

The Giving Tree

Defining and Understanding Sustainability

Introduction: During a year of service, VISTAs are frequently reminded to keep a sustainability binder as they build the capacity of a sustainable project, while implementing sustainable practices. Well, what exactly is sustainability and how do we get there?

For the purpose of this activity, *Program Sustainability* is the “ability of an AmeriCorps program to continue engaging a community’s citizens to meet the needs of the community, through potentially changing circumstances and sources of support.”- *Toolkit for Program Sustainability, Capacity Building, and Volunteer Recruitment/Management*. Corporation for National and Community Service.

The Giving Tree Activity is designed to help outline the sustainable aspects of a VISTA project and allow the VISTAs to become aware of how far they can expand their boundaries before becoming overwhelmed by the broad scope of their project.

Discussion Activity:

Using the book *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein, participants will work through the process of sustainability to identify and understand personal and professional goals, and also recognize important boundaries.

We all have an internal voice. The discussion activity is designed to identify the tone of our internal voice and to help us recognize a difference in communication between our internal voice and the voices of people around us. The discussion questions are there to help open the discussion but once the group gets started, try to let the conversation flow and not become overwhelmed by the agenda of prepared questions. The discussion questions are targeted toward a more analytical or philosophical discussion. The second part of this activity will help identify a process for site-specific sustainability guidance.

Estimated time: 1 hour

Materials:

- A printed copy of Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* for each participant
- VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) for each participant
- Notepaper/ pen
- Optional: Projector, laptop, internet access.

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Directions:

- 1) Allow 15 minutes for each participant to read *The Giving Tree*. To allow participants to feel less pressured (and to save time) you may want to email a copy to each participant beforehand. A copy of the text can be found here: http://allpoetry.com/poem/8538991-The_Giving_Tree-by-Shel_Silverstein. If participants have read beforehand, have a 5 minute summary prepared to review.
- 2) Ask the group how many people interpret the story to be about the boy being selfish and how many people interpret the story to be about the tree having unconditional love for the boy. Does anyone think both? Note the tally.
- 3) If you have a projector and internet access, follow the link below to hear *The Giving Tree* read aloud by Shel Silverstein. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TZCP6OqRIE>
If you do not have a projector and internet access, choose two people to each read the story aloud: 1 person whose interpretation is a selfish boy and one person who believes the story focuses more on the tree's unconditional love for the boy.
- 4) Ask the group again if the focus is on the tree or the boy. Also, did hearing another voice read the same story change your interpretation or original thoughts? Has the tally for question 2 changed?
- 5) Initiate a group discussion. Below are sample discussion questions to begin.

Discussion Questions:

- How many of you interpret the story to be about a selfish boy? Or a loving tree? Both?
- Did hearing another voice read the same story change your interpretation or original thoughts?
- What makes the tree happy? What makes the boy happy? Are they ever both happy together?
- Is the relationship between the tree and the boy and healthy one? Why or why not?
- Should the tree have set boundaries? What about the boy? Suggest 3 examples.
- Is it selfish for the boy to take what the tree gives him? What if he never asked for anything but the tree gave anyway?
- Discuss why the tree never says no. Does the tree do more damage to the boy or to herself by never saying no?
- Do you wonder what has happened to the boy's family or material possessions?
- What do you think would have made both the tree and the boy happy?
- At what level do you feel responsible for the happiness of the people around you?

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Tree Building Activity:

This activity will help each participant organize their agenda. The “professional giving tree” is about their position, organization, site, and professional personality. Participants will be able to identify which of their site goals are necessary for sustainability and which parts are “bonus projects”. This activity can be modified to build a “personal giving tree” to identify each participant’s values, beliefs, and personal goals. Each Giving Tree will assist participants in recognizing where to set boundaries, prioritize, and avoid burnout.

Estimated time: 1 hour

Materials:

- A printed copy of Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* for each participant
- VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) for each participant
- Notepaper/ pen
- 10 pieces of colored construction paper per participant
- Scissors
- Glue or tape
- Optional: Colored pencils or markers can be used to draw trees if time a resources are not available to cut and paste.

