Communicating Through the VISTA Life Cycle

A Tutorial

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The Importance of Communication

The crux of many challenges between VISTA member, Leader, and site supervisor hinges on *communication*.

Communication is the cause and solution to most problems and successes in the workplace.

VISTAs, who had a solid communication plan and were able to overcome communication challenges, were more successful in completing their tasks and had a more positive experience.

Methodology

Our Goal
"To create an interactive tool that all members of the VISTA program can and will use to build quality relationships by solving current communication problems and preventing future ones."

Our Project
Six VISTA Leaders nationwide collaborated to explore communication processes between VISTA members, leaders and supervisors.
We created a 22 question interview instrument, focusing on three areas: Attitudes, Knowledge, and Skills and Abilities.

Between February 1st and March 5th, we conducted **51** interviews.
- 28 VISTA Members
- 11 VISTA Leaders
- 12 VISTA Supervisors

From these interviews, trends were identified within those three focus areas.

Communication Trends

Communication Styles
- Many VISTA members, VISTA leaders and VISTA supervisors identified more than one communication style. Process-oriented and analytical were the most common styles, particularly for VISTA members and supervisors.
- Most did not seem to think their communication style was effective or that its effectiveness depended on the situation.
- Many used multiple platforms to communicate, depending on the message and availability of who they were communicating with.
- Email was very common, though many preferred face-to-face communication.
- Supervisors' lack of availability was a concern for many of the VISTA members.
- Coworkers and members in organizations were generally not knowledgeable of the VISTA program or roles of VISTA members.
- Isolation, disparities between VAD reality and the VISTA's expectations, and distance are common communication challenges.
- For supervisors, understanding communication styles of new VISTA members, getting/giving support, and staying organized are challenges. given the small amount of time they have for the VISTA project.

Attitudes
- All felt that attitudes played a major role in communication (even more so than knowledge and skills).
- Most VISTA members felt what they expected to do at their site was different from what they actually do.
- For VISTA leaders the difference between expectation and actual roles was not as big.
- Supervisors (and in some cases VISTA leaders) felt they could influence the attitudes of others. VISTA members feel they can influence their own attitudes, but not as much as others.
- Most said having and keeping a positive attitude is most important, and it can influence the attitudes of others (as can a negative attitude).
- Adjustments to the VISTA Assignment Description are very important and impact attitudes. Having a positive attitude toward the adjustments is important to overall service quality.

Knowledge
- VISTA members said it was important to know they are not interns, what capacity-building is, and their role is indirect service.
- Knowledge is important in communication.
- Knowing the VISTA leader, member and supervisor roles help to guide how and to whom communication is made.

Skills/Abilities
- Listening, active listening skills are important.
- Constant, consistent means of communication between all roles is vital.
- Be OPEN to the experience, to new ideas, to new goals, changes, etc.
- Have confidence in your role/position.
- Be able to handle criticism, give/receive feedback and be willing to compromise.
- Being outgoing, a go-getter is key to your role.
- Being organized and taking time to plan is crucial.
- Patience has no substitute.
- Communication is a skill and is essential to the Project's success.

Recommendations for Resolving Communication Issues
- Address issues as soon as possible – don't wait!
- Never be afraid to ask questions about what you are required to do or who to go to for help.
- Do not be afraid to ask for help when you need it.
- Be open to changes and compromise.
- Best practices would be to give important information early and often
- Be upfront about difficulties and confusions.

Helpful Resources
- Examples of other VISTA members' experiences and ways to resolve them.
- Communication/Personality Styles training (Colors, Leadership Compass, etc).
- Trainings that incorporate everyone.
- Information on who to contact for specific problems.
- Ways to better inform others (coworkers, supervisors, VISTA members, etc) of roles and responsibilities.

From the trends described above, we have both collected and crafted resources to help VISTA members, leaders, and supervisors overcome communication challenges.

Using this Tutorial

Communicating Throughout Your VISTA Year
In this tutorial, we will explore the most common communication challenges at each stage of the VISTA Life Cycle. Our goal is to address these challenges and help VISTA members, leaders and supervisors work through their problems.

Each stage in this tutorial contains a description, a scenario to follow, communication challenges, reflection questions and best practices.

The **Appendix** contains resources, by section, that can be used alongside this tutorial.

Objectives of the Tutorial
After completing this tutorial you will be able to:

•   Assess your stage in the VISTA Life Cycle.

•   Identify and understand the communication challenges you are facing.

•   Find relevant resources that help you communicate more effectively within your VISTA project.

•   Use 'best practices,' to create a solid communication plan at any stage in the VISTA Life Cycle.

Suzie Helperton - Your VISTA Guide
Throughout the tutorial you will read about VISTA Suzie Helperton and journey alongside her and her Supervisor as they complete a VISTA service year.
Disclaimer: The identities and situations, while fictional, are based on real events, but any similarities are purely coincidental.

The Enthusiastic Beginner - Months 1-3

About the "Enthusiastic Beginner"
"Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." - Emerson

Characteristics:
The VISTA is extremely excited to begin her/his service year. A few setbacks into the year, and she/he suddenly loses steam.

Suzie – "The Enthusiastic Beginner"
Suzie Helperton, a first-term VISTA at Collins High School, started with a bang, ready to eradicate poverty in the city of Riverdale, USA and boost college-going rates in the local schools. Before Pre-Service Orientation (PSO), she thoroughly read her VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) to help her come up with different events she could plan within her community.

