

Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

Submission No:	206
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Publication:	Making the submission and your name public
Attachments:	See attachment
Submitter Comments:	

A Personal Submission by Andrew Clegg

A Case Study of a Successful Volunteer Organisation

I offer this as a personal submission based on my experience with a volunteer organisation, the Manly-Lota RSL subbranch on Brisbane's bayside. I have been with the subbranch as a committee member and through other volunteer work for almost ten years. This subbranch is very successful in attracting and retaining volunteers so I will use it as a case study in what works. My experience has been that attracting volunteers requires people to see the volunteer organisation as one where they can find a sense of community and where they can contribute to something they see value in. Then to retain volunteers the organisation must be well led, well managed and be an inclusive team with a positive culture.

The subbranch as a case study

The Manly-Lota subbranch is not attached to a services club so no pokies, club restaurant or big money. It has a mix of service and auxiliary members from across generations totalling 200+ members. It is based in a nearly 100 year old hall with a small bar and meeting / memorabilia room at the rear. The subbranch is funded through bar and merchandise sales, raffles, grants and hiring the hall out to everything from children's dance classes to family celebrations. It supports veterans through its very busy in-house free veteran advocates, the veteran pantry outreach program providing grocery and friendship support to those in need and through events to build connection and camaraderie. The subbranch has one paid staff member, a parttime administrative role supporting the advocacy work and is only viable due to the hard work of the many motivated and engaged volunteers.

The subbranch keeps veteran advocacy free and membership, functions and other services are delivered on a minimal or no cost basis. Costs however include both operating costs and periodic capital expenditure such as for the replacement of air-conditioners, hall maintenance and advocate office renovations. Recurring costs such as insurance, utilities and cleaning are covered by raffles, sales and hall hire with capital expenses and advocacy costs generally covered by grants. RSL Qld also provides some welcome subsidised services such as IT support. While the subbranch is stable financially without careful management this could deteriorate quickly. Financial stability is undoubtably an important enabler for any organisation. Despite this in my view too much money creates tension and can cause a volunteer organisation to lose focus on its purpose in the pursuit of profit or growth. A healthy balance is required between seeking finance and organisational purpose.

Motivation for volunteering

The common thread I see motivating people to volunteer is that they are seeking a sense of community and purpose. Our retired volunteers are often replacing the connection they had at work while for many of the younger volunteers still working it offers connection away from work but related to their shared experience of military service. Societal changes such as the move to working more from home and the reduction in the influence of other community groups has meant that people are looking for something to join, somewhere to meet others and something useful to do.

Aligned with community is that people want to feel a sense of purpose where they can help others. The subbranch gets work done through volunteers by utilising the large and varied pool of skills and experience that is available across the membership. Examples of how we use existing skills and experience include a veteran with deep media experience who manages subbranch communications, an ex-government employee working as an advocate, former managers developing bids for grants while project managing renovations and several small business owners who have provided in kind support. Those with other skills fit into different roles such as through working in subbranch property management, behind the bar or in the kitchen. The lesson from this is that utilising the diversity of skills, experiences and abilities existing in volunteer membership helps give everyone a purpose within the organisation. People want to feel they make a unique and valued contribution.

Retaining volunteers

Retaining volunteers requires an organisation to be successful and to be an enjoyable place to volunteer. People are more willing to commit time if they feel they can join without the risk of being overwhelmed by workload or becoming part of a chaotic or toxic organisation. While the Manly-Lota subbranch has had its ups and downs it is currently in a good steady state with a very positive culture. In my view achieving this requires the following:

- **A committed core team** - Of course this includes the inner committee (president, treasurer and secretary) but the core team is much broader. To function we need people who are willing to coordinate and lead work areas such as advocacy, kitchen, bar, grants, merchandise or managing the hall. Without these volunteer leaders those on the committee would be overloaded. To maintain this team, it is important to ensure workloads are spread and changing personal circumstances are considered. If volunteers are overcommitted, burnout or partners pressuring the person to reduce their commitment can then cause people to leave the team.
- **Effective volunteer leadership** – Like any organisation leadership is critical in a volunteer organisation. The leaders' approach however needs to be nuanced as volunteers are making a commitment without expectation of remuneration. A “business” performance management approach is therefore likely to get a poor response. Sometimes leaders of volunteers may need to shape work around different people's capabilities rather than trying to performance manage people to fit into roles. Personality clashes will happen, people will make mistakes and may take on roles they aren't capable of. Others will need coaching to do their work in a way that meets charity and other governance requirements. To lead in this environment leaders must accept a diversity of approaches and address people challenges on the assumption that most people are trying to do the right thing. Leadership in this environment is challenging and different to other environments.
- **Succession and depth.** To maintain this core of committed members the subbranch maintains and develops succession with alternates supporting key roles. Alternates allow everyone to have long holidays (that cruise or road trip) or meet changing work commitments without the subbranch suffering. If people feel they can't take a break they won't commit. This also allows people to learn roles before taking the lead in an area.