Directions:

Professional Tree:

- 1) First, you are the tree. As VISTAs, we are here to give back to our community by building the capacity of our organizations. However, we need to establish our limits. Start by building your tree stump. This is your sole objective, something your project cannot exist without. Something that needs to be represented when you are finished. Consider your organization’s highest priorities, a quality or character trait that is a constant for your site, a mission, goal, or value.
- 2) Next is your trunk. Label your trunk with three activities you must complete to ensure your stump remains. Consider the goals of your project, what must continue at your site, or activities that must be passed on after your term ends.
- 3) Extend your branches. Create as many branches as it takes to achieve the activities engraved on your trunk. Include necessary actions, processes, people, places, key involvement. This is the skeleton of your project. What needs to be in place when you are no longer at site? What are the most important points to communicate to the next VISTA assigned to your site?

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- 4) Fill your tree in with leaves. The leaves are your vision of the end-game. What would you like to leave with your organization? Consider it as your personal stamp on a generic project. What will fill your project out? What do you enjoy working on most? Create a leaf for each factor you bring to your project and site.
- 5) Attach your apples. Apples are a bonus to your site. Consider all activities you are working on that are not on your VAD. These are things that your organization has asked you to take on, as well and any extra tasks you create or ideas you have that aren't listed on your VAD or in your project description. List everything. Remember not to get bogged down with these activities. Focus on your branches and leaves. Apples will come with time. You cannot grow your apples if you do not first extend your branches and fill in your leaves.
- 6) Surround your tree with a forest. The forest is your environment, support system, community connections, etc. Where do you go for support? Who needs to know about your project in order to achieve sustainability? What connections do you need to secure before you leave?
- 7) Now, you are the boy. We all can admit that we expect some personal and professional return for our work. We need to set realistic expectations of what we receive throughout or service. Cut a few squares for money. Money is our immediate satisfaction. How do you reward yourself? What are your treats or splurges? What are examples of immediate rewards you wish to receive?
- 8) Now build a house. During your service, where do you go to find love and appreciation for the work you have done? Who do you confide in? Who do you vent to? Who do you bounce ideas around with?
- 9) Your boat is next. Where do you hope your experience with VISTA will take you? What do you hope to gain personally and professionally?
- 10) Finally, create a resting place. This is your PERSONAL end-game. What do you hope to gain from your project or your site? Where do you want to end up? Consider a future position, graduate school, recommendations, etc.
- 11) Share your Trees! Ask questions and engage with the group. The facilitator may want to have a tree prepared ahead of time or prepare on alongside the group to share.

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Personal Tree:

- 1) Start by building your tree stump. Your stump is your soul, your morals, and your values. Any non-negotiable traits or characteristics. List anything you are unable to change or give away to another.
- 2) Next is your trunk. Your trunk is your internal voice. Your trunk contains key characteristics that always remain but are hardly expressed to others. Think of things only a few people about. Parts of you that you would only change or give to a family member or significant other.
- 3) Expand your branches. Your branches are your common and general characteristics. What makes you, you? What parts of you do you share? Humor? Care? Opinion?
- 4) Fill your tree in with leaves. Your leaves are how you present yourself to others and how you hope others see you. This may include characteristics that you can change or adjust in certain situations. Maybe a more “professional” self or a “guarded” self. These characteristics can be the part of you that you allow others around you to almost control.
- 5) Attach your apples. Your apples are part of you but they may have more value to somebody you love who also loves you back. What are you most willing to give away or completely change? When can you compromise? When or what do you give of yourself to benefit others?
- 6) Surround your tree with a forest. Who is your support system? Who do you depend on? Who depends on you? Who knows you well? Who provides answers or guidance to you? Who do you rely on for honesty? Who or what do you work so hard for? Who benefits from your strength? Children? Significant other? Friends? Personal satisfaction? What keeps you going?
- 7) Now, you are the boy. We all can admit that we expect some personal reward in life. We need to set realistic expectations of what we receive for what we give. Cut a few squares for money. Money is our immediate satisfaction. How do you reward yourself? What are your treats or splurges? What are examples of immediate rewards you wish to receive?
- 8) Now build a house. Where do you go to find love and appreciation? Who do you confide in? Who do you vent to? Who do you trust? Where is your place of comfort and who are you with?
- 9) Your boat is next. Where do you hope life will take you? What do you hope to gain? Wisdom? Wealth? Possessions? Adventures?
- 10) Finally, create a resting place. This is your PERSONAL end-game. What do you hope to gain in life? Where do you want to end up? Consider both personal and professional goals. When and what will make you satisfied?
- 11) Share your Trees! Ask questions and engage with the group. The facilitator may want to have a tree prepared ahead of time or prepare on alongside the group to share.