



WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS

Recruiting volunteers- You may use a variety of methods for recruiting members but one of the most effective ways is to “ASK THEM”. We can advertise, promote, and send emails until we are exhausted, but simply asking someone can be the most effective. For recruiting AITC people, look for those with an interest in education, teachers, promotional groups, FB members with children in school, agriculture education instructors and others that show an interest in agricultural literacy. As you form your county group, a more diverse group of people will lead to reaching out in more diverse ways.

Position descriptions- Trends show that volunteers gain increased satisfaction, do a more effective job, and stay with a project longer when they have clear expectations and guidelines of what their role is. Position descriptions, or job descriptions, will define the work that needs to be done, provide ideas, clarify who should be doing what, and offer ways for the volunteer to change or grow. Reviewing the position descriptions with the volunteers through an interview process will also help match volunteer skill levels to the tasks needing to be done. Periodic feedback and evaluation with the volunteer will help them assess the job they are doing as well.

Time commitment- It is important that the group outlines the time needed to complete a task and that the volunteers communicate the time they have available or are willing to commit to the project. Differences in the “time offered” vs. “time required for the job” may result in needing to recruit more volunteers, evaluating the task to be done, or determining that the volunteer may not be the right person for the job. Be realistic and up-front about the amount of time needed to help with your program.

Finances and costs- It is important that policy is set up for handling costs, ordering supplies, and other expenses related to activities. If there isn't funding available and costs are picked up by the volunteers, it is important to let the volunteers know that before you begin. If there is funding, outline what the limits, procedures, and guidelines are so that one person doesn't use up the entire budget! Have the guidelines and procedures in writing so that there isn't any miscommunication.

Effective use of volunteer's time- Volunteers are offering a very precious resource – their time – and it is important that organizations value that resource. Having productive meetings, not canceling or postponing meetings at the last minute, and following through on commitments is important to volunteers. Acknowledging the volunteer's efforts, thanking them, and recognizing them for taking their time to help is appreciated by volunteers. Most volunteers do their jobs because they believe in the effort – but it's nice to recognize those efforts and the payoff is usually a guarantee that they will help again.

Communications- Good communications with volunteers keeps them informed about any changes and strengthens their bond with the activity. Communication also conveys to the volunteer that they are important and need to be aware of important information. Find the best way to communicate with your group- newsletter, email, letters or via the telephone.

When volunteers need redirection- Sometimes volunteers aren't working out as we had anticipated. There are ways to address situations and still have a positive outcome. If a volunteer needs some assistance in classroom presentations or the content of the subject they are covering, perhaps one-on-one time to go over the presentation would be best. If they are overstepping their authority, a time to review the program and who is responsible for what tasks may be helpful. Being diplomatic in your conversation is essential- it is important not to embarrass, talk down to, or be harsh with the volunteer.

Delegating responsibility- Delegation is essential if an organization wants to succeed. Delegation may fail if the leader doesn't understand what his/her responsibilities are, they don't know how to delegate, they feel ownership and don't want to give it up, and they want the task to go perfectly. In order for the delegation of tasks to be successful, the group should make sure the tasks are manageable, define the responsibilities clearly, match the right people for the appropriate task, agree on time limits for completion, and provide support through sharing knowledge and information.

Instituting change on a committee or program- People view change in different ways- some are threatened by change and others embrace it. Making changes in your AITC program should be a group effort. Change is more likely to be accepted if people are involved in making decisions, the changes seem logical, the effects of the change are clear and specific, those being affected by the change understand the circumstances and the risks are minimized. Committee meetings should provide members an opportunity to voice their opinions, concerns and ideas. By involving everyone in the process, the more effective the changes will be and the easier they will be accepted.

Reporting on activities- Set up a procedure for volunteers to report on their activities. It will make tracking activities and projects easier and provide volunteers the opportunity to tell what they have been doing. If monthly reports or just a year-end report are needed, the collection of information throughout the year will make the process easier. You may need a system that also allows you to inventory supplies – especially if you have items you give away to students during classroom presentations or farm tours. Develop a system with your volunteers input so that it is easy to use and understand for them.

Recognizing volunteers- It is always nice to recognize and thank the volunteers that make a program successful. Consider ways to recognize them through newsletters, at events such as annual meetings, on programs or flyers, as a part of teacher in-services, or during other activities.