

# **Working with: Collaborative approaches for engaging and leading volunteers (Capacity Volunteer Programs)**

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I want to present a set of approaches to working with volunteers, which I have been developing and working with for some fifteen years. It is an approach which is collaborative and human centred. In the language of today it is a capacity approach to working with volunteers.

This model is suited to those who are engaged in community building and capacity building projects, and to the emerging group of volunteers such as corporate volunteers, social entrepreneurial volunteers, retiring baby boomers and those seeking to develop professional skills. I would argue that this way of working is simply more effective and appropriate with all those who are volunteering.

A capacity approach concentrates on identifying the assets of a community in the form of individuals, associations and institutions, and then regenerating community through developing these capacities (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). It is focusing on strengths rather than needs or weaknesses. A capacity approach to volunteer programs considers how to enhance the capacities of the volunteer and of the organisation (and by result of the broader community). Traditional volunteer programs follow a path to identify needs within the organisation, develop a recruitment campaign, and interview and select those most suited to address the specific identified needs of the organisation. This is a fundamentally sound management

approach. It also limits who you might involve and how you might involve them. I want to explore some of the elements which make up a capacity approach.

## C community building mindset

Traditionally there has been an artificial distinction between working with volunteers and community development. This distinction has been based on the perception of volunteers as being managed and working for the “less fortunate” while community development was perceived as engaging with people to build their communities. However many volunteer programs have indeed been informed by and reflect effective community development practice and many volunteer programs have grown out of endeavours by people to build their communities.

In capacity programs there is recognition that working with volunteers is in part about building community. We are building community whether it is as a community of care, a community of practice, in an organisational community or at a broader community level. It is perhaps more effective to see all those who contribute to our work as community members rather than roles of volunteers, staff and community.

Central to this mindset of community building are the following:

- An approach of working with rather than managing, which means seeing people as humans rather than human resources.
- Involving volunteers as integral to organisational processes rather than as a consulted or a subsidiary group.
- Valuing process as well as outcomes with a understanding of the power of small informal groups and the relationships they develop.
- Looking within the community for the resources rather than initially seeking external resources. One major

organisation decided to do a skills audit of their current volunteers. They found that they could half of what they currently outsourced to consultants was available within their organisation.

- Using strengths based or asset approach in working with people, which recognises that each of us have gifts and talents which can make a contribution.

## **A**gency, identity and meaningful engagement

During two major projects we interviewed many volunteers and community leaders about their work and their motivations. Some central ideas emerged as to why people stay and contribute.

People find through volunteering a sense of agency, an ability to choose to act and make a positive difference in the world through choice. Shoe manufacturers and banks may have ripped off this concept but it is still central to why people get involved. Satisfying work is when you find that your values are in sync with what you are doing – value congruence. In many of the stories we hear how significant it is for individuals to be “engaging in my passion”. In management driven organisations too often we look at competencies for how we match our volunteers and their role. Far too little value is placed on volunteer’s passions and interests. There is an enormous enthusiasm that can be generated and utilised when volunteers are seeking to learn new roles.

To maintain and enhance motivation, organisations need to provide roles in which people who volunteer can act and have an impact, with opportunities to have a say in what happens and how it happens. Taking responsibility or stewardship of a particular project or set of tasks often provides a great sense of agency and engagement. People choose the organization that they want to contribute their time too... and that each time they volunteer they are making a decision to remain involved.

Margaret Gooch (2003) found that developing an ecological identity sustained many catchment volunteers. She stated "Identity...can be acquired through the development of shared values, beliefs and interests...(and) built over time through collective experience." (23). Gooch notes that while some may come with a deep interest in ecology, others develop it through engaging in the group. Encouraging a sense of identity may involve supporting the development of shared values, beliefs and interests, providing opportunities for joint activities and celebrations centred around activities, identification / affinity with a particular place, opportunity for working with similar minded people, building a sense of connectivity of the group through memory, story-telling, local knowledge, sharing values, reflection and dialogue.