So far, her first month of service was going well. She spoke to high school students about their college interests. She also attended a meeting with her supervisor, Ms. Jergens, and the school principal, Mr. Rogers, to discuss everyone's expectations.

Suzie was so excited about finding ways to accomplish the goals of her VAD that one day she decided to type all of her ideas and gave them to Ms. Jergens. Ms. Jergens read Suzie's ideas and called her into the office for more information. She told Suzie that even though she had great ideas, they may not be feasible in the school's community.

When Suzie suggested a dance competition to raise funds for new computers at the high school, Ms. Jergens expressed doubts that the idea could work in the low socio-economic, high-crime neighborhood of Riverdale.

Ms. Jergens had given Suzie the task of creating student files for 319 seniors in one week's time. Suzie started 20 files, and then stopped to plan the community event, even though her supervisor told her it wouldn't work in Riverdale. This upset Ms. Jergens, and the next day Suzie was told to "know her role in the college access department." Suzie felt Ms. Jergens rejected every idea she planned.

Discouraged, Suzie began to regret moving from her small country town of Coastatta to the rough side of Riverdale. In addition to her problems with her supervisor, Suzie had problems connecting with the community and getting along with her coworkers. Suzie began to feel as if she didn't belong and will never do anything right to make her service year a successful one.

Communication Challenges for the VISTA as the "Enthusiastic Beginner"

Adjusting to office culture and following company protocol
- Suzie spent so much more time on her community event planning that it upset Ms. Jergens. Ms. Jergens scolded Suzie by telling her to "know her role" in the college access department.

Lacking follow-through to complete tasks
- Ms. Jergens gave Suzie H. the task of creating college access files for all 319 seniors, and she had one week to complete it. Suzie started 20 files, than stopped to plan the community event, even though her site-supervisor told her it wouldn't work within the community.

Living or serving in a new community
- When Suzie later suggested a dance competition to raise funds for new computers at the high school, Ms. Jergens expressed doubts that the idea could work in the low socio-economic, high-crime neighborhood of Riverdale.

Getting along with co-workers and other VISTA members
- In addition to her problems with her supervisor, Suzie had problems connecting with the community and getting along with her coworkers.

Reflection Questions
- Are you experiencing any of these communication challenges, like Suzie?
- What were your expectations when you joined VISTA?
- Do you know what the unmet community needs are? Are you familiar with their values and beliefs?
- What are your preconceived notions about the community you are serving?
- If you have relocated for your service, how is your new community different from your last? How is it the same? What adjustments do you have to make?
- Have you had training or hosted training for your VISTAs?
- Do you regularly meet with your site supervisor/VISTAs?

Ms. Jergens' "Enthusiastic Beginning"

Ms. Jergens, supervisor and counselor at Collins High School, was very excited to have a VISTA coming to help spread the college-going message. She attended the supervisor training and studied the VAD. She even held a meeting with Suzie Helperton, the VISTA, and the principal, Mr. Rogers, about their expectations at the beginning of the year. They were able to dispel Mr. Rogers' original idea of an extra set of hands on campus to help call parents about school registration. Ms. Jergens' expectations included Suzie building capacity by speaking to students about their college interests and helping organize related events.

She loved Suzie's enthusiasm at the beginning, but soon started seeing things that raised concerns. Ms. Jergens felt Suzie had trouble identifying the needs of the community and the school demographics when she suggested hosting a dance completion. Suzie didn't follow through with assigned tasks, needed help with time-management skills, and did not follow school protocol. Ms. Jergens contacted Mikey Roberts, VISTA Leader, and suggested that maybe Suzie should be removed from Collins High School.

Mikey reinforced that Suzie had started some great projects and that these issues could be solved by better communicating with Suzie. Ms. Jergens met with Suzie to reassess roles in

the college access department. Ms. Jergens wasn't sure that the message was understood but was optimistic that the situation would improve.

Communication Challenges for the Supervisor of an "Enthusiastic Beginner"

Understanding the VAD and the role of the VISTA in your organization
- They were able to dispel Mr. Rogers' original idea of an extra set of hands on campus to help call parents about school registration.

Understanding what challenges your VISTA is facing in regards to the community and organization
- Ms. Jergens felt Suzie had trouble identifying the needs of the community and the school demographics when she suggested hosting a dance completion.

Providing professional development for VISTAs
- Suzie didn't follow through with assigned tasks, lacked time-management skills, and couldn't follow school protocol.

Using the VISTA Leader effectively
- Ms. Jergens contacted Mikey Roberts, VISTA Leader, and spoke strongly that the VISTA should be removed from Collins High School. Mikey reinforced that Suzie has started some great projects and that these issues could be solved by stronger communication with Suzie.

Reflection Questions
- What expectations do you think site supervisors have of the VISTA? Do your expectations match the goals of the VAD?
- Do site supervisors and other co-workers have an adequate understanding of the roles of VISTAs and VISTA Leaders?
- What are ways site supervisors can help their VISTA develop personally and professionally?
- How can you continue to motivate an enthusiastic beginner?