- **Flexibility in commitment** - At different life stages people can make different levels of time commitments. Recently retired or part time workers may provide more time while working members learn roles with lesser time commitment. As people age, they may need to reduce their time commitment but want to stay involved mentoring others. A volunteer organisation must have a robust volunteer base that allows individuals to move in and out of different levels of commitment.
- **Inclusivity** – At the subbranch maintaining membership with a broad representation of age, gender, service and experience is important for now and in the future but inclusivity is more than this. It is essential that in any volunteer organisation new members are welcomed and cliques don't develop in ways that exclude others. It is also important that leadership positions are seen as roles working for membership and that perceptions of status are left outside the organisation. Our subbranch has a positive inclusive culture that achieves this. Volunteer organisations will collapse if conflict divides membership. This is a leadership challenge for all volunteer organisations.
- **Community support** – The subbranch has strong connections to the community through organisations such as the chamber of commerce, the local pub and through other volunteer groups that some subbranch members are members of such as the scouts and the coast guard. We also have connections with politicians at all three levels of government. In various ways the local politicians support the subbranch directly and through helping us navigate the at times complex ways of government. These connections both support the functioning of the subbranch and create visibility in the community to attract new members.

Opportunities for support

I see the following as concepts that could be developed further to improve how volunteer organisations are supported in how they attract and retain members.

- **Stronger skill matching** – The question many people have when they consider volunteering is “what could I do and where could I fit in? Most want to make a real and tangible contribution that is in some way unique to them. Volunteering Qld at volunteeringqld.org.au does do this to some extent by asking what kind of volunteering people are interested in. While this is a useful tool an improved approach to this may be to suggest options based on skill and capability matching. For example, asking for a potential volunteer's background might identify they have a background in small business with capabilities in managing finance, health and safety and warehousing. Then someone from a volunteer organisation needing a treasurer could call to discuss an opportunity that matches their capabilities. While people will still want to learn new skill most will want to contribute through work that they are good at and work that is valued.
- **Promoted cross support to emergency services** – Within the subbranch there are individuals who may be willing to contribute to emergency response volunteering. There is an opportunity to encourage cross recruiting by emergency response organisations (SES, RFS etc) from other volunteer organisations with a view that they stay a member of both organisations. Each team offers something different to the volunteer with commitments to each varying based on stages of

life. Many subbranch members are already volunteers across multiple volunteer organisations so this should not be seen as a threat to membership of any team.

- **Leadership and management support** – Running a volunteer organisation requires a broad set of skills such as leadership, finance, grant application, property management and governance. While I see there is formal training available from organisations such as Volunteering Qld, many volunteers would benefit more from access to targeted mentoring and coaching. What is required varies greatly depending on the gaps in the skill sets of volunteers and so needs to be customised and focused. In addition most volunteers don't have time to complete certificate level training packages. Organisations such as RSL subbranches benefit from the support available from umbrella organisations, in our case RSL Qld. Other organisations don't have this support structure. Leadership mentoring may also be useful when provided by experienced volunteer leaders. This is important when leaders from a business or public service environment take on volunteer organisation leadership as mentoring to nuance their approach may be required.
- **Targeted financial support** – There are opportunities for targeted financial support. Of particular concern recently has been the significant increase in insurance costs covering building and liability. Conversations with other smaller charities relying on volunteers have indicated that this is a significant challenge for many organisations. The difficulty is that insurance costs do not necessarily scale down with the size of the organisation resulting in very small charities having unrealistic insurance costs. Exploring ways to further provide this cover or other unavoidable operating costs such as utilities without having each organisation having to go to the market individually would add value. Approaches based on establishing umbrella coverage for insurance, subsidies for utilities or enhancement of the existing outcome linked grants are recommended.

Conclusion

Connecting people to volunteering organisations more effectively must be done considering the point of view of the potential volunteer. When people are looking for a volunteering opportunity remember that they don't need to volunteer so if it is too difficult to apply they may walk away. As volunteering is 100% discretionary a clear process that answers the "where would I fit in?" question is essential. Once they are identified and matched to a role getting people to join and stay volunteering requires supporting the volunteer organisation so that volunteering remains attractive. To make the opportunities attractive the volunteer organisation needs to be well led, professionally run and have a welcoming and inclusive culture. While targeted financial support such as insurance would help making volunteering attractive is not just about adding money. Support needs to be focused and customised based on the specific situation of each organisation and the volunteer base they have.