Evaluating Volunteers

“True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of uncertain, hazardous, and conflicting information.”
Winston Churchill

David Kelley notes that evaluation and judgment are responses to what exists, sorting the things that pass before us into categories of good, bad, and indifferent. Evaluation is a critical process in the success of a volunteer program. Both the volunteer and the volunteer program must be evaluated. Evaluation is a useful management tool when used correctly. It allows the volunteer administrator (VA) to provide specific feedback to volunteers as well as personalized recognition. The VA should remember two things about evaluating volunteers:

• Most volunteers are there to contribute to the organization to the best of their ability. When feedback and assistance are not taking place, volunteers can feel neglected and unimportant.
• Most volunteers will be successful in evaluation situations.

Why Evaluate Volunteers?

• Evaluations help volunteers work closer to their potential. The evaluation process provides them specific feedback on their performance; specific contributions or shortcomings, with information related to enhancing future contributions. It also provides a natural time for volunteers to review whether or not they wish to remain with the program.
• Evaluating volunteers helps them become more involved in the organization. If they feel valued, they are more likely to seek other ways to get involved.
• Evaluating a volunteer sends the message that you care about that volunteer and the quality of work they are performing. Even if they know they aren't doing well, they will think more of you and the organization if you conduct evaluations. Evaluation sends the message that volunteers are held accountable just like paid staff.
• Evaluations communicate to stakeholders that your programs are effective. Clientele, funding providers, and agency administration want to know if the volunteer led programs are effective.
• Evaluations give the supervisor an opportunity to encourage alternative or additional program functions. Think of evaluation as a way of determining
how volunteers feel about their work - if they are bored, burned out, or need a new position.

- Performance evaluations are also part of improving the services of the organization. They are excellent opportunities to solicit feedback on supervision. An evaluation will show what you need to do as much as it will show what the volunteer needs to do.

**When should you evaluate?**

Volunteers should be regularly appraised of their performance just as though they were paid staff. Feedback and skill development are as important to those who are not paid for their work as for those who are.

A trial period for new volunteers should be established where more frequent evaluation occurs: between 3 and 6 months, and then annually thereafter. If problems arise between the scheduled appraisals, a nonscheduled appraisal can be arranged.

**Steps in Evaluating Volunteers**

1. Pre-evaluation
   Questions that should guide the evaluation process:
   - What is the purpose of the evaluation?
   - What are the program goals and objectives?
   - What is the frequency of evaluation?
   - What type of data should be collected?
   - What format will be used?
     - Client survey
     - One-on-one interview
     - Questionnaire
   - Who is responsible for conducting evaluations?

2. Preparation
   Prior to the evaluation, the following components should be in place:
   - Policies and procedures on the performance evaluation and review process. Explain this process to each volunteer during the initial orientation session.
   - A system for developing and maintaining current and accurate job descriptions for each volunteer.
   - A method for reviewing commitments to change made during the evaluation meeting.
   - A grievance procedure to allow volunteers the opportunity to express dissatisfaction or discuss problems or concerns.
3. Conducting the evaluation
The appraisal process should be a positive and helpful experience for the volunteer. It should be constructive, friendly, and directly related to the tasks the volunteer has done or tried to do. A clear set of expectations is a prerequisite to a relevant, meaningful, and constructive evaluation. Allow the volunteer to participate by offering an opportunity for self-evaluation.

a. Evaluations start with the job description. The job description outlines the goals, objectives, and performance measures of the volunteer’s job. Both the supervisor and the volunteer know what was expected of them.

b. Offer the volunteer the chance for self-evaluation. Have them evaluate their performance against the job description. Ask what areas they would like to improve, or special topics they would like to learn more about. Include the volunteer’s goals, along with the supervisor’s goals, in the performance appraisal.

c. Rate the volunteer’s performance in each area. Then proceed to the volunteer’s individual goals, and determine jointly with the volunteer whether those goals were met completely, in part, or not at all.

d. If the volunteer falls short of the goals, explain why. Review the volunteer’s self-appraisal, and discuss any areas of concern.

e. Finally, the performance appraisal should include a plan of action to address any training needed or desired by the volunteer, as well as what other actions the volunteer will take to improve performance.

Evaluation Methods

The evaluation should be a two-way meeting in which volunteers and evaluators both have a chance to give input and voice their opinions. There are several different methods to choose from when conducting evaluations.

The RAP Method
This RAP method has been known to be simple and effective. RAP stands for:

- Review the past
- Analyze the present
- Plan the future.
1. Begin with the job description: Does it describe what the volunteer is doing? Make adjustments to reflect the reality.

2. Keep the evaluation basic and simple. Look at the volunteer’s:
   a. Job proficiency
   b. Working relationships with paid staff, other volunteer staff, as well as clientele
   c. Previous evaluation for comparison

3. Ask the volunteer's opinion about the volunteer program, get their ideas on how to improve things for themselves and other volunteers.

Self Appraisal
The method works well for volunteers who work at an outside location where the VA cannot easily observe their work.

1. The volunteer fills out a paper evaluation form, evaluating their task performance as it relates to the goals set out in the job description.

2. You should meet with the volunteer so they have the chance to discuss their experiences. In addition to giving the volunteer performance feedback, you should seek their feedback concerning the volunteer program.

3. Use a set of competencies to help volunteers set future goals.

Poll the Clients
When a volunteer works at a remote site with the agency's clientele, this method may be the most appropriate.

1. A paper survey or phone interview may be used to collect evaluation data.

2. You must make it clear that the information clients share is confidential or they may not be completely honest.

3. It still may be necessary to ask the volunteer to come in for a face-to-face meeting to talk about their volunteer position and possibly alter their goals or find another volunteer position that may be better suited for them.
Evaluating volunteers is critical to the success of any organization. Evaluation of volunteers communicates their worth to the organization, to the organization’s leadership, and to agency stakeholders.