Best Practices for Communicating with the "Enthusiastic Beginner"
- VISTAs:
  - Ask questions about the VAD.
  - Assess and seek further understanding of the community and organization in which you will be serving.
  - Recognize pre-existing biases about the community and organization and work to overcome them.
- VISTA Leaders:
  - Check in regularly with your VISTA members and their supervisors to ensure expectations are understood and equitable.
  - Promote the creation of a communication plan for VISTAs and supervisors to have in place for when and how each can contact one another.
- Supervisors:
  - Host an on-site training for new VISTAs when they arrive on-site, both group and individual.
  - Aid VISTAs in communicating within new cultures.
  - Set up communication norms for project participates.
  - Introduce the VISTA to the sponsoring organization's office norms and reporting procedures.

Second Thoughts - Months 2 - 4

About "Second Thoughts"
"At the end of the day, it's all about relationships."
　　　--VISTA Leader

Characteristics:
During this phase of the cycle, VISTAs experience difficulty communicating their needs. The VAD is becoming more hands-on, and they are building relationships with key staff at their site. VISTAs now "know what they don't know" and can begin to advocate for themselves.

Suzie's "Second Thoughts
Suzie completed her second month at her host site, Collins High School. She was the only VISTA at the site and at times still felt disconnected from the rest of the office staff.
 Suzie was also having difficulty using the school's database program. The IT Director gave her a brief training, but Suzie felt she needed a more hands-on training with time to ask questions about some of the database's features.

When she initially reviewed her VAD, she had a good understanding of the project's goals and the activities she would be responsible for completing; but now, upon closer inspection, she found some of the activities to be difficult to complete in a year. She desperately needed help to break these activities down into manageable and "do-able" assignments.

Sometimes it seemed to Suzie that everyone in the office was too busy to stop and answer her questions, especially her supervisor. Suzie understood Ms. Jergens had other duties and responsibilities, but wasn't the VISTA program just as important?

Communication Challenges for VISTAs having "Second Thoughts"

Adjusting to the "office culture"
- Suzie still feels disconnected from the office because she is the only VISTA working there.

Working on your VAD
- In the beginning, Suzie felt a sense of excitement for her VAD projects. Now, on closer inspection, she feels that some of these tasks don't fit with her timeline.

Building relationships with key people (especially your supervisor)
- Suzie finds it difficult to schedule time with Ms. Jergens and other team members at her site. She needs guidance on her ideas, but can't seem to get enough time with her supervisor.

Self advocacy
- Suzie knows she needs more help to learn her role with the site's database. She needs to advocate for this help.

Ms. Jergens' "Second Thoughts"

Collins High School VISTA supervisor, Ms. Jergens, felt uneasy about Suzie's potential success at the college access program. Suzie seemed preoccupied with problems related to her VAD and less concerned about the pressing timeline for inputting project data related to vital funding issues.

Ms. Jergens has been busy coordinating other activities at the site, but she felt she had given Suzie the necessary tools and resources to complete project goals successfully. She arranged for Suzie to have a day-long database training from the school's IT Director. She also provided her an office with a brand new computer.

Although Ms. Jergens set the stage for Suzie to be successful at their site, Suzie has forged little progress toward completing the goals set forth in her VAD. Ms. Jergens should not have to constantly tell her to "pick up the pace". What happened to the young lady who came into the college access program excited and eager to begin her new role?

Communication Challenges for the Supervisor Having "Second Thoughts"

Wearing different "hats" with your VISTA (coach, supervisor, educator, liaison)
- Ms. Jergens arranged for the VISTA's office set-up and training. She can also communicate with the VISTA about goal setting, time management, and professional development activities.

Integrating the VISTA into the office and communicating the clear distinction between the VISTA role and clerical staff role
- Using the VAD to help Suzie manage her time in the office, Ms Jergens needs to be sure to make proper introductions to staff, explaining the unique role and opportunity of a VISTA.

Setting clear expectations for the VISTA and establishing communication patterns
- Ms. Jergens felt she was constantly asking Suzie to work more quickly on projects. Setting short-term goals and time management is important in VISTA supervision.

Reflection Questions
- What is important for the VISTA-Supervisor relationship during this part of the VISTA Life Cycle?
- What communication challenges can you see between Suzie and Ms. Jergens?
- What do you think Suzie could do to address those challenges?
- What do you think Ms. Jergens could do to address these challenges?
- Are you modeling appropriate attitudes and behaviors for your VISTAs?

Best Practices for Communicating with "Second Thoughts"

- VISTAs
  - Meet at regularly scheduled times with their supervisor and communicate an agenda for their meetings.
  - VISTAs know how and when to contact the following people and have met with them:
    - supervisor
    - tech support
    - VISTA Leader
    - State CNCS office
- Supervisors
  - Making sure that you're available to your VISTA when you say you will be.
  - Get to know your VISTAs personal and professional goals for their service year, not just what is on the VAD.
  - Modeling appropriate work behaviors and attitudes in the workplace.
- VISTA Leader Roles:
  - **Mentor**
    - Meeting regularly with the VISTA and providing the opportunity for VISTAs to have relevant personal or professional development.
  - **Liaison**
    - Facilitating the relationship between the VISTA and their Supervisor or co-worker; especially important when the VISTA is having "Second Thoughts."
  - **Educator/Facilitator**
    - Finding a VISTA goal, i.e. self advocacy or speaking up, and providing them with opportunities to accomplish their goal.
- **Supervisors**
  - The VAD is a primary tool to reflect on the VISTA's progress during supervisory meetings.

