

Volunteers – The Heart and Soul of our Charities

*Written by: Mr David Wong, Member, Charity Council
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As charities in Singapore grow and develop, they invariably “professionalise” their management and operations. Lamentably, this is often at the expense of opportunities for volunteer involvement and contributions.

There is much to be said in favour of charities employing suitably qualified staff and professionally qualified management teams. I am all for bringing in qualified and experienced professionals and staff into the charity sector. This will raise the effectiveness and standards of management and governance in our charities. In this respect, the larger and more established charities have the resources and standing to lead the way. Nonetheless smaller and newer charities will also benefit from:

- a) Learning from the introduction of best practices in more established charities;
- b) The increased manpower resource pool as more qualified persons find meaningful employment in the charity sector as a whole; and
- c) The improved level of trust which the community will have in our charities.

However, even as the charity sector “professionalises”, it is vital that charities continue to harvest the potential of their volunteers. It is my firm conviction that **volunteers are, and should always remain, the heart and soul of our charities.**

Before I set out the main reasons for my convictions, please allow me to explain that there are a VERY wide range of volunteers which are engaged in our various charities. They reflect the varied nature of our charities, which include: welfare and social service agencies, arts groups, healthcare homes and centres, environmental groups, animal welfare groups, community development organisations, sports associations, centres for children, elderly, and persons with special needs, educational institutions and religious organisations. These volunteers include befrienders, counsellors, artists, performers, stage hands, students, retirees, athletes, coaches, choristers, religious teachers, traffic warden etc..; most of them passionately committed to furthering the causes their charities represent.

Indeed, **passion** is the first reason why it is important for charities to encourage the continued involvement of volunteers in their activities. Volunteers serve in a charity because they are committed to, and show interest in the cause. They are prepared to go the extra mile, because they are not working for pay, and are rarely working for recognition. While stakeholders who support a charity do look for good governance and reliable management, and also for a worthy cause, it is most often the passion and commitment of the volunteers who serve in the charity who make the biggest impression on stakeholders.

Rising **costs**, especially manpower costs, is a major concern of most charities. Beyond rising costs, scarcity of suitable manpower resources is an even greater concern. Most charities in Singapore will cite manpower recruitment as one of their major challenges. This will always remain a challenge in manpower scarce Singapore, and may only get worse. The solution is for charities to structure their operating models around the involvement of volunteers. Activities and functions should be organised to tap the talent and resources of the charity’s volunteer pool. A common complaint from employed staff is the difficulty and burden of having to organise and work with volunteers. I think this is a hollow excuse. Indeed, charities should empower volunteers to organise themselves. This often produces superior results...and costs much less!

Charities who invest in building up a volunteer corps, will find **increasing support** for their cause. Everyone engaged in the charity sector will attest to how casual volunteers develop a passion for the cause over time, even as they serve. Anecdotes abound as to how someone begins by casually volunteering to serve a charity in a mundane activity/function (e.g. distributing gift parcels), perhaps at a young age. But then develops an empathy for the cause, and develops to become a passionate stakeholder and volunteer over time. Charities who “professionalise” at the expense of their volunteer base, may find their stakeholder support erode in the long run.

There is a place for a properly qualified management team, with staff who possess the right training and experience. We should also recognise that many such staff are also “volunteers” in a sense – having given up better paying positions and prospects to serve a cause which they believe in. That is like having the best of both worlds.

As they professionalise, charities will do well to work out how best to marry the contributions from both staff and volunteers. This will improve the impact and effectiveness of the charity.