

25 Tips for Peace Corps Volunteers

• by RPOVs Lyle Jaffe and Kathy Gamm

1. **If you want to grow, drop your ego.** If you want to change the world, change yourself. Capacity building by definition is not about you so drop your ego and your guilt. If you haven't gotten it by now - work on getting rid of your ego. Empowerment is the capacity to bear power responsibly. You cannot empower another person. But you can empower yourself.
2. **Use this experience to learn about yourself.** This is the most important lesson. Try to remember it.
3. **Development is disruptive.** It implies changes in power relationships. It means uncertainty. Few people willingly give up power. And most poor people cannot afford to change radically.
4. **Do not expect a smooth ride.** Do not expect people to fall over their feet to listen to you. Do not expect people to go out of their way to listen to you. Do not expect. People had a life before you came. They will continue to have a life after you leave. You are probably not a messiah. If you are, please forgive me. If not, your two years is a furrow in their field in a single agricultural year. Most of their years your furrow is not there
5. **Appreciate the fact that you are one of many who will advocate change** and then leave. Why should people trust you before you have demonstrated results?
6. **You will not see tangible, measurable results in 2 years anywhere close to what you hope or expect.** The saying that "what takes a day in USA takes a week in Africa, what takes a week in USA takes a month in Africa, what takes a month in USA takes 1 year in Africa is close to true for reasons that you have no control over. So after your first month on the job, when you are still in USA mode, write down what you would like to achieve in 2 months time. This now becomes your 2 year work goal. NOTE: You can achieve more than this if you move into "take charge mode" but not through a capacity building approach. Also, in 2 years, you will probably not move out of USA mode.
7. **There is no "us and them".** Human beings are the same everywhere. Could you do it if you were you in their shoes? Don't think for a moment that because you live in a hut and don't make much money that you are in their shoes. In your life in the USA, how much of your achievements to date really reflect on you? Or did you just make good use of the opportunities provided you? For certain you did not need to build the systems, government and schools associated with creating these opportunities. Perhaps your great grandparents did, but not you.

8. **It doesn't matter how right you think you are**, if you haven't developed a working relationship with someone, if you don't approach your suggestion with the most sincere humility, you will not convey your message effectively.
9. Do not be the money volunteer. **Personal interactions should be linked to building genuine relationships, encouraging positive self esteem and confidence.** It takes a huge amount of energy (physical and emotional) for an average rural folk to maintain daily life, let alone try to break out of the poverty cycle.
10. **Learn how to yield effectively to win.** Their life is not about your principles. Neither is mine or anybody else's. Try to understand why people do what they do and then don't judge. Work the problem not your emotions.
11. **Pay attention to the way you feel when you spend time judging.** If it feels bad, if you feel worse, then don't do it. It isn't pretty to watch people sit around doing the "these people syndrome". If you find yourself doing it, it's a sure sign that you have something to work out within yourself. Find it and work it out.
12. Do not think for a minute that your attitude towards people is unfelt. Everyone feels when they are being put down. **Make people feel that they have grown in your presence.**
13. **Build open, sincere dialog. Be sincere.**
14. **Don't want it more then they want it** (or, don't show them how bad you want it to work). Find other ways to deal with your personal and professional frustration regarding the work ethic, the what could/should/can be in the face of serious problems. You are but one step in a very long journey to address these problems. Concentrate on doing your step well and having fun.
15. **The basic logic associated with problem solving and analysis is weak.** You may need to catch people up on foundation skills, including sorting, sequencing, matching, opposites, etc. In your personal time, this can be done in a fun way through puzzles, chess, card games, etc. Just don't show people that this is a learning exercise or it will come across as patronizing. The added benefit is that they may start to play these same games with their children. You have no idea how much difference this can make.
16. **Over a 2 year period, your task is really teaching.** Teaching is all about 1) finding people's starting point and thereafter, 2) experimenting with teaching methods that will walk people through the steps of awareness and skills development through applied knowledge. It might take 3 steps or it might take 21 steps. There is nothing right or wrong about the number of steps so do not judge as this is the same as saying "I have no hope that you can learn"

17. **Introduce people to the process of problem solving and constantly refer back to the process.** Define the problem and its root causes (problem-objective trees), turn the problem into SMART objectives, develop activities to reach the objectives, break the activities into tasks, monitor, and adjust. Action – Reflection – Action.
18. **Understand that your frustration is about you.** It is about 1) your own expectations regarding tangible achievements within your own time-frame, and 2) your limitations in coming up with appropriate teaching methods. No one gets it right the first time or the second time. Good teachers are forever experimenting with new methods and trying to match proven methods with new students and situations. Everyone is more than capable of being a good teacher, provided they are prepared to adjust to the student. You need to constantly go back to the drawing board and revisit your starting point and your methods until learning takes place (at times learning needs additional intervention i.e. to address emotional issues etc... but you will only know this if you first go through the process of elimination phase)
19. **Do not give up and do not give in.** Unfortunately, the process of development can not be shortened. Respect that those you work with drew the short straw, appreciate that you did not. After you die, you can ask God about all this. For now, your anguish, guilt and questions about this will just distract from the task at hand and are really rather self indulging, if you think about it.
20. **Keep a lot of irons in the fire.**
21. **Be a positive role model in your personal life,** someone that young folk can aspire to become like. Healthy living and all that, including "walking your talk" regarding your sexual relationships.
22. **Peace Corps is first and foremost a cultural exchange program.** You will learn more than you will give. Be prepared to change your understandings. You can only balance the formula if you change both sides of the equation. This may not seem like much but refer back to step 1. It may impact a co-worker a lot.
23. **It takes five years to be a player at management level.**
24. **If you follow any of the above, you will be out of step with most of the development world and time-frames.** But at least you will have fun.
25. It goes without saying that I did not do a single one of these things satisfactorily. But I wish I had.