The Disillusioned Learner - 3-6 Months

About the "Disillusioned Learner"
"Patience, Perseverance and Persistence" - VISTA Leader

Characteristics:
- VISTAs may feel they are not making lasting contributions.
- Capacity-building & sustainability seem absent from the VAD or VISTAs may question if they are building capacity at their sites.
- Supervisors want to give VISTAs more autonomy over projects but VISTAs may feel supervisors are withdrawing their support.

"Disillusioned Suzie"
Suzie has been at Collins High School in Riverdale for five months. She spent the majority of her time marketing the college access program to the local community and making connections with other organizations. Although she has been able to make several key contacts with local groups, Suzie did not have the time to nurture these relationships. She began to think that hosting a community service or job fair would strengthen relationships with the contacts she had made and would also communicate the college access program's commitment to the community. Suzie was very excited to present this idea to Ms. Jergens.

After several weeks of trying to schedule a time to meet with Ms. Jergens, Suzie finally got an opportunity to present her idea. Many of the students were very excited for Suzie's first idea, a fundraiser and dance competition, but the school administration rejected it as impractical and inappropriate. While Ms. Jergens seemed to like the job fair idea, she explained to Suzie that, due to the school's current situation, it would be difficult to host such an event.

Suzie left the meeting disappointed and uncertain about why her suggestions were always turned down. Didn't the organization want her to help build these relationships and make more opportunities for college access to the students? Suzie felt she was not making any lasting contributions to her school or project.

Communication challenges for the VISTA as a "Disillusioned Learner"

Still learning how the organization works - sometimes resulting in confusion when suggestions get turned down.
- VISTAs are still learning and, like Suzie, may not understand why her suggestions were turned down.

Not feeling like you are making a difference in the community.
- Suzie felt she was not making any lasting contributions to the project.

The amount of time supervisors spend with VISTAs reduces.
- Supervisory meetings become more irregular and, like Suzie, it may be difficult to find time to meet the supervisor.

Difficulties and challenges not addressed early on caused undue tension later in Suzie and Ms. Jergens' working relationship.

Reflections Questions
- What does Suzie expect from her assignment? Her supervisor?
- What does Suzie's supervisor expect from her?
- What can Suzie do to re-align her ideas for the project with the goals of her VAD?
- What are some questions Suzie can ask her supervisor to clarify understanding of her role and assignments?
- How do you think Suzie can begin to communicate her needs to her supervisor?
- How have you experienced similar communication challenges in your service? What did you do to address them?

A "Disillusioned" Ms. Jergens...

Ms. Jergens is happy to be at the "half-way" mark with VISTA Suzie Helperton. Over time, everyone grew into a very natural routine and, even though Ms. Jergens had regular meetings with Suzie at the beginning of her term, she didn't see any need to hold regular meetings now. Ms. Jergens was confident that if there were any problems Suzie would come to her. Ms. Jergens has always shown that she was open to Suzie's ideas and concerns.

Recently, Suzie had come to her with an idea for a community event. Ms. Jergens knows community events are excellent marketing tools, but she also knows that their current funding wouldn't cover a large event. In addition, with the end of the school year approaching, the timing wasn't right for such an event - surely Suzie was aware of all of these variables. Ms. Jergens was pleased to see Suzie looking for new community outreach opportunities but was rather perplexed when Suzie seemed to lack her usual enthusiasm after their conversation.

Communication Challenges for a Supervisor of a "Disillusioned Learner"

Missing vital time with VISTAs for check-in and reflection
- Suzie and Ms. Jergens settled into a natural routine and regular meetings didn't seem necessary.

Making assumptions that the VISTA is well-versed in organizational culture and regulations
- Ms. Jergens understood why Suzie's community events wouldn't work at that time and assumed Suzie understood as well.

Losing project momentum and ignoring potential VAD changes
- Ms. Jergens was pleased to see Suzie looking for new community outreach opportunities.

Reflection Questions
- What communication challenges can you identify between Ms. Jergens and Suzie?
- What is the risk of making assumptions at this point in the VISTA-supervisor relationship?
- What do you think Ms. Jergens could do to address those challenges?
- Do you think Ms. Jergens understands Suzie's emotional responses to her turning down Suzie's suggestions?
- Have you had to address similar challenges on your project?
- Thinking about your communication challenges, what strategies could you use to address current challenges or prevent future ones?
- How could a VISTA leader assist both Suzie and her supervisors at this juncture? What roles of the VISTA leader would be relevant now?

Best Practices for Communicating with the "Disillusioned Learner"

- VISTA
  - Continue to set aside time to check-in and reflect on a regular basis. Ask questions! Clarify and communicate to make sure you understand others' perspectives.
  - Review the VAD regularly and make sure activities still fit the project goals and timelines of the site.
- Supervisor
  - Keep track of your VISTA's accomplishments. This will help you encourage your VISTA through their contributions as they go.
- VISTA Leader Roles
  - **Mentor:**
    - Model effective communication practices.
  - **Facilitator/Educator**
    - Provide trainings and tools to help build communication skills of the members.
  - **Liaison**
    - Help members and supervisors communicate needs and address misunderstandings.

