Knowledge Gateway

Practice Guidance and Information

Volunteer Leadership: A Balancing Act

Introduction

Volunteer leadership is a dynamic process that emerges through collaborative relationships.

There is a clear relationship between the roles of volunteer leaders (often known as volunteer managers) and volunteers. While the volunteer leader supports and leads volunteers, they also leverage their unique volunteering experiences and those of the volunteers to help achieve the organisation's mission and objectives.

An MSc student recently interviewed eight volunteer leaders for their dissertation. The primary objective of the research project was to gain insights into the experiences of volunteer leaders in UK charities, focusing on their lived experiences as volunteer leaders and volunteers. The research aimed to enhance the current understanding of volunteer leadership and promote best practice.

Volunteer leaders bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to their role. Many of them are volunteers themselves, or have been volunteers in the past, and have found that volunteering provided a helpful apprenticeship to understanding the needs of their volunteers, whether that experience was positive or negative. More recognition is needed in the third sector to highlight the breadth of volunteering experience and skillsets that volunteer leaders bring to strategic volunteer leadership practice. A wide range of volunteer leadership skills are comparable with those found in HR professionals, but volunteer leaders also bring a richer skillset to volunteer-involving organisations.

Volunteer leaders must balance the volunteers' and the organisation's expectations and motivations. Volunteer-involving organisations are expected to achieve their strategic goals within the allocated budget. At the same time, volunteers are driven by their emotional connection to the cause and the positive experiences they gain from volunteering as well as being involved in the charity or initiative.

The organisation's mission unites volunteer leaders and volunteers. Volunteer leaders who understand this inspire engagement, loyalty and commitment. However, volunteers may bring challenging observations to the leader's attention.

The challenge for leaders is to look beyond the immediate discomfort and appreciate how addressing sensitive issues serves the common purpose. It can be risky for volunteer leaders to ignore feedback from volunteers.

Communication within organisations involving volunteers should be a continuous golden thread throughout the organisation, balancing technology and human interaction. Volunteer leaders must be accessible, confident, and open to ideas and possibilities. The pandemic has impacted the operational elements of most charities, and many staff members work from home or spend only a couple of days in the office. Volunteer leaders should regularly check in with volunteers to determine if the change in working arrangements has limited communication pathways. Remote work could be contributing to the well-documented decline of volunteer participation.

What do I need to know?

The research investigated whether volunteer leaders require specific people management skills that differ from managing employees. Following the research interviews, four key themes were identified:

A wide range of volunteering experience and knowledge is necessary for successful volunteer leadership.

There can be challenges balancing the expectations and motivations of volunteers with those of the organisation.

Collaboration and synergy are essential in achieving the charity's mission.

Volunteer communication should consider volunteers' preferences, which can depend on what people of different generations prefer.

How can I find out more about this topic?

If you would like to know more about this research project or would like a research summary, please email **helen.fleming@owlandforest.co.uk**. Below are some of the resources referenced in the research project.

Greene, A. and Ward, J. (2016)' The management of volunteers in the National Trust', *Leicester Business Schoo*l, De Montfort University Leicester, UK. Available at: **https://www.dmu.ac.uk/documents/research-documents/business-and-law/hrm/crowe/managing-a-volunteer-workforce-report-june-2016-final.pdf**

Haslam, S.A. and Reicher, S.D. (2016) 'Rethinking the psychology of leadership: from personal identity to social identity', *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 145, pp. 21–34. Available at: **https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00394**

Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power. Oxon: Routledge.

Hurwitz, M. and Hurwitz, S. (2015) *Leadership is Half the Story: a fresh look at followership, leadership, and collaboration*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Jackson, R. *et al.* (2019) *The Complete Volunteer Management Handbook*. London: Directory of Social Change.

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The Knowledge Gateway is created and led by **Volunteer Scotland**

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This is a regularly reviewed resource. If you have any suggested updates, please email Volunteer Scotland at **hello@volunteerscotland.org.uk**