helping resource people help you

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Much can be found in literature about the programming process in adult education. One aspect of the process that hasn't received much attention is the effective use of human resources. A resource person has the responsibility of helping others learn new knowledge, skills, or attitudes. Although resource people may be called on to perform a variety of functions, the emphasis here is on those who make presentations to groups. A wealth of information on selecting resources is available, but little attention has been given to how human resources can best be used.

Three Concerns

The proper use of resources concerns me for three reasons: (1) my involvement as resource person in several programs in which I felt less than totally effective, (2) observing ineffective resource people, and (3) talking with resource people who expressed negative feelings about their involvement. One important conclusion drawn from an analysis of these situations is that, too often, the person hasn't been adequately informed of how he/she is to participate. When this happens, programs tend to be ineffective. The resource person may become frustrated when the needs of participants aren't being met. Participants, in turn, lose interest and may show their disapproval verbally or nonverbally. The result . . . little learning takes place.

Resource persons are generally chosen on the basis of competence, knowledge, or expertise in a given area. If this is true, we must assume that other factors come into focus that cause individuals to be ineffective. This article discusses the added dimensions that affect the performance of individuals asked to serve as resource people for groups.

History of the Organization

Resource people are frequently used to provide educational services for many organizations. The purposes for which programs are designed vary depending on the goals of the organization. Consequently, program planners shouldn't assume that a resource person knows the goals of the organization.

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When an individual is asked to provide services, a brief history of the organization, including its goals, organizational structure, and unique problems, would be invaluable. This information would help the individual plan content for specific needs.

Demographic Profile of Clients

Program planners should provide the resource person with a profile of perspective clients. Facts such as the average age, income and educational background, the number of participants, compulsory or voluntary attendance, and a history of the clients' past involvement in similar programs are essential. The success of the program depends on the person's knowledge of the target audience.

The average age of participants is important to focus the presentation towards the dominant concerns of young, middle, or older age groups. Presentations may be strengthened by using illustrations and examples that are relevant to the age groups present.

Another concern is to understand the conditions surrounding attendance at the program, that is, whether participants come on their own or if they are compelled to attend. Attendance requirements may provide clues about the level of motivation in the group.

The educational level of participants should be discussed in some detail. The success of a program depends on the degree to which participants can comprehend the content presented. The resource person must be aware of the knowledge level of participants and structure the presentation accordingly.

A person may be more effective if information concerning the participants' previous involvement in programs is known. Information like reactions to previous adult educational programs, how participants were involved, and the success of the programs would be useful. In addition, he/she should know if participants have a long history of involvement in adult education programs or whether they're relative newcomers.

Reconciling
Expectations
In many programs, the individual is given little information concerning how the presentation fits into the total program. The assumption is that an individual can contribute effectively without a thorough knowledge of the overall plan. This approach fails more often than it succeeds. The problem may be that there's no overall plan from the outset. Many programs are structured around a set time frame and planners simply search for people to fill slots. The objectives are often left to the wishes of the resource person, sometimes with detrimental effects. Overall, specific objectives for each session should be provided to avoid needless duplication and proper sequencing of content. The result is the participants learn more. Furthermore, the individual leaves with a feeling that a real contribution was made to the success of the program.

Outcomes of
Presentation
The expected outcome should be discussed with each resource person. A program may have varying purposes: to give information, to solve problems, to inspire, to entertain, or to change attitudes. When purposes are known, other aspects of planning such as choice of methods and techniques, audio-visual aids, and room arrangements are made easier.

Sequence of
Program
In programs where several resource people are used, it's important to know how content will be sequenced. Knowledge of sequence increases the possibility of building on what has already been presented. A series of unrelated presentations does little to improve the learning of participants.

It's also necessary to know whether a presentation will be in the morning, afternoon, or evening. If a program is to last two or more days, it's important to know on what day one is to contribute.

Environmental
Concerns
Problems often arise in an organization or community that may affect the successful operation of a program. A recent crisis or problem may have aroused deep feelings or actions among participants. The resource person should be aware of these so he/she can change the presentation if necessary.

Physical
Arrangements
The physical layout of the meeting facility should be known in advance. A rough diagram of the physical setup— how chairs and tables are arranged, the availability of display tables, and the size of the room—would be helpful. The availability of audio-visual equipment and who will be responsible for securing and setting up this equipment needs to be discussed.

Audience Preparation

The most common way of preparing participants for a presentation is to provide a brief sketch of the presenter's background and experiences. Although this is common practice, it doesn't adequately prepare the participants for the presentation.

Participants should be told how the content fits into the total program. They should be informed of the purpose of the presentation, that is, to initiate, to present facts, to inform, to experience, or to summarize. This knowledge establishes the focus for participants.

Additionally, participants should be told how they'll be expected to participate. Adults often come to an educational program expecting to sit passively and be told what they need to know. Hostility often arises when participants are asked to become actively involved in their own learning. It would be advantageous, therefore, to tell participants before they arrive how they're expected to participate. Otherwise, they should be told during the introductory phase of the program. This makes the job for the resource person much easier.

Summary

Choosing effective resources for adult education programs is an important concern for program planners in Extension and other institutional settings. Resource people are generally selected on the basis of their competence, knowledge, or expertise in a given area. Little attention has been given to other important factors that may facilitate their effective use.

In addition to the obvious expertise, knowledge, or competence a resource person may bring to a program, information such as the history of the organization, a profile of the client the sequence of program activities, level of content to be presented, selected environmental concerns, and physical arrangements should be provided.

These concerns aren't intended to be inclusive. If program planners incorporate these ideas in their planning efforts, the quality of programs for adults will be vastly improved.