The Final Phases

Communication and the Final Phases
The results of our research have shown that the first three phases in the VISTA Life Cycle - "Enthusiastic Beginner," "Second Thoughts" and "Disillusioned Learner" - contain the most communication challenges. Establishing good communication patterns and utilizing the resources in this document during these crucial, early phases will ensure that the VISTA member, VISTA leader and supervisor are prepared with good communication skills and strategies for the final two phases of the Life Cycle.

We will provide a description of the last two phases with resources as a conclusion to this tool:

- The "Cautious Contributor" and,
- The "Peak Performer."

The Cautious Contributor - 2-12 Months

About the "Cautious Contributor"

Characteristics:

You know what to do but just don't realize it during this phase. You have the necessary knowledge and skills to do your work but doubt your ability to complete tasks effectively and efficiently without direction from your site supervisor. The self-doubt may arise from your work or communication style, a lack of ownership of your VISTA position or service, no formal vision of how you can make improvements, or feeling as if you are not "making a difference" as a VISTA at your host site.
 Taken from: http://vistacampus.org/mod/book/view.php?id=178&chapterid=85

Suzie the "Cautious Contributor" – Her hidden ideas...
In her seventh month at Collins High School, Suzie was diligent about completing tasks that her supervisor assigned to her. Ms. Jergens was always complimenting her on how well she followed directions, but, in the same breath, Ms. Jergens cautioned that Suzie needed time management skills with the year coming to a close soon.

Suzie had some very good ideas about improving the infrastructure for her VISTA project but elected not to share these with Ms. Jergens. Suzie was afraid that if she shared her ideas, Ms. Jergens would require her to implement them, and Suzie doubted that she had the time to do so.

From the beginning of her VISTA term in Riverdale, Suzie had been researching ways to improve the infrastructure which was aided by her VISTA Leader's webinars.

Suzie knew the research was evidence-based and could improve services in the college access department. She wanted to speak up and share the research, but instead she kept it hidden under her program binder and a stack of local newspaper clippings.

Reflection Questions:
- Do you personify a self-confident attitude and show initiative at your VISTA site or are you more like Suzie and keep your ideas to yourself? Why? How can you communicate good ideas?
- Do you, like Suzie, sometimes have self-doubt? What steps can you take to create a positive, nurturing attitude towards your work and ideas without being attached to the outcomes?
- What special skill sets and knowledge have you learned from being at your VISTA site which can help you be successful at completing your VISTA tasks and duties?
- How will you take ownership of your VISTA service during the last months?
- How can your VISTA leader support you through these last months? Your supervisor??

Ms. Jergens and the "Cautious Contributor"

Ms. Jergens was mostly satisfied and impressed with the improvements Suzie had made during the last five months. She had observed Suzie's progress in filling out database reports in a timely fashion, increased student participation in college access programs, and how she had built and strengthened relationships with guidance counselors, teachers, and truancy officers.

However, the supervision and paperwork requirements for the VISTA project, along with requirements from Suzie's VISTA Leader, has put a strain on Ms. Jergens' fundraising goals and partnership-building this year.

Looking over the original VAD, Ms. Jergens wonders if it would have been less time consuming to partner with the local college to bring interns into her organization for three to five hours a day. At least with interns, the interns' course instructors would provide a detailed description of duties and she would not have to contend with the reporting requirements and other rules and regulations imposed by CNCS.

Reflection Questions
- Have you worked with VISTAs (like Suzie) who lacked initiative?
- What can you do or have you done as a site supervisor to help your VISTAs express a more self-confident and assertive attitude toward completing VISTA-related goals and responsibilities?
- How would you describe your "ideal" VISTA-skill sets, knowledge, attitude, abilities?
- Are you modeling appropriate attitudes and behaviors for your VISTAs?
- What role does the VISTA leader play in this stage of the cycle? How can the leader support both the VISTA and the supervisor during the challenges of this cycle?

Best Practices for Cautious Contributor:
- VISTA
  - Find what is meaningful to you about your service and make the position your own. One way to do this is to re-read your VAD for tasks that you were excited to take on, and note your progress. Or, maybe you need to talk to your supervisor for some inspiration to reconnect you to why you wanted to be a VISTA.
  - Ask for clear and honest feedback that will spur you to improve.
  - Look for opportunities to transfer capacity and teach others what you do and what you have learned.
  - Ask for clear and honest feedback that will spur you to improve.
  - Look for opportunities to transfer capacity and teach others what you do and what you have learned.
  - Prepare and plan for your next steps following your term of service.

- Supervisor:
  - Take a communication quiz and discuss communication preferences with the VISTA. Play some icebreaker games. See Appendix for ideas.
  - Show the VISTA what they have already accomplished, discuss how to measure future achievements/goals.
  - Check in with the VISTA at regular intervals; don't wait for the VISTA to come to you.
- VISTA Leader Roles
  - **Mentor:**
    - Act as a trusted counselor or guide, a tutor or coach for your VISTAs. Role-play with the VISTA, support their ideas.
  - **Facilitator/Educator**
    - Using "strengths-based" approach to leverage VISTAs self confidence. For example, helping VISTAs look at their strengths and utilize them to address problems/goals.
  - **Liaison**
    - You may connect the VISTA with other groups, organizations, or individuals that share a similar mission or vision.

