Creating, Implementing, and Supporting a State-wide Volunteer Conflict Management System

Dan Teuteberg *

Washington State University

dan.teuteberg@wsu.edu

Lauren Hrncirik Scanga

Washington State University

lauren.hrncirik@wsu.edu

Natalie Stott

Washington State University

nkinion@wsu.edu

Brian Brandt

Washington State University

bbrandt@wsu.edu

Eric William Larsen

Washington State University

eric.larsen@wsu.edu

Melissa McElprang Cummins

Washington State University

missy.cummins@wsu.edu

Jana S. Ferris

Washington State University

ferrisj@wsu.edu

∗   Corresponding author

Abstract

Volunteers are essential in carrying out the mission of Washington State University Extension. Properly managed volunteer conflict in Extension programs can have a positive impact on the organization's image, the ability to achieve programmatic outcomes, recruitment and retention of volunteers, and ultimately fulfilling the mission of the organization. A comprehensive volunteer conflict management system was created and implemented across the 4-H Youth Development program at Washington State University. Educational training sessions on the use of the Volunteer Conflict Management System were provided. Participant evaluations indicated a higher understanding of the system and resources available. Follow up evaluations and professional development opportunities are being implemented in the coming months.

Key Words: Conflict Management, Organizational Systems, Volunteer Management

Need

The Extension System is a non-formal educational program developed in the United States to provide individuals with researched based knowledge to improve their lives. This service is provided by each state's designated land grant university. Washington State University (WSU) is the land grant university for Washington State. Many of WSU Extension's educational programs engage volunteers to implement programs.

Volunteers are essential in carrying out the mission of WSU Extension. Specifically, they are a critical component of the 4-H Youth Development program and most often the direct link to positive youth development (PYD) outcomes (Arnold, Dolenc, & Rennekamp, 2009). Some suggest that the ability of staff to effectively manage volunteers has the greatest impact on 4-H youth activities and personal development (King & Safrit, 1998). Conflict management and people skills are competencies needed by Extension professionals working with volunteers (Seevers, Baca, & Leeuwen, 2005). Improperly managed conflict in any Extension program can have an adverse impact on the organization's image, the ability to achieve programmatic outcomes, and the recruitment and retention of volunteers. "Conflict is a normal part of life. Healthy conflict can lead to positive changes in personal relationships and organizations. Negative conflict can however be very destructive and can sap energy from a group," (University of New Hampshire, 2009).

In youth programs, volunteer conflict can also have severe negative impacts on young members. Systematic volunteer training and on-going support is a primary component impacting the satisfaction and retention of volunteers (Arnold, Dolenc, & Rennekamp, 2009). To strengthen and build the capacity of the local 4-H Youth Development program, quality volunteer education and sustainable volunteer systems must be in place. Otherwise, youth development outcomes suffer as well as volunteer retention, and overall program weakens. According to the National

Framework for 4-H Volunteerism, a comprehensive volunteer system includes both volunteer resource management and the development of individuals participating in the 4-H Youth Development program (Stone and Edwards, 2008). Systems exist to assist in managing risks, liabilities, and conflicts related to volunteers and their involvement in the 4-H Youth Development program. Systems exist to assist in managing risks, liabilities, and conflicts related to volunteers and their involvement in the 4-H Youth Development program.

Action

Before 2016, WSU Extension did not have a system-wide approach for handling volunteer conflict. Conflict is defined as challenges between two volunteers, volunteer to youth, youth to youth, etc. Conflict costing faculty, staff, and administration excessive amounts of time and resources handling volunteer grievances. The Volunteer Conflict Management Team, consisting of county-based, regional, and statewide 4-H Youth Development faculty, was formed at the request of the Associate Dean and Director of Extension. Team goals were 1) to develop a state-wide, research-based 4-H Youth Development volunteer conflict management system; 2) to design, deliver, and train faculty and staff on educational tools and resources; and 3) to aid in local system implementation across the WSU 4-H Youth Development program.

The Volunteer Conflict Management Team utilized best practices of supervising and coaching volunteers from National 4-H Learning Priorities: Volunteerism for the Next Generation (2010) to provide the Volunteer Conflict Management System framework. This system also integrates a coaching model by incorporating a corrective action process. A four-step process for handling volunteer conflict was created. The process includes:

1) identifying disruptive volunteer behaviors,

2) documenting and investigating using the supporting resources,

3) communicating findings with the volunteers involved,

4) next steps/follow up.

This process uses supporting documents and resources to help faculty and staff navigate the Volunteer Conflict Management System. The supporting documents include a behavior matrix, staff documentation form, tips to effective documentation handout, and letter templates.

