Kansas

ELEMENTS OF TEENS AS VOLUNTEER LEADERS PROJECT

What Is Teens as Volunteer Leaders?

Teens as Volunteer Leaders is a proven model for involving teens in delivering curriculum and programs to younger youth. This cross-age approach is highly effective in building leadership and life skills in both the teens and younger youth who receive the program. Younger youth respond well to teen instructors who often provide a positive role model for them.

The success of the Teens as Volunteer Leaders model will not happen without considerable planning effort. Experience and research has shown that there are 10 core elements to planning and delivering a Teens as Volunteer Leaders project.

A review of each of the 10 core elements follows.

10 Core Elements*

1. Dedicated Adults Who Support Teens

2. Active Teen Recruitment

3. Strong Curriculum

4. Initial Training

5. Ongoing Training and Support

6. Attention to Details

7. Recognition and Reward

8. Team Building

9. Setting Teens Up for Success

10. Feedback and Evaluation

*Adapted from research conducted by Faye C.H. Lee and Shelly Murdock, University of California Cooperative Extension.

Lee, F.C.H. & Murdock, S. (2001). Teens as Teachers Programs: Ten Essential Elements. Journal of Extension, [online], 39(1).
Available at:
http://www.joe.org/joe/2001february/rb1.html

Elements of Teens as Volunteer Leaders Project

1.   Dedicated Adults Who Support Teens

Committed adults serving as mentors or coaches is an essential element of an effective Teens as Volunteer Leaders project. Teens benefit from the experience and passion of a caring adult. The mentor role should be established early in the process and continued through the completion of the project. Adult coaches and mentors allow teens to explore and try our new roles and new skills in a safe environment. They identify potential problems but allow teens to problem solve and try out solutions. They encourage teens through praise and positive criticism. They allow teens to be the central teachers, planners and evaluators. They view their role as creating an environment where teens will be successful.

2.   Active Teen Recruitment

Finding and recruiting teens to participate in the Teens as Volunteer Leaders project requires planning. Some projects may require teens to have a prerequisite of skills or experience, while others will provide training necessary for the project. Completing an application and keeping some type of records is useful and can be an opportunity to teach job seeking skills. Using a commitment or participation agreement is helpful in spelling out the expectations for teens, mentors and those overseeing the project. See Chapter 2 for suggestions on how to create and implement a recruitment plan.

3.   Strong Curriculum

Successful outcomes are associated with a solid curriculum that is easy for teens to deliver. Teens will be more competent and feel more knowledgeable and capable when they have strong curricula to deliver. Curricula should utilize the experiential learning model and be interactive and hands-on. Minimally, curricula should have at least five lessons that are about one to one and a half hours long. The subject matter of the curriculum can vary. Providing activities that interest teens and younger youth is key.

4.   Initial Training

A comprehensive training on the curriculum and how to teach it is essential. Time spent training the teens on curriculum details and allowing them to practice what they have learned will pay off in top results. Shortchanging the initial training can cause problems in program delivery and compromise program outcomes. Equally important is teaching the teens how to work with younger youth. Our experience has shown that program delivery issues most often are associated with classroom management issues that stem from not understanding the developmental characteristics of the young people with which they are working. Unrealistic expectations about the ability of younger youth to sit, comprehend, respond or perform a task can lead to teen frustrations. Addressing these issues in the initial training will assure greater Teens as Volunteer Leaders project success.

5. Ongoing Training and Support

Successful Teens as Volunteer Leaders projects invest in additional training and support. The initial training can be overwhelming for some teens. They need an opportunity to reflect on what they have learned. A follow-up meeting to review expectations and content can alleviate anxiety. If delivery problems have been encountered, providing a venue to discuss the issue, identify solutions or even receive additional training is helpful. Teens appreciate the opportunity to get together with other teens teams, discuss their successes and get other tips for further project delivery. Mentors should be trained about how to continuously support the teens.

6. Attention to Details

Giving attention to details may be obvious to many who have experience working with teens or delivering a program of this nature. Successful program delivery is dependent on taking care of the "nuts and bolts" of the project. Great training is only as good as the delivery support system. Plan ahead to provide appropriate communication between teens, parents, mentors, after-school sites and program implementers. Determine in advance what supplies and other materials are needed to deliver the curriculum and how they will be provided. Set dates and share them with all participants in advance of the start of the project. Give attention to teens' needs, such as planning for food, transportation, rest, relaxation and recreation. Don't forget to make the project fun!

7. Recognition and Reward

Everyone needs to be recognized for their hard work. Make sure your program provides adequate recognition for all program participants. Teens will benefit from a variety of recognition forms. They will sense whether their efforts are valued and appreciated. Consider offering both intrinsic and extrinsic forms of recognition. Some projects offer stipends or pay the teens for their time. These decisions are usually based on the philosophy of the programs, their locale and overall objectives of the project. If some form of financial compensation is offered, it should be well thought out with details of compensation and expectations provided in writing to the teens.

8. Team Building

A Teens as Volunteer Leaders project that focus on building a strong team approach are most successful. Teen camaraderie and being part of a teen group experience is a motivating factor for many teens' involvement in the project. Most teens also prefer to work with other teens in delivering the curriculum. Our experience shows that establishing these teen teams in advance of the training works best. Providing opportunities for teens to continue to meet beyond the initial training also supports team building.

9. Setting Teens Up For Success

Staff who implement successful Teens as Volunteer Leaders projects know what a successful project looks like, and they work to assure that teens will experience this success. They are flexible and willing to change course if needed. They have high expectations for teens and confidence in their abilities. The pay attention to group needs and those of individual teens. They provide a safe and caring environment where teens can test their abilities.

Teens need immediate and constant feedback. Mentors assigned to small groups of teens can provide ongoing encouragement and suggestions. Programs that provide multiple opportunities for teens to receive feedback have been found to be the most successful. Involving teens in critiquing their own performance is valuable to teens and to the project. Providing forms, journals and discussion time to review performance is helpful. The use of portfolios, artifact boxes, videos and photographs of the projects in action are additional ways for teens to record and communicate project successes. Asking mentors to give ongoing feedback on teens' performance can identify areas that may need to be modified. Teens or mentors should be adequately trained about how to administer evaluation tools if they are involved in collecting project outcome data.

Resource: *4-H Afterschool Resource Guide, Teens as Volunteer Leaders,* June 2005
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10. Evaluation