

## Too many cooks (volunteers) spoil the broth (work)?

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*Tom: "Why bother with volunteers? They usually get in the way of work and worse still, they always need guidance."*

*Jay: "Thank God for volunteers. We wouldn't know what we could have done with the seniors if not for them. It is such a charm when our seniors respond to well-intentioned efforts from our volunteers."*

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Differing sentiments expressed by different organisations represented by Tom and Jay lead to our topic of consideration: are volunteers a boon or bane? Of course, each charity and the services offered and the needs they meet differ. Even so, volunteers ought to, conceptually and within reason, be able to assist, provide and contribute to charities. How then are the opinions of Tom and Jay above so different? Tom considers volunteers a "nuisance." Jay considers them a valuable asset.

One clue for the difference could lie in preparation of the people in the charity and the volunteers. The charity needs to understand how volunteers can contribute. Preparation for volunteer involvement requires charities to determine the needs for volunteers and identify the areas where volunteers can be engaged. Preparation also includes equipping the staff, caregivers and beneficiaries for the participation of the volunteers. It also entails having clear expectations of behaviours from the volunteers and the incumbents within the charity (the insiders). From the perspective of these insiders, the volunteers are outsiders and strangers. The introduction of strangers could disrupt a charity's normal work processes. Beneficiaries and caregivers could be uneasy with new people around.

### **Preparation**

It should be obvious from the above how preparation will make a difference. It is when the charity has considered the role that volunteers can play that they can realise the potential of volunteers as co-labourers for the charity's mission. Volunteers are not plug and play components. They are people who come with differences in commitment in time and expertise. Their contribution to the charity must fit the charity's needs.

Volunteers can be actively and directly involved in the delivery of a charity's services. Such active direct involvement could take the form of regular participation in assisting with the provision of care. It is direct in the point of contact with the beneficiaries, caregivers or staff who work with beneficiaries. On the other hand, volunteers could

be indirectly involved, less frequent, and distant from the actual care and services delivered. With each category of volunteers, different preparation activities are needed by the charity and the insiders.

#### *Volunteers with active direct involvement with beneficiaries*

1. The charity has to determine the areas that the volunteers might be involved in assisting
2. With the selected areas, there is a need to identify the processes and steps volunteers can participate in.
3. Decide if the tasks the volunteers will perform require training and arranged for required training.
4. Equally important that the volunteers know how to contribute to the charity, there is a need for an alignment between their motivations and the charity's rationale for their participation. Volunteers need to know how they make a difference and charities need to know why volunteers are involved. It should be part of the charity's philosophy for continued engagement of these volunteers.
5. The charity should incorporate all the above in the Codes of Conduct for their volunteers, which the Code of Governance for Charities and Institutions of a Public Character (IPC) recommends.
6. The role of volunteers, their involvement (hours, sessions) and the manner they co-labour with the staff needs to be communicated with the insiders.

#### *Volunteers with indirect involvement*

The roles these volunteers play include advisory, supervisory or directorial ones. Lawyers, accountants, consultants, fixtures, nurses, therapists etc. could volunteer their time and expertise. With this group, it is more likely that the charity would be dependent on these volunteers to detail the steps their contributions would comprise after the charity has worked out the scope of involvement with them. The scope of their involvement could take the form of terms of reference where they participate as a member of a project team, taskforce or a committee. What was outlined earlier on what charities should do with indirect volunteers would apply except the aspect of training. A difference has to be noted as to the depth of involvement and the interaction with insiders. These volunteers, who do not have direct contact with beneficiaries, are likely to be involved in specific functional areas. They will be interacting with managers in those areas. There may be broad policies on the work and function these volunteers participate that vary according to function.

## *Code of Conduct for Volunteers*

Charities should heed the recommendation in the Code of Governance for Charities and IPC to develop codes of conduct. The development of a code of conduct for volunteers spurs a charity to consider the factors articulated above. One can only develop the code of conduct when one has a clear idea for volunteers can contribute. It requires thinking about the way volunteers will interact with the staff, caregivers and beneficiaries. A charity would need to plan for a continuing relationship with the volunteers: how to recruit, retain and motivate (sometimes referred to as volunteer rewards). Hence, the exercise of designing a code of conduct could lead to a systematic process of thinking through a charity's volunteer management.

It is not possible in this short piece to spell out all that volunteer management involves. Readers minded to follow up on this should refer to guides, books or websites listed below. Returning the sentiments this short article began with, Tom would not have different ideas on the presence and involvement of volunteers had the charity had clarified and communicated the volunteers' roles with the staff and there is a philosophy of operations that explains the "what, how and why" of volunteer involvement.

Some useful resources:

- Scott C. Stevenson (Editor), 2013. *Volunteer Training Primer: Principles, Procedures and Ideas for Training and Educating Volunteers*. Jossey-Bass, ISBN: 978-1-118-69209-7.
- National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, 2019. *One Size Does Not Fit All: A Volunteer Management Guide* (Accessed on <https://www.nvpc.org.sg/resources/one-size-does-not-fit-all-a-volunteer-management-guide>).
- Commissioner of Charities, 2019, *Code of Governance for Charities and IPCs*. (<https://www.charities.gov.sg/manage-your-charity/Day-to-Day-Operations-of-Charity-IPC/Pages/Code%20of%20Governance%20for%20Charities%20and%20IPCs.aspx> accessed on 22 Oct 2019)
- National Council of Social Service, Social Service Institute, National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, Volunteer Management Toolkit (<https://www.charities.gov.sg/PublishingImages/Resource-and-Training/Guides-Templates-Awards/Guides/Documents/Volunteer%20Management%20Toolkit%20NCSS%20NVPC%20V3.pdf>)