions to an issue (How can volunteers help our agency?). The purpose of brainstorming is to generate as many ideas as possible. Brainstorming follows a set of rules that assure that many ideas will be produced.

1. No criticism, evaluation, judgment, or defense of ideas during the brainstorming session. Such discussion during this state limits “out of the box” thinking or creativity.
2. No limit on wild ideas, no matter how outrageous or impractical they seem. Every idea is to be expressed.
3. Quantity is more desirable than quality.
4. Piggybacking, or building on other's ideas, is encouraged.
5. Everyone must be encouraged to participate. Ideas may be presented in a round-robin fashion. Each member has the power to pass on their turn.
6. Record all ideas such as on a piece of flipchart paper.
7. Combine similar ideas when appropriate.
8. Individually rank ideas, then bring the rankings together.

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Only after all ideas have been generated, does discussion of the ideas occur. The planning team may now critically discuss the merits and feasibility of each idea. Organizational policies, budgets, or other factors may limit the feasibility of some ideas.

Nominal Group Technique

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) uses small groups of 5-6 people to generate issues and identify solutions to those issues. The goal is to gain consensus among the group members as to the solutions generated. It is less threatening to some participants due to the smaller group size. Steps in the NGT are:

1. Divide larger groups into groups of 5-6. Each group should have a trained facilitator to keep the process moving.

2. Ask participants to individually brainstorm and write down several answers to an open-ended question (“What are some jobs that volunteers could fill in our organization?).

3. Have the participants share their answers in a round-robin fashion (one response per person each time) and record their answers on a flipchart. Other group members should ask clarifying questions, but no criticisms of the ideas are allowed.

4. Participants then vote for the issues or solutions that they believe to be the most critical. This voting is anonymous. Participants can rank the ideas/issues with the rankings of all participants combined to achieve a group ranking. Members can also be allotted a number of “votes,” (10 for example) and can allocate their votes among the issues. Issues are then ranked according to which one gets the most “votes.”

5. The rankings/votes are tabulated and a group ranking is prepared. If there are several small groups seeking answers to the same questions, the top issues/answers from each group must be combined into one list and a second round of voting must occur.

6. The issues/answers are then ranked based on this final vote and reported to the group.
SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis is a quick analysis of the key issues relevant to your organization’s business. It is a structured form of brainstorming. SWOT stands for: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

Strengths: What is your organization good at doing? What is it known for? Examples include, excellence in programming, quick response to your clients, a caring staff.

Weaknesses: Where are areas that the organization could improve to make it more efficient, competitive or viable? Examples might include lack of knowledge or training for your staff/volunteers, or rigid rules and policies that hinder your agency’s ability to serve its clients.

Opportunities: Look outside the organization for current issues or trends that may affect your agency. Are there opportunities for your agency to make an impact or grow? Examples include new audiences for your programs, new grant funding that has become available, or new partners with which you can collaborate.

Threats: What are the barriers or obstacles that you might have to overcome to be successful? Examples include reduced funding, changes in policy or law that affect your clients, changes in the economy that might increase the number of people that come to your agency for help.

As illustrated in the figure below, strengths and weaknesses are internal components and opportunities and threats are typically external to the organization.
In conducting a SWOT analysis, all stakeholders of the agency should be represented. This includes clientele, funders, paid staff, and volunteers. These should be divided into groups of 6-8. There are four steps in conducting a SWOT analysis.

Brainstorm

Have members brainstorm ideas for each of the four SWOT categories. Think of each of the categories in relation to the agency’s mission.

Storyboard Ideas

Once the group has completed the brainstorming session, have them share their ideas with the group. Ideas should be recorded by category where all group members can see them (such as on a flip chart).

Group into Themes

After all ideas have been recorded, the group should examine each category to see if some ideas can be grouped into similar themes. The themes/ideas should be ranked into some semblance of importance or priority.

Develop Strategies or Goals

The analysis is not complete until the group has identified strategies for dealing with each issue. How can the agency's strengths be leveraged to take advantage of an opportunity? How can weaknesses be minimized or external
threats be addressed? Specific plans must be developed to address the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that were identified.

Organizations must know how volunteers can help their organization and identify specific roles that they will fill before any volunteers can be recruited. All paid staff members who will potentially supervise or work with volunteers should participate in identifying and defining volunteer roles. Without their input, other paid staff may have poor working relationships with the volunteers and may come to resent them.

**Steps in Conducting a Needs Assessment**

There are three basic steps in conducting a needs assessment:

1. Planning
2. Data Collection
3. Data Analysis and Reporting

Planning involves establishing a planning team consisting of members of the different stakeholder groups, paid staff members, and the volunteer administrator. The planning team’s task is to establish goals and objectives; to identify desired and actual levels of knowledge or skill; to characterize the audience; and to conduct a thorough information and literature search. It is important that the planning team clarify the problem: What is it that we need to do to solve the problem, serve our clientele, or improve services? And what roles can volunteers play in accomplishing these tasks?

Data collection involves choosing the correct methods for collecting data from stakeholders and the type of data analysis and synthesis methods that will be used. Methods of collecting data include: observation, interviews, focus groups, mailed surveys, questionnaires, existing data, and testing. The team designs the collection instruments and the data is gathered and recorded.

Data analysis and reporting involves performing the data analysis, synthesizing the information into a useful format, creating reports, drawing conclusions, and making recommendations. Once the team has identified what needs to be done and identified roles for volunteers to fill in the organization, the volunteer administrator can move on to the next step in Generating volunteers.