The Peak Performer- 6-12 Months

About the "Peak Performer"

Characteristics:

In this phase, you are productively and meaningfully engaged. It has been said that happiness is joyful engagement or absorption in a meaningful activity, or a sense of being "in the zone." You know what you are doing, you feel good about doing it, and you are getting positive feedback from others in your organization and community.

Suzie and Ms. Jergens' "Peak Performance"

Suzie Helperton couldn't believe it had been nine months since she moved to Riverdale and started at her VISTA placement focused on college access at Collins High School. As the first VISTA at the school, Suzie has had an uphill battle - from working with her supervisor to get a better idea of how to organize the seemingly impossible tasks on her VAD to getting to know people within the community.

Ms. Jergens was very excited about all the wonderful work Suzie was able to accomplish, but she was also worried that when Suzie's service term ends, she will have to do twice as much work to sustain the momentum of the project. Ms. Jergens was extremely busy with her departmental projects and strategic planning for next year and didn't know how she would also "juggle" Suzie's projects at the close of her service.

Suzie was proud of her accomplishments and kept reassuring Ms. Jergens that everything would "fall into place" when it was time for her to leave.

Reflection Questions (to be completed together)
- Have you been keeping records of:
  - What you've accomplished?
  - What you've learned?
  - The relationships that have been built?

- What is your vision for the future of the project?   If someone were to pick up where you left off, what would they do to go beyond simply maintaining the program?
- How will you teach and transfer capacity to others? Make a plan!
- Begin to articulate how the work you have done as a VISTA member, VISTA leader or supervisor on your project, and how you will shape your next steps.

Best Practices for the "Peak Performer"
- VISTA
  - Keep a file with e-mails, notes, and records of positive feedback you have been given. This will help keep you motivated.
  - Identify people to transfer capacity to; for example, other members of your organization or community volunteers that have been recruited.
  - Discuss plans with your supervisor on how the Sponsoring Organization is going to sustain the work VISTAs have completed.
- Supervisor
  - Consider creating a file with the VISTAs accomplishments.
  - Create an exit survey that will measure the achievements, attitudes, and opinions of the VISTA.
  - Celebrate the accomplishments of the VISTA; have a ceremony or reward to mark the end of their service year and show appreciation.
  - Discuss plans with your Organization for sustaining the work VISTAs have done.
- VISTA Leader Roles
  - **Facilitator/Educator**
    - Provide templates for VISTA Legacy Binders, portfolios, etc. Translating the VISTAs service year into functional skill sets for a resume.
    - Facilitate discussion on sustaining the work the VISTA has done.
    - Explaining the VISTA benefits for after service.
  - **Mentor**
    - Provide support for VISTAs in future job searching, help with interviewing skills etc.
  - **Liaison**
    - Linking VISTAs with job opportunities as they come up, job placement services, people who can give recommendations, etc.

Conclusion

Congratulations!
You should now have several tips on how to improve communication in your VISTA year!

DON'T FORGET!
The Resource Guide that accompanies this tutorial contains many valuable tools to help you build your communication skills and to address communication challenges.

Appendix

VISTA Overview

AmeriCorps VISTA:
AmeriCorps*VISTA, founded in 1965, is the national service program designed specifically to fight poverty in America. Over 17,000 volunteers have dedicated their time to creating some of the most unique and well known anti-poverty organizations.
Today over 6,500 VISTAs serve at 1,200 projects nationwide.
AmeriCorps VISTA Leader:
AmeriCorps*VISTA leaders support and help coordinate larger VISTA projects and/or regions, involving at least six VISTA members
Leaders serve as recruiters, coordinators, trainers, mentors and resource providers
They strengthen the capacity of VISTA members, VISTA projects, and community members.
In our research, we discovered the role of the VISTA Leader had the most "role confusion" or misunderstanding of responsibilities.

Supervising VISTAs
The site supervisor provides day-to-day direction and guidance to VISTA members. It is important for Supervisors to keep the following in mind:
 VISTAs are not employees of the local partner organization.
VISTAs serve with the sponsoring organization to build capacity
VISTAs do not provide general help for other duties as assigned.
At no time should a VISTA member's duties supplement those of paid staff or existing volunteers of the partner organization.
The VISTA Assignment Description (VAD), created by the sponsoring agency, outlines the activities and duties of the VISTA for the project's implementation during the year.
VISTAs are expected to act in a professional manner and conduct themselves in accordance with the workplace norms of the partner organization.

VISTA Leader – Supervisor Role Comparison
http://vistacampus.org/file.php/14/PreparingForTraining/Prepare_Training_Appropriate_Leader_and_Supervisor_Roles.pdf

Communication and Work Style Resources

"Differences in Communication Styles" (VISTA One-Pack Resource Toolkit)
http://vistacampus.org/file.php/11/TrainingandDevelopment/Community_Building_One_Pak/02_CONNECTIONS/DifferencesCommStyles.pdf

"Leadership Styles" (VISTA One-Pack Resource Toolkit)
http://vistacampus.org/file.php/11/TrainingandDevelopment/Community_Building_One_Pak/03_CONTROL/LeadershipStyles.pdf

"The Leadership Compass":
   Bonner Curriculum:
   http://www.bonner.org/resources/modules/modules_pdf/BonCurLeadershipCompass.pdf
   Action Without Boarders: http://www.idealist.org/ioc/learn/curriculum/pdf/Leadership-Compass.pdf
   EnCorps:
   http://encorps.nationalserviceresources.org/resources/documents/LeadershipCompass.pdf

Enthusiastic Beginner Resources

On-Site Orientation Checklist
AmeriCorps*VISTA

This checklist is designed to acquaint you with your site within the first couple weeks of service. Your site supervisor is required to address the following, however please be proactive and ask them to introduce you to your new community and worksite. **Remember: When issues arise, address the person you have them with in a positive and professional manner. You can also work with the CFAT Office or VISTA Leaders - we are always available to help and support you.**

First Objective: *Get Settled in at Work!*

☐ Do you have a defined workspace?