Identity is developed partly through the work and its impact but also through working with others. For many volunteers, their key satisfaction has been finding those of similar interests and passions, developing new relationships and making friends. Too often we undervalue the importance of personal connectedness and don't allow time for people to spend time together and converse. Volunteering can provide numerous opportunities for social interaction which actually enhance the work that people do and the experience and learnings for the agency.

- Capacity volunteer programs have a commitment to meaningful engagement of volunteers. Volunteers are involved in work that needs to be done, not just tasks to keep them busy. Volunteers know the significance of the work they are doing and the impact it has in the overall efforts of the team or organisation. Time is given to determining where the individuals passions and interests lie and ensuring their work engages those passions and interests as they change over time.

Volunteering is a pathway for learning and development, whether it is to gain employment, for personal development or to gain new knowledges and skills. An extensive five year study of voluntary organisations and learning was conducted in the United Kingdom by Elsdon, Reynolds and Stewart (1995). The study revealed that fifty seven percent of volunteers interviewed experienced learning which contributed directly to occupational tasks or to generic skills and attitudes which could be demonstrated to assist in work related activities. These researchers also found that for many volunteers the most important learning was associated with developing better interpersonal skills, greater confidence and self-awareness (Elsdon, Reynolds and Stewart 1995, p.53-55).

In many interviews people spoke about the pleasure and fun of their work – yet this is not traditionally associated with volunteering. One community leader was adamant: ‘I’m not a volunteer, I love what I do’. Often the work we are engaged in is challenging and draining, so humour and pleasure become even more important. Some people speak of volunteering being the sole joy in their life – a way of pushing through the boredom and struggle which is often associated with receiving government benefits or with mundane paid work. Our mission as those who work with volunteers should be to have fun! Central to this is modeling – i.e. having a good time yourself.

## **P**erson centred

Having the good systems and processes in place is essential to provide support and protection for volunteer staff; however it is the way we provide spaces for meaningful engagement and relationships which make the difference. Too often the management systems, documentation and standards become the central focus of those who work with volunteers.

Traditional programs tend to put the focus on the roles that volunteers will undertake and then recruit volunteers with the appropriate skill set. Capacity programs are more people centred, and they seek ways to include those who wish to be involved and are more flexible in the roles they develop and how they work. A key difference is how we manage incoming volunteers and think about placing them within the organization.

In the initial stage of involvement, capacity programs identify and work with not only current skills but on capacity and potential. Focus is put on what could this volunteer do, with support, training and encouragement. We try and value the whole set of skills and find a way to engage people in these roles, rather than cutting the person down to a specific role definition. This continues as an ongoing process rather than a once off match. By focusing on the capacity of individuals and exploring how they can assist, we can identify a range of additional ways the organisation can achieve its goal. It also opens the organization to new roles which not have been considered otherwise. Opportunities mushroom in programs in which people work together.

Informal relationships, groups and networks are invaluable to any effective program. These provide the volunteers with a sense of belonging, the chance to develop and share knowledge and build friendships. We can enhance these through people working in teams or groups, encouraging buddying, providing opportunity for social engagement and knowledge sharing.

Jeremy McArdle (1993) has a great model for encouraging informal relationships – SIMPLE

- Small groups
- Interest based
- Meaningful outcomes
- Personal contact
- Loose structures (but not sloppy unclear structures)
- Easily accessible

Thirdly we need to recognise that for many people volunteering is part of a journey and only a part of their life. Capacity programs work with this rather than seeing it as an obstacle. They do this through language that is used, the expectations and flexibility we have around commitment, realism about what can be achieved and the strong recognition of reciprocity in how we work together.

We also need to provide balance and support people to effectively balance their involvement and be vigilant to avoid burnout.