The Volunteer Conflict Management System was grounded in a positive youth development perspective by integrating the 4-H essential elements (Kress, 2003). A matrix of volunteer behaviors was created and linked to the potential negative impacts for each behavior on the 4-H essential elements of positive youth development. Specific volunteer behaviors are color coded within the matrix to help faculty and staff recognize the severity of the conduct. Behaviors are identified as Green – low risk, Yellow – medium risk, and Red – high-risk. Specific actions listed on the matrix were created using input from internal and external stakeholders from 9 of the 39 Washington counties including 4-H volunteers, fair representatives, and other youth development agencies, as well as input from the university's human resources personnel and attorneys. While the matrix has an extensive list of behaviors, it is not intended to cover all disruptive volunteer behaviors.

The Volunteer Conflict Management System also involves a step-by-step process to help faculty and staff in diagnosing the severity of disruptive volunteer behavior and includes template letters and documentation forms for staff to use when working with volunteers through a conflict situation. The documentation forms allow staff to investigate and appropriately document the situation for a consistent process and approach across the entire state. Similar to the documentation form, volunteer template letters accompany the system for faculty and staff to use to address individual color coded behaviors. These letters allow customization for each

situation but also remain consistent for continuity across the entire state 4-H Youth Development program.

Once a faculty or staff member thoroughly investigates an incident, they document the situation, and then contact by letter the involved volunteer to arrange a face-to-face meeting. The in-person discussion gives the volunteer and staff opportunities to review findings of the investigation and to work with the volunteer on identified behaviors needing improvement. Face-to-face meeting outcomes with the volunteer may include no issues found, low-risk behavior change needed, volunteer suspension, re-education, or if necessary, volunteer removal.

The final step is to complete any specific next steps needed to finalize the issue. At the conclusion of this step, the Volunteer Conflict Management System is complete.

To support staff in the using the conflict management system five regional conflict management trainings (n=80) were held throughout the summer of 2016. Training was held at five different sites across the state and taught by two of the Volunteer Conflict Management Team members; one of whom co-taught at every regional training to provide consistent delivery. Participants included local and statewide staff and faculty from each of the three Extension program units (Youth and Families, Community and Economic Development, and Agricultural and Natural Resources). All were either directly or indirectly involved in volunteer management. Each training included overview of the Volunteer Conflict Management System, an in-depth review of the four steps in the process (i.e. Identify disruptive behaviors, documentation and investigation, communicating with the volunteer, the findings and next steps) and the supporting tools (i.e. behavior matrix, staff documentation form, tips to effective documentation handout, letter templates). The training concluded with a small group activity that involved each group receiving a scenario to practice implementation of the Volunteer Conflict Management System.

Each team presented how they would handle the situation from beginning to end utilizing the system and resources provided. Examples of scenarios included "lack of timely communication with 4-H Youth Development staff and repeated failure to submit club documents on time", "two volunteers not getting along in a club setting, both complaining to you individually," and "adult bullying/harassment of another adult in 4-H Youth Development program". Four additional trainings were held throughout the state in the fall and winter of 2016.

Results

Five in-depth conflict management regional trainings were attended by a total of 91 individuals. Each participant was asked to complete a retrospective post-then-pre survey to measure knowledge gain and intent to change behavior in volunteer conflict management practices. Response rate was 88% (n=80). Participants included local, regional, and statewide staff and faculty (41% (n=31) were extension faculty, and 59% (n=45) were extension program support staff). Four participants did not indicate their role within extension. 44% (n=33) of participants responded being in their current position for three years or less, and 56% (n=42) indicated being in their role for four or more years. Five participants did not identify how many years they had been in their current position.

Participants were asked to indicate their change in knowledge with six statements before and after participating in the workshop using a five point Likert scale (1 = very prepared; very confident; definitely yes; extremely comfortable; extremely well or; extremely consistent and 5 = not at all prepared; really not confident; definitely not; extremely uncomfortable; not well at all or; not consistent at all). Percent change was calculated as follows: % change = ((after-before)/before) x 100. The retrospective post-then-pre indicators revealed that participants experienced a positive change in knowledge, ability, confidence, and attitude. Three of the six

indicators registered a positive change over 40%. The overall mean for the nine items increased

from 3.03 (before) to 4 (after) (Table 1).

