



Guest writer Martin J Cowling is back, this time to discuss nine behaviours he dislikes from leaders of volunteer engagement.

I love seeing people engaged in supporting and making volunteering happen effectively, safely and positively. Over many years, I have learnt much from committed, hardworking and amazing leaders and managers of volunteers. But...

...there are nine behaviours that I see too often. These behaviours cause me to inwardly groan because these oft repeated bad behaviours are robbing the organisation's chances of success and volunteers of the best possible experience.

1. Not knowing what our real job is

To be fair, no one in the world decided "when I grow up I want to be a volunteer leader". Very few of us end up in this role deliberately. Many of us have had volunteer leadership tacked onto an already overflowing not-for-profit role or ended up in a full-time role by a serendipitous route. Equally of concern, on average, managers of volunteers only stay a very short time in their role. As a result, too many never really understand their role.

If I was to ask you "what is your job as a manager of volunteers", what would be your answer?" A good answer would be "*I mobilise the community to solve the issues or concerns of the community*". What many default to is: "*I recruit volunteers*" or "*I train volunteers*" or "*I support volunteers*". The difference is profound, and I want to challenge how you see your role. By focusing on one aspect of your job and thinking that is your entire job you're missing out on the true power of your powerful mobilising role.

2. Lacking Passion

How passionate are you about your work? Too many employees are so hum or negative about the roles. In contrast, a leader of volunteers must be a cheerleader for volunteering. You cannot mobilise people effectively if you're not passionate about them and their work.

We need to be deeply excited about our work. That passion is contagious and will potentially create a volunteer culture that is positive and successfully.

There are many things that you can do to maintain that passion and excitement. Have a peer or group of peers that inspire you. Take time to look at your successes. Indulge in some dreaming. Enrol in training. But whatever you do, avoid a lack of passion.

3. Not communicating the power of volunteering

The reality is that there is usually only one voice for volunteering in an organisation: the volunteer manager's voice. Few people understand volunteering and few people advocate for it. The manager of volunteers must, therefore, see it as a priority to educate the organisation and seek out and invest in allies for volunteer engagement across the organisation. If you speak up for volunteering, people will expect it. If support for evaluating comes from the finance director or the operating officer, then people will take notice.

After a seminar, a woman in the USA told me how she gained an ally in her CEO. One of her volunteers gave her a \$1000 donation to the organisation. Normally she would send the donation to the accounts department to process. On this occasion she sent it directly to the CEO with a note saying "another example of how our volunteers contribute". That single move triggered a change for the CEO who called a meeting with the volunteer manager to understand what was going on. Within 30 minutes, the CEO had a completely new vision for volunteering and became the volunteer manager's greatest advocate.

4. There is no strategy

It is astounding how many organisations in the 21st century have no strategic direction for volunteer engagement. Can your board and management team articulate the connection between volunteering and the direction of the organisation? Or is volunteering relegated to a one-line 'motherhood and apple pie' statement in the Annual Report?

Managers of volunteers need to be clear about what the direction of volunteer engagement is, ensure that their organisation understands it and that this relationship to the wider organisation's mission is included in all formal strategic documents.

5. Measuring the wrong things

There are three measures of volunteers which get bandied around by managers and organisations. The first is how many volunteers we have. The second is how many hours a week/month/year they give. The third is the dollar value of our volunteers' time. They are meaningless statistics. No one really cares

except for other volunteer managers

There are three things that are better measures:

1. What is the impact of volunteering on your volunteers? Ask them and quantify their responses.
2. What is the impact of volunteering on your organisation? Are you ensuring that?
3. What is the impact of volunteering in your community?

That is what we should be hearing volunteer managers declare about their work.

6. Paid staff alienated

This will seem heretical but there is such a thing as too much passion about volunteering!

The relationship between volunteers and paid staff can be fraught. It is rare that you will find harmony. All too common, we can instead see mutual suspicion or even all-out war!

The manager of volunteers must overcome being seen as an automatic apologist for every volunteer and their behaviours and be seen as a cheerleader for the whole organisation. Not bridging this will see your role isolated in the minds of most of the paid staff.

7. The too busy Volunteer Manager

If you are too busy to cover all the aspects of your job (and you will be), the obvious solution is to recruit a team of volunteers to work with you to take some of the load away from you. Yet, I find the greatest resistance to doing this comes from volunteer managers themselves. Such resistance is not acceptable.

You need to be modelling the engagement of volunteers in your own work. In one organisation, I stopped doing any of the initial volunteer interviews after 15 months because I had a team of volunteers who conducted all of them. Likewise with induction. One of my volunteers who was the chief librarian of a university library. He audited all of the physical and electronic records paperwork. He was happy and I was happy and our paperwork was ship-shape!

8. We make it hard to volunteer

Mary retired from her advertising executive job and offered to volunteer for one day a week for a national youth sports organisation. The group told her that the only job available was to cut up fruit at sporting events because “volunteers don’t work in the office”. Can you imagine the profile that such a

woman could have brought to the organisation? What their materials and publicity could have looked like. Or what could have brought to fundraising?

Organisations lock people out of volunteering because we don't see some jobs as being available for volunteers or we create unrealistic hours or place unnecessary training burdens. For example, I found an organisation that required all volunteers to undertake a 40 hour literacy course before they could teach English to refugees. As most of the volunteers were current or recently retired literacy teachers, they could not see the necessity of such a course and would choose to volunteer somewhere else. Onerous paperwork should not sit on volunteer's shoulders in order to do work.

If it's legal, moral, ethical and practical, let's find every means possible way for volunteers to contribute to our mission.

9. Sloppiness Rules

I have a concern with managers of volunteers when I witness or experience poor practice. In one organisation, when I took over, one of the volunteers asked if I had looked in the second drawer yet. In that drawer were 780 applications from volunteers that the organisation had never processed. It is not professional to keep somebody who wants to volunteer for an organisation waiting for months for a response. It is not professional if you're not organising for volunteers when they arrive. It is not okay to cancel things continually or fail to say thank you to them.

Work hard to be as professional as possible. Always be looking for ways to improve. It amazes me when I step into an organisation and find they are operating the same way as they have always done! One charity I visited, was still using the brochure I designed 15 years before. Highly flattering but not a sign of progress and innovation.

Ask your your volunteers how you can improve, all the time. "Mystery shop" your own organisation by getting someone to test your recruitment processes. Check how quickly your agency responds to an initial enquiry. Check how the volunteer applicant feels. Then make changes.

Whatever you do, do not allow volunteer engagement to be known for sloppiness.

How did you do? Of the nine, how many have you witnessed or engaged in?

And conversely how many are you not guilty of?

What do you need to change first?

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