_____

_____

_____

☐ Understanding of the workplace policies and procedures (access to the internet, supplies, answering phones, appropriate clothing, etc.)

_____

_____

_____

☐ Do the staff wear name or identification badges? How do you get a name or identification badge?
_____

_____

_____

☐ What are the regular hours for staff? What's the policy on clocking hours? Checking in and checking out? Will you have access to your workspace when your supervisor is not present?

_____

_____

_____

☐ Is there a calendar that includes upcoming events, activities and programs and professional development days? What are upcoming and important dates?

_____

_____

_____

☐ Are there regular staff meetings that you can attend? Is this a time and place where you can be introduced?

_____

_____

_____

☐ Expectations of member/supervisor relationship – What kind of support/communication/ direction do I expect from my supervisor? What does my supervisor expect from me?

_____

_____

_____

☐ Who should I go to when I have questions?

_____

_____

_____

☐ What other programs, support organizations or staff are already in my community?

_____

_____

_____

☐ Locate and become familiar with key documents and resources.

_____

_____

_____

☐ What are my short and long-term goals? What are the projects already in my program?

_____

_____

_____

☐ What are my expectations for the first month? What are the projects?

_____

_____

_____

☐ What access will I have to my site during throughout the whole year?

_____

_____

_____

_____

☐ Is your supervisor familiar with your Volunteer Assignment Description or VAD (though this is last on the list, it is your top priority). How will your VAD guide and support your VAD?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Second Objective: *Become a part of your community!*

☐ Locate and become familiar with the community life. Find the library, parks, social events, community activities, etc.

_____

_____

_____

☐ Locate your local media and organizations.

_____

_____

_____

☐ Self-Evaluate: How are you doing? Do you need help settling in or adjusting?

_____

_____

_____

Third Objective: *Understand your organization and your role within the organization!*

The Organization:
☐ Find out the history of the organization.

_____

_____

_____

☐ What is the mission statement?

_____

_____

_____

☐ What are the future goals and objectives?

_____

_____

_____

☐ What is the organizational chart and chain of command? Who are the members?

_____

_____

_____

☐ Who is the Executive Director at your organization?

_____

_____

_____

Your Project:

☐ What is the specific community problem that you will be working on and what is the intended outcome? What are the current challenges faced by the community?

_____

_____

_____

☐ How do the goals and objectives of the VISTA project complement the overall organization's goals and objectives?

_____

_____

_____

☐ Is the VISTA role recognized and understood in your organization? (i.e. VISTA is about capacity building, not direct service)

_____

_____

_____

☐ What is the support system in your sponsoring agency?

_____

_____

_____

☐ Who are the other VISTA members in your team? How can they support you?

_____

_____

_____

The Community:

☐   Understanding of the Community's history.

_____

_____

_____

☐   Understanding of the different cultures and organizations in the community.

_____

_____

_____

☐   Become aware of the political structures operating in the community. What members of the community are involved or engaged in the school programs or success?

_____

_____

_____

☐   Meet key community members. Who are they?

_____

_____

_____

☐   What is or is not known by the community about poverty and your organization?

_____

_____

_____

What are the specific goals of your volunteer assignment?
The VAD or Volunteer Assignment Description is the key to your success. In order to accomplish the following objectives, use the assignment description as your guide and reference to successfully achieve the goals outlined for your VISTA year.

☐ List the goals and objectives of your project:

_____

_____

_____

☐ How are your project's goals related to the mission of VISTA?

_____

_____

_____

☐ How will you know when the goal is reached?

_____

_____

_____

☐ What is the overall strategy to accomplish these goals and objectives?

_____

_____

_____

☐ How was the strategy developed and who participated in the formation of the strategy?

_____

_____

_____

☐ What conditions will exist at the end of your service year?

_____

_____

_____

What Training Opportunities are available to strengthen needed skills or knowledge?
The Corporation for National and Community Service state office generally provides two or three training opportunities throughout the VISTA year that address capacity and community building, creating sustainable programming, and life after AmeriCorps*VISTA training.

There is a possibility that you may need additional training to meet the individualized goals of your project. Please be proactive in finding out what community trainings you may need to fulfill your term of service.

Trainings:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Take the opportunity to shadow other VISTAs at their program sites if possible. This can often be one of the most beneficial components of on-site orientation as it will assist you in beginning to form relationships with other VISTA members and their sites and communities. Schedule time in advance with your supervisor when you can go to other VISTA members for continued on-site training, support or project planning.

VISTA Shadowing:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

The Member-Supervisor Relationship

*T*he AmeriCorps*VISTA program is unique in its ability to attract highly qualified, committed people to serve for one year. One of the most important aspects of a member's experience is his or her relationship with the supervisor. We have found that the most successful sites are those which find a good match in styles and strengths between supervisor and member. Below are a few general expectations. Please keep in mind that the hallmark of any good supervisory relationship is openness, communication, and collaboration.