Table 1

Percent Change among All Training Participants

Survey Questions	Before	After	Change	% Change
Do you have the tools you need to handle conflict in your county [a]	3.0	4.3	1.3	43.5%
How well prepared do you feel in handling volunteer conflict in your county [b]	2.9	4.1	1.2	42.1%
How consistent do you feel WSU Extension will be in responding to volunteer conflict issues [c]	2.9	4.0	1.2	40.2%
How well do you think you will be able to distinguish the severity of volunteer conflict situations (i.e. minor versus major issues) [d]	2.9	3.8	0.9	30.9%
How comfortable are you in handling a volunteer conflict issue in your county [e]	3.0	3.8	0.8	25.4%
How confident do you feel in your abilities to handle conflict in your county [f]	3.5	4.0	0.5	13.8%

Note. n=80

[a] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = definitely yes, 5 = definitely not) scale.

[b] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = very prepared, 5 = not at all prepared) scale.

[c] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = extremely consistent, 5 = not consistent at all) scale.

[d] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = extremely well, 5 = not well at all) scale.

[e] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = extremely comfortable, 5 = extremely uncomfortable) scale.

[f] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = really confident, 5 = really not confident) scale.

When comparing participants according to number of years in their current role, the

percent change is greater across all indicators for respondents with zero to three years in their

present role. The percent change for two of the six indicators is two times higher for respondents

with zero to three years in their role than respondents with four or more years. The data indicates

that staff with less experience in their role may benefit more from the training.

Table 2

Percent- Change Between 0-3 Years and 4+ Years Employees

Survey Questions	0-3 Years % Change	4+ Years % Change
Do you have the tools you need to handle conflict in your county [a]	61.0%	33.8%
How well prepared do you feel in handling volunteer conflict in your county [b]	60.9%	30.9%
How consistent do you feel WSU Extension will be in responding to volunteer conflict issues [c]	50.0%	35.6%
How well do you think you will be able to distinguish the severity of volunteer conflict situations (i.e. minor versus major issues) [d]	41.9%	24.6%
How comfortable are you in handling a volunteer conflict issue in your county [e]	37.0%*	14.2%
How confident do you feel in your abilities to handle conflict in your county [f]	19.4%*	8.3%

Note. 0-3 Years n=33. 4+ Years n=42

* = The percent change is two times greater for respondents with 0-3 years in their role than respondents with 4 or more years

[a] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = definitely yes, 5 = definitely not) scale.

[b] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = very prepared, 5 = not at all prepared) scale.

[c] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = extremely consistent, 5 = not consistent at all) scale.

[d] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = extremely well, 5 = not well at all) scale.

[e] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = extremely comfortable, 5 = extremely uncomfortable) scale.

[f] Topics evaluated on 1 to 5 (1 = really confident, 5 = really not confident) scale.

In addition to the positive results in Table 2, qualitative feedback was also provided. Here is what one participant said, "I found it useful for guiding how corrective action and discipline should be handled with our volunteers. Prior to the system, we were left to our own decisions, and the tool provides me with the confidence to handle issues that may occur with our volunteers."

Recommendations

In the end of 2017 the volunteer conflict management team will conduct a one-year follow-up evaluation with the staff and faculty who participated in the 2016 regional conflict management trainings to identify impacts since implementing the Volunteer Conflict Management System.

The team is developing training modules the state will utilize to educate new hires in Extension Volunteer programs. Implementing a staff and faculty online module system will allow training to happen as needed throughout the year, and allow new hire education on managing volunteer behavior regardless of when that person joined the Extension staff. Additionally, the Volunteer Conflict Management System team is in the process of developing online modules for additional training of staff and faculty in conflict management best practices and creating conflict management resources for volunteers.

Although the Volunteer Conflict Management System was developed to address an unmet need within the Washington State University 4-H Youth Development program, Extension administration quickly recognized the value of having a consistent process to managing volunteer conflict Extension-wide. As a result, the 4-H Volunteer Conflict Management System became the model for all Extension volunteers. The team worked collaboratively with other volunteer program unit leadership to ensure the system was applicable for any Extension volunteer. The materials developed can be implemented in any county in Washington State, and also potentially replicable nationwide (upon locally vetting volunteer laws and university policies).

A Volunteer Conflict Management System can be applied to other volunteer programs and organizations. Creating a list of volunteer expectations, identifying disruptive behaviors with consequences gives administrators and volunteer managers the skills to make appropriate conflict management decisions. For example, Fair boards and Fair management can create their own set of expectations for volunteers and identify inappropriate behaviors before the Fair or event to ensure positive interactions and to create a consist method for handling conflict.

Annually, all members of the Volunteer Conflict Management System team will meet to

review and refine the system and the accompanying resources to continue best practices

implementation.

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