

How to keep volunteers when change is ahead



Let's imagine this scenario: A safety audit exposes issues associated with volunteers working solo on assignment. An overhaul of your volunteer program is required to introduce a buddy system. This means training volunteers to work consultatively with other volunteers and introducing a new rota system. This will result in an increase in volunteer and client safety, but an unavoidable decrease in the number of clients you can serve. You hope to recruit more volunteers to address the latter.

These are big changes to a stable, productive volunteer group – who may not understand the risk management profile of the services you provide, and what is deemed acceptable risk. It is important to make the changes – but you are worried about losing volunteers in the process. It's a real fear many volunteer managers face.

It often is not the change that volunteers object to, but the way change is managed that causes discontent. Change means different things to different people and being aware of how volunteers, in particular, experience change can inform key elements of project planning and implementation.

ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS WITH CHANGE



Too often we expect volunteers to change because we explain that it is important. We address changes in a timeframe that is expedient for quick results to improve the organisation or issue at hand. We try to do the right thing - discuss, encourage, provide tools and reinforce the benefits to help the process, but are confused as to why volunteers react differently to expectations. Is it they find change more difficult

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than employees? Do volunteers experience change differently to others? Yes, I believe both are true and I would like to explain why.

WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING IN A VOLUNTEER'S LIFE?

Firstly, volunteers often come to volunteering to seek fun, find joy or because of a change in their life. Change may have been brought on by unemployment, retirement, or redundancy. Alternatively, change may have been brought on by other personal reasons – illness, divorce, death or tragedy, for example. Essentially, many new to volunteering have already experienced some form of change. As a result they may already be emotionally drained and fatigued, and have a lower stress tolerance threshold. Add more change, and the situation can be very challenging.

CHANGE FATIGUE

Change fatigue can influence the extent people can accept new or more change. When you have choice, like volunteers have in their role, they can reject even the smallest amount of change, regardless of the rationality or reason. Sometimes the change stress associated with the rest of their life is enough to manage.

DIFFERENT TIME CONTINUUM

We sometimes forget that volunteers have an extended life and experience outside their volunteering role. If a volunteer works for 4 hours a week with you, they have 164 other hours a week in their life to forget the changes (and the reasons why) you wish them to make.

Volunteers also work on a different time continuum. Their experience and exposure to new ways of doing things are significantly limited. A volunteer working 4 hours per week would need over 2 months to have the same exposure to a change environment compared to a full-time person in one week!

By change environment I mean training, practice, reinforcement, tea break chats about results, problems and new solutions. Think about how difficult it is to remember a new PIN number when you only use it once a week. Introducing a new process, such as a buddy process, is far more complicated.

MOTIVATION THREAT

We know a volunteer's motivation to donate their time has a lot to do with your mission. If volunteers do not understand how specifically your mission will be protected and enhanced, change can be rejected. How can decreasing the number of clients served be good? Only when an alternate reason to protect the organisation's mission is presented. Have your reasons for change been articulated appropriately?

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A volunteer's motivation to donate their time to you also has a lot to do with benefits they themselves receive from the work. Volunteers can unwittingly reject or even sabotage change efforts if the change threatens the very personal reason they enjoy volunteering for you. It makes sense – if your volunteers enjoy team camaraderie and your change appears to threaten this, it can be a lightning rod for objection.

Likewise, if you are introducing a buddy system to a volunteer group who pride themselves on competent independent action – volunteers may feel that their actions aren't trusted anymore.

MUTUAL TRUST & VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

It must be remembered that volunteers operate within a mutual trust arrangement. They trust you will manage them and their time respectfully and efficiently, and you trust they will honour their commitment to best represent the organisation's values by working within the organisation's policies and procedures. A poorly planned change project, where volunteer needs are not understood, considered and incorporated into a considered plan, can erode this trust agreement. Let's face it - when you don't feel heard, respected or considered, it is easy to disengage.

Additionally, the emotional connection volunteers have with your organisation can be a strong and personal one. Their passion for your cause, their interest in your community and the non-contractual nature of engagement creates a unique relationship. Their choice to be associated with you reflects very personally on them and may result in a strong reaction when change is perceived to change that. Emotional responses may not be rational, but they are valid and can influence behaviour both positively and negatively.

WHAT NEXT?

It must be recognised that the nature of volunteer engagement is different and more nuanced to that of full time staff, and that volunteers need different consideration when planning change. After considering the unique conditions outlined above, and how they may impact your volunteer team, the next questions are:

- **How do I translate this understanding into planning?**
- **What tools do I need?**
- **What do I need to put in place to give volunteers the best chance of success with the changes I wish to introduce?**

There are dozens of tools I've collected and they broadly fall into the following themes:

1. Minimise stress
2. Provide generous timelines
3. Focus your tools and support methods

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4. Link the changes to your mission
5. Protect the 'what's in it for me' motivation
6. Honour volunteers' identity and connection with you.

Each change scenario is different and each need a combination of different tools to plan an optimum outcome. There is a lot to talk about on this topic.

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