## **A** flexible and dynamic structure

In capacity programs there is a more fluid approach to how the organisation works. It recognises that people engage in different ways and is open to living with different opportunities and ways of working within the one organisation. Much to the dissatisfaction of academic approaches it may be an amalgam of models which suit reality.

There is also openness to how the work can be done and how the staff achieve the outcomes that they need to do without being too prescriptive or micro-managing. There is lots of talk about how we get there, openness to new ideas and visions of where we would like to be.

In traditional programs roles of volunteers are often corralled off at the bottom of the organisation. In capacity programs there is a much greater flexibility and opportunities are identified at all levels of the organisation. While part of this is to be open to the skills and capacities people bring to the organisation, part has to do with developing a range of projects which are open for people to engage in at different levels of the organisation. Essential to

this approach, is that paid staff feel their own jobs are secure and this is entrenched in policy and in practice.

I ask four questions (developed from Ivan Scheier) of managers and staff to develop a range of projects and roles across the organisation. Let me give you an example of how these work in an organisation like RSPCA.

1. What would you love to do in your program but do not have the skills to do?

At RSPCA we identified the need for strategic IT knowledge to assist fundraising develop a more effective donor database.

2. What would you love to do in your program but don't have the time or resources to do?

One of key projects was around Pre-adoption Counselling for people seeking a pet through the shelters. We are currently putting a team into place to develop this area of the organisation.

3. What do you wish you didn't have to do but know someone has to do it?

We always get lots of responses to this question - from administration to writing reports etc. And often we can identify a range of volunteers who would see this work as fitting their interests and needs exactly.

4. What should you do but never get around to?

Examples of this was around re-developing job descriptions and manuals as well as archiving. We have identified a range of skilled volunteers who want to be involved in these projects.

## **C**ollaborative leadership

Chrislip and Larson (1994: 127) define the role of collaborative leadership as the ability to engage others by designing constructive processes for working together, convening the appropriate stakeholders and facilitating and sustaining their

interaction. This indeed reflects the role of those who want to work with rather than manage volunteers.

In our work with volunteer managers, community and grassroots leaders we have identified some key approaches which central to those working with volunteers in any capacity approach.

Collaborative leaders create environments in which people feel safe. They do this by walking the talk and demonstrating and by being clear and upfront about the boundaries which apply to work and relationships within the group. Most importantly their whole attitude is one of working collaboratively and working with.

Collaborative leaders encourage volunteers to take on particular roles. They do this through personal engagement, suggestion and influence rather than through direction or formal delegation. They do understand the fundamentals of delegating projects and roles rather than tasks and avoid prescribing the how. They link these roles and projects back to the vision and values of the group and discuss how this can be put into action.

They act as linkers and relationship builders. They know the various skills and interests within their program and link skills to project and one person to the other. Central to their style is a manner of communication which is in line with the group's style and approach. This means that they are usually democratic in style and spend a lot of energy engaging people in thinking about what to do and how to do it

Collaborative leaders encourage and engage new volunteers in an increasing level of involvement and responsibility, while recognising that some just want to stay put. They do this through increasing the complexity and range of work the volunteer is involved in, through setting up a range of leadership roles across the organisation and by encouraging, recognising and supporting leadership acts from all the staff they work with.

They manage the work - particularly the different levels of involvement, making it happen, driving the processes. They facilitate involvement. They are responsive too, to organizational ebbs and flows; to volunteers' changing interests, skills and aspirations.

## Inclusive

Central to any capacity approach is the notion of inclusion, yet it is enormously challenging to be truly inclusive and it will have time and resource implications.

In considering such issues we need to be aware of being inclusive of all people, regardless of race, gender, disability or class, but also of being inclusive in providing equal access to training, involvement, support and decision making structures.