Supervisor Expectations
- Partner with member to develop, expand, or refine programming to meet program goals
- Work alongside other community partners to provide support and direction for member's activities
- Invest in helping member create and complete Personal Growth Plan activities
- Provide ongoing training as needed
- View member as a professional
- Offer ongoing evaluation and feedback
- Provide a clear position description and responsibilities
- Clearly delineate who the member reports to and is responsible for/to
- Attend regular supervisor-member meetings and events
- Provide computer, voicemail, telephone, e-mail, workstation, office supplies, other
- Complete required paperwork—quarterly reports, timesheets, in-kind forms, as directed by the program

Member Expectations
- Partner with supervisor(s) and other community partners to develop or expand or refine program
- Develop a Personal Growth Plan and complete activities
- Attend ongoing training provided by program staff and site staff, as directed
- View the member role as a professional position and behave accordingly
- Provide ongoing evaluation and feedback to both site, partners, and program staff
- Adhere to a clear position description and responsibilities
- Complete required paperwork—quarterly reports, timesheets, training evaluations, surveys, etc as directed by the program staff
- Attend regular program meetings and events as well as supervisor-member meetings

VISTA Member Activities

Non-Capacity Building	Capacity Building	Sustainable Endeavors
Recruit volunteers	Develop forms, volunteer assignments	Develop volunteer handbook
Train direct service providers	Write training curriculum or manual; train trainers	Develop training manual and train the trainer curriculum
Coordinate project	Develop procedures and systems	Develop volunteer management system and procedural guide
Public speaking	Develop speakers' bureau	Develop community partnerships
Write press releases	Develop press kits, media database	Secure media partners
Organize fundraising events	Grant writing; develop database	Secure project staffing
Organize task forces/coalitions	Develop leadership structure of task force/coalition	Create infrastructure
Conduct outreach	Design brochures, posters	Create mechanism for project evaluation

Second Thoughts: Resources

***PSO Materials: Organizational Culture and Community Entry*. (August, 2009). [Brochure]. The Corporation for National and Community Service.**

Journal Exercise:
Answer the following questions and share with your supervisor:
I joined VISTA because...
I am passionate about helping others because...
A project that I am really excited to work on as a VISTA is...
Three professional skills I hope to develop during my VISTA year are...
I bring _____to my VISTA position because of _____.
I am enthusiastic about_____.
I work best when I have _____.
I work best with people who_____.
When I perform well such as successfully completing project goals and tasks, I like for my accomplishments to be recognized in the following manner:_____

Links to Helpful Resources
"Workplace Culture Shock: Adjusting to a New Company Culture"
http://www.milliondollarjourney.com/workplace-culture-shock-adjusting-to-a-new-company-culture.htm

Personal VS Professional:
http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/297336/tips_for_professionalism_when_handling.html?cat=31

"SMART Goals for Work/Life Balance"
http://www.ninaspencer.com/index.cfm?Fuseaction=ArticleDisplay&ArticleID=148

Pepperdine University Graziadio School of Business and Management "Personality Traits and Workplace Culture" http://gbr.pepperdine.edu/011/culture.html

University of Michigan Health Systems "Blending Work Styles" exercise
http://www.med.umich.edu/diversity/pdffiles/file3.pdf

"Work Style Assessment" instrument
http://www.queendom.com/tests/access_page/index.htm?idRegTest=1785

Plan Do Check Act: http://www.wisc-online.com/objects/ViewObject.aspx?ID=MFQ202

Dale Carnegie's Ebook Principles from "How to Win Friends and Influence People"
http://www.dalecarnegie.com/flash/gbflash.htm

Understanding your Workplace Culture
http://humanresources.about.com/od/organizationalculture/a/culture_create.htm

Disillusioned Learner Resources:

"Effective Feedback" (VISTA One-Pack Resource Toolkit)
http://vistacampus.org/file.php/11/TrainingandDevelopment/Community_Building_One_Pak/03_CONTROL/EffectiveFeedback.pdf

"Activate Your Listening Skills" (VISTA One-Pack Resource Toolkit)
http://vistacampus.org/file.php/11/TrainingandDevelopment/Community_Building_One_Pak/02_CONNECTIONS/ActivateYourListeningSkills.pdf

"8-Step Conflict Resolution Process" (VISTA One-Pack Resource Toolkit):
http://vistacampus.org/file.php/11/TrainingandDevelopment/Community_Building_One_Pak/02_CONNECTIONS/8StepConflResoluProcess.pdf

Cautious Contributor Resources:

How Self-Confident are You" Quiz: http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTCS_84.htm

How to Build Self-Confidence Assessment: http://www.mindtools.com/selfconf.html

"How to Enjoy Your Job" Workbook: http://www.scribd.com/doc/22744039/How-to-Enjoy-Your-Job-Or-Find-a-New-One From: Penn, J. (2008). *How to Enjoy Your Job* [EBook].

Peak Performer Resources:

 "What's Next: Life After Your Service Year"
http://encorps.nationalserviceresources.org/whatsnext/index.shtml
From: *What's Next: Life After Your Service* [Online Tutorial]. (2010