

ISOTURE: A Model for Effective Volunteer Management

Volunteers are critical to the success of not-for-profit organizations. Yet without the proper structure and management plan, most organizations are not getting the most out of their volunteers. Likewise, if volunteers feel unappreciated or underutilized, they won't stick around for long.

One effective model for volunteer management is the ISOTURE model. It is a set of steps for organizations to help strengthen volunteer programs and lead volunteers more effectively.

ISOTURE Model

Identification
Selection
Orientation
Training
Utilization
Recognition
Evaluation

Identification

Not all volunteers are the right ones for the job at hand. Just as you have a list of needs to be met, volunteers have a set of expectations to be fulfilled. It is up to you to

- assess and recognize the needs of your program or organization,
- identify the types of volunteers available, and
- acknowledge the potential motivations and expectations of those volunteers.

Armed with this information, you can develop a volunteer job description for each type of volunteer you need or each role to be filled. This job description should clearly outline the expectations and responsibilities of the position. A volunteer job description is a useful tool for recruiting volunteers, because it answers several questions up front and saves you time and effort in the long run.

Another useful tool is a volunteer interest form, which collects information such as availability, previous experience, interests, skills, and motivations for volunteering. Anyone interested in volunteering with your organization should complete this form, even if you're not ready to bring them on board just yet.

Selection

Now that you've identified and recruited the type(s) of volunteers you need, the next step is to meet and interview potential candidates. Important topics for discussion include:

- Description and purpose of the position
- Benefits of serving in this role—to the individual and to the organization
- Responsibilities and expectations
- Needed skills and knowledge
- Time commitment
- Available support and resources

Also inquire about the candidate's interests, strengths, past experience, and motivations. If done correctly, this interview process will enable you to match the right volunteer with the right role in your organization.

Orientation

First and foremost, orientation is not training. It is a precursor to training, and it begins with the first contact between a volunteer and your staff. The primary reason orientation should be distinct from training is that it gives both you and the volunteer another chance to make sure this is a good match for all involved, before too much time, effort, and resources are invested into training.

Orientation is an opportunity for the volunteer to learn the following key items:

- The organization's mission and vision
- How the volunteer "fits" into the big picture
- The roles and expertise of staff with whom the volunteer will be working
- The general cultural values and norms of the organization

Training

Although volunteers come with existing knowledge and skills, training is an opportunity to help them enhance the quality of their work. But training should not be a one-size-fits-all approach. The type of training depends on the volunteer's role, past experience, and current knowledge/skills.

When training volunteers, it is important to remember the needs of adult learners:

- They need to have a say in what and how they learn.
- They need to have a goal.
- They need to feel what they're learning is relevant to them.
- They need to be able to apply what they're learning quickly.
- They need to feel respected.

For more information on how adults learn, read [MSU Extension Publication 3378 How Do Adults Learn?](#)

Utilization

Volunteers who feel accomplished and as if they're making a difference will have a greater sense of self-worth. In turn, they will be more loyal to the organization and may serve as advocates in times of need.

To strike this delicate balance and keep everyone happy, it's important to be strategic about delegating to and managing your volunteers. Volunteers need opportunities to put their skills to work, to feel challenged without feeling overwhelmed, and to be successful. Utilization, then, is about providing those opportunities in the right way and at the right time.

Proper management of volunteers also includes:

- maintaining open lines of communication;
- keeping volunteers current with relevant information;
- checking in periodically to gauge progress; and
- providing timely, frequent, and appropriate feedback (positive and negative).

Recognition

While most volunteers may be intrinsically motivated, they still need to be recognized and awarded for their efforts. Recognizing volunteers demonstrates respect for them and their place in the organization. It also helps motivate them and keeps them involved.

As with training, recognition should not be a one-size-fits-all approach. An end-of-the-year awards banquet is great for volunteers who wish to be acknowledged publicly and like being in the spotlight. However, it does very little for volunteers who are more introverted or prefer smaller, more frequent "pats on the back."

Remember the volunteer interest form? Now's the time to use that information about your volunteers' motivations. What makes them tick?

If someone is motivated by positions of power, recognize them by giving them a more senior volunteer leadership role (preferably along with a certificate and a title). If someone is motivated by knowing they're making a difference, send them a hand-written note detailing the impact they've had on the organization.

Others simply might be motivated by the social aspect of volunteering. In this case, give them opportunities to gather and socialize, such as a potluck holiday party or a monthly lunch-and-learn session.

Key to relevant and successful recognition of volunteers is your relationship with those volunteers. Nurturing a relationship built on trust and respect enhances the value and impact of timely and appropriate recognition.

Evaluation

Employees don't want their supervisor to wait until the end of the year to give them any feedback. Volunteers are no different.

Use a variety of formal and informal methods of evaluation to determine volunteer performance. This feedback helps volunteers achieve the desired results.

Volunteers should also have the opportunity to evaluate the organization and the staff with whom they work. Their feedback may offer insight into how to update or change existing policies and procedures.

There are three common types of evaluation for volunteer programs. A **process evaluation** assesses the volunteer's experience, including satisfaction with their role in the organization. An **outcome evaluation** assesses changes in the volunteer's knowledge, skills, or behaviors over time. Finally, an **economic impact evaluation** reveals the dollar value of a volunteer's efforts to the organization and its clients.

Summary

The ISOTURE model has a long history of success, especially for nonprofit and public-service organizations that rely heavily on volunteers. With a little bit of strategy and planning to properly **I**dentify, **S**elect, **O**rient, **T**rain, **U**se, **R**ecognize, and **E**valuate your organization's volunteers, you can have a strong, effective volunteer program. Your organization will have the right volunteers for the right roles. Volunteers will be motivated and integrate well into the organization's culture. You will have an environment of innovation and open, reciprocal communication. The potential of volunteers to help achieve your and your organization's mission and goals will be realized.

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