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TrainingBriefs
Assessing and Addressing Member Training Needs

*In *TrainingBriefs*, MOSAICA uses the term *member* to refer to individuals (including members, volunteers, and participants) providing service in National Service programs.

National Service program staff, site supervisors, and trainers share responsibility for member training and development. *TrainingBriefs* provide these individuals with useful information and innovative ideas for training and development.

Assessing — and addressing — member* needs is an essential step in designing effective training. Members are not "blank slates" who come to your program with no previous experiences, nor do they share the same perspectives and needs (e.g., learning styles, motivation levels). Actually, they bring assets and challenges that need to be considered when preparing training. Customize training sessions so that they meet members "where they are."

Never implement a training agenda in a vacuum! Always keep in mind the assets and needs of members while developing training session objectives and activities. For example, when planning a session on "teamwork" — a quality expected of AmeriCorps members — be attentive of such factors as member experience working in teams, cultural expectations around sharing rewards, and physical challenges in the group. If most members have worked in groups before, focus on how to get the most out of teams; if many members are unfamiliar with group work, concentrate first on "the basics": how to work together, roles and responsibilities of group members, and group dynamics.

When training capitalizes on member strengths and addresses their needs, the result is relevant, engaging, and meaningful training experiences. Refresh your memory on trainer tips for effective training, such as planning well and using experiential activities (see *TrainingBrief* #2: August 1997). Then, keep in mind the following when customizing training for the diverse needs of AmeriCorps members.

Members bring assets. AmeriCorps members are adult learners (see *Starting Strong*, pp. 193–196) who possess real world skills and experiences (e.g., CPR certification, cross-cultural peer training). In addition, members in the group bring a continuum of abilities and skill levels. Well before the session, conduct needs assessments that evaluate the group's strengths and limitations. Involve members with assets in the planning, design, and the implementation of training sessions focusing on topics related to these assets. Empower members to lead a roundtable discussion or enlist them to create case studies of situations likely to occur during the year. Their involvement reinforces the value of individual experiences and promotes peer teaching. (For more information on members as training resources, see *TrainingBrief* #6: February 1998).

Members bring "baggage." Members have diverse interpretations of the many responsibilities — at their service assignment (e.g., effective tutoring, thorough documentation), with respect to peers (e.g., active listening, synergistic teamwork), and with respect to the community at their host sites (e.g., respecting and involving community residents). One member's perception of program or behavioral expectations may differ greatly from those of other members and program staff. Meet members "where they are" by incorporating cooperative learning

activities (see *Starting Strong*, pp. 197–202) that encourage sharing of individual perspectives while working towards a common vision. For example, structure group brainstorms around definitions of the ideal team environment and then use small group discussions to reach consensus on a list of everyday behaviors that help to achieve this ideal team.

Members bring different learning styles. Be sensitive to the needs of diverse learners (e.g., visual, tactile, analytical, hands-on, inductive, etc.) — some members need to see or hear information and some need to take notes; some learn best starting with the big picture and others need a step-by-step process. Members may also be motivated to learn — or may find it difficult to learn — in certain environmental conditions such as with soft background music or in large outdoor venues. In addition, some members prefer to hear from experts in particular topics while others will only respect peers with direct experience in similar service assignments. Don't rely on one mode of presentation — vary the teaching style by using different types of techniques (e.g., short lectures, role plays, games). Consider having training in non-traditional settings, and bring in guest trainers from varied backgrounds. Also, use icebreakers and energizers to begin sessions and after breaks in order to build momentum for member learning.

Members bring different levels of motivation. Be in tune with what members hope to gain from their service year. They certainly will have a range of motivations that are personal (e.g., make a difference, act on a strong service ethic, learn) as well as professional (e.g., attain education awards, boost resumé for future job). Make training sessions relevant to personal development by relating session topics to applications at member service sites and for life after AmeriCorps. Early in the year, use reflection activities that assess members' motivation levels and begin the process of exploring future career goals.

Members bring personal needs. While training is an essential — and required — aspect of the National Service experience, be sensitive to personal situations (e.g., transportation issues, child care needs, other time commitments). A training site that is too far away or insensitive to family care will cause stress and worry as well as reduce concentration. Give schedules of training sessions well in advance to minimize barriers and offer options for accomplishing training goals through other means, if necessary (e.g., an individual session). Provide accessible and comfortable training sites. The training en-vironment can either improve or limit the learning potential of the sessions.

Effective training and member development require developing a vision (i.e., knowing where you're going), understanding member needs (i.e., knowing what you have), and developing a plan (i.e., knowing how to get there). By customizing your training plan to what members bring, your training will be a huge success!

ACTIVITY: The Assets Circle

Purposes:
To conduct an assessment of assets (i.e., skills and experiences) that members bring to a team. To identify differences and commonalities among members. To promote a sense of comfort and *esprit de corps* among members.

Instructions:
On a large sheet of paper (or several taped sheets), draw a circle with plenty of writing space both **inside** and **outside** the circle. Place the sheet of paper on the floor and make markers accessible to members. Have the large group gather in a circle around the paper.

Explain that the activity is a way to learn about each other's assets and what indi-viduals contribute to the team. The circle represents the line between assets that participants have in common with others — inside the circle — and the assets that members possess individually — outside the circle. Stress that the goal is to find differences as well as com-monalities, since both are valuable. Direct mem-bers to think individually about their own knowledge, skills, and experiences that they consider assets, and write down five assets re-lated to their service site (e.g., speaks Spanish, ex-perienced CPR trainer, served in Big Brother program, etc.) and five personal assets (e.g., avid reader, traveled abroad, softball player, etc.). Give examples to help get the creative juices flowing.
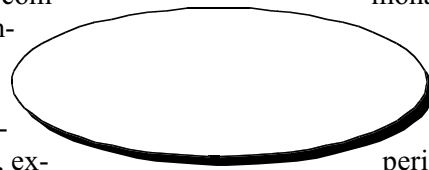
In the large group, have one participant share one asset from her/his list. After sharing the asset, s/he asks if anyone else shares this asset — whether on their list or not. If at least one person shares the asset, that person writes this "common asset" within the circle. If the asset is unique to that person, s/he writes this "unique asset" outside the circle. Follow this process until everyone has shared and written one asset; then begin another round of sharing and continue until everyone has shared their lists. To maintain the pace of the activity, limit sharing and writing of each asset to no more than a half minute; let the group know there will be time for follow-up after all assets have been shared.

Facilitate a large group discussion around the types of assets that members bring to the team and the ways in which the team can help each other develop assets. After the discussion, post the assets circles in a group location to reinforce the value of mem-bers' assets.