It is important to remember that good intentions are not enough and you need to demonstrate organisational commitment to diversity. This should include such strategies as

- gain support from the board and senior management.
- begin by increasing diversity among board and staff
- develop policy statements and ensure they :
  - a. express the organisation's commitment to inclusiveness and diversity
  - b. reflect realistic and measurable objectives
  - c. are communicated effectively
  - d. support proactive involvement (including resources to achieve (Nestor, 1994; Phillips, 1996)
- develop practical and specific strategies to be inclusive and prioritise resources

- ensure your mission or organisational values statement includes a commitment to inclusiveness (does it identify how this can be done)
- A focus on inclusive job design and meaningful work
  - develop a range of jobs throughout the organisation which can provide a variety of opportunities ( eg. have a pro-forma for all staff to use for noting down possible work for volunteers)

Phillips (1996) lists 6 barriers to inclusiveness. These are:

- *Fear and Uncertainty* - work with all staff to ensure understand change processes, that they are recognised and valued and that they understand the issues involved. training in the issues
- *Relationship to the resources and the client*- traditional definitions of resources and strong valuing of those resources eg. wealthy donors, client as need - need to identify the sources of power valued in your organisation and determine who they exclude.
- *Concerns regarding time and resource investment*- demonstrate benefits, acknowledge the investment, point out the need to remain viable is dependant on diversity, point out risks of not doing.
- *Organisational culture and norms.* - familiarity can breed exclusiveness, relying on those coming to the organisation to adjust - challenge culture, identify internal norms
- *A disparity between perceptions, motivations and reality* - work to come to consensus, challenge instrumental approaches to diversity
- *Intensive recruitment with minimal follow- up or management* - ensure it is a volunteer management program approach and not only focused on recruitment.

## **T**ransparency and clarity in processes

Capacity programs are terrifically exciting with lots of innovative approaches and ways of working and for this reason there needs to be transparent processes so that everyone can see the way things are and clear processes so that the program remains functional and effective while allowing for flexibility and innovation. While it may be possible and even appropriate to distinguish clearly between paid and unpaid staff, there is a general approach that the roles may be different, but they are complementary and treated equally.

Such systems need to ensure that there are

- clear decision making processes and we have a process that involves people and provides for a way in which we reach decisions.
- effective and inclusive communication structures and strategies
- organisational knowledges whether they be about the work, about the systems, about the people and/or about the culture are accessible to both staff and volunteers
- policies and procedures which don't discriminate between paid and unpaid staff
- pathways for all those concerned to develop – such as team leader positions with real authority and power to make decisions.
- involvement for all staff in meetings, working parties, planning days.
- a focus on effectiveness not only efficiency
- a recognition of the power of informal processes, ensuring a way to encourage and document these without losing the very nature of them.

**Y**es to learning and new ideas.

Finally these programs encourage new ideas and risk taking. They look to all workers to provide fresh approaches.

A key strategy for moving to enhancing volunteer involvement and impact is to encourage and support learning within the organisation. Learning is much more than training. Training is basically teaching people the skills they need to do the job. Learning is much more than this. Consider:

- Developing a supportive learning culture within the organisation. This can be done through developing systems which encourage participation, innovation risk taking. By encouraging people to share their ideas through team meetings, buddying, teams working together. Involving teams in defining their own boundaries and in deciding on how to recognise achievement, and in developing vision, policy and procedures. These assist people to engage in a whole number of learning processes.
- Recognising learning is not just formal and skills based. Learning occurs when volunteers sit down together and discuss the mission of the organisation and how this impacts on their own values and how they act in the service. Many problems are solved when volunteers share their ideas and solutions with paid staff and other volunteers.
- We can provide a range of learning opportunities. Formal learning can include orientation/ seminars/ workshops/ conferences/ specific skill training/ personal development/

guest speakers / visits to similar organisations. Informal can include on the job/ role modelling/ social events/ regular meetings/ information sharing. But also volunteering can be a part of volunteers own personal learning approaches and research.

In my experience capacity approaches are usually the very thing which maintains and sustains volunteer engagement, even if they are not necessarily valued or recognised by the organisation itself.

### **References**

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