Recruiting and working with Volunteers

An NGO platform promotes volunteering in your town. Building on existing co-ordination mechanisms that emerged over time is common practice where municipalities want to establish an NGO platform. Creating an entirely new organisation is difficult, especially if the municipality has very limited resources available to support the development process. The advantage of making a fresh start is that you can determine mission, structure and procedures in ways which are supportive of working with volunteers. The purpose of this brief paper is to set out some principles about recruiting and working with volunteers to support you in developing an NGO platform in your town.

Regular and episodic volunteers

Broadly speaking there are two types of volunteers: those who volunteer regularly over longer periods of time and those who prefer one-off opportunities to make a contribution to a cause they feel strongly about. Regular volunteers are valuable for planning and designing activities; they are typically involved in the provision of distinctive services and frequently complement the services provided by public agencies. Regular volunteers tend to be the backbone of small NGOs and frequently are involved in the creation and management of co-ordination mechanisms, such as NGO platforms. Episodic volunteers, on the other hand, rely on others to tell them what needs to be done. This might range from simply turning up to a campaign event, to planning and organising major initiatives, for example saving a library from closure. You are most likely to need both types of volunteers to get your NGO platform going.

Older and younger volunteers

Volunteering is shaped by societal norms, values and socio-economic conditions. Each of us perceives these differently. Young people tend to look for short term volunteering opportunities, particularly ones which offer work experience and skill development that might be helpful in early career progression. Younger volunteers tend to need financial compensation for expenses they might incur while volunteering, for example travel cost, but they are generous in making their social media and online networks available to support the initiative. They also need clear sign posting towards volunteering opportunities with clear descriptions of what is expected of them and what they might get in return. Most important of all, younger volunteers want to have fun! Older volunteers tend to rely on word of mouth to find out about and make choices about volunteering opportunities. They prefer opportunities for meaningful social interactions and longer time frames to get things done. Having autonomy in organising their project and being able to demonstrate competence when they contribute to a project is very important.

Motivation

How to get people to give their time freely is a key challenge for everyone involved in running voluntary initiatives. People who are in the midst of raising their family while holding down demanding jobs are less likely to volunteer than people who do not work or whose children are grown up. Yet we find volunteers from all walks of life in NGOs, whether it is the accountant who manages the finances of a charity or the retired construction worker who runs a dance club for older people. What motivates people to take responsibility depends on their personal characteristics (skills, education, gender, age, ethnicity) and the cause they

want to support. However, motivation to volunteer is essentially intrinsic, in contrast to being motivated by material rewards, and can be divided into a small number of categories:

- Express values about a particular problem
- Learning new skills
- Career development
- Social engagement
- Personal fulfilment and self esteem

There are overlaps and also contradictions in these categories but they help us with trying to understand what might motivate the individuals we want to involve in the development of our NGO platform. The next step is to create an 'offering' to them, a volunteering opportunity that closely reflects their motivations.

Recruiting and retaining volunteers

Employers encourage volunteering and some places operate time banks where people can exchange time credits for voluntary work they have done. Then there are campaigns people sign up to, donating money or helping with specific projects. But the most I effective method of recruiting volunteers is person-to-person (this is why faith organisations are so effective in harnessing the volunteer potential of their congregations). The personal approach is important because it allows the potential volunteer to assess the nature of the volunteering task and, equally important, the nature of the organisational context in which he/she would volunteer. Essentially there are two organisational models:

- The workplace model, which treats volunteers as unpaid workers who perform specified tasks. Hierarchical structures, rules and a division of labour are characteristic of such volunteering models, as is the presence of paid staff who often manage the volunteers.
- The collectivist model, which aims to be egalitarian and minimises hierarchy, rules and procedures. Volunteers provide leadership and contribute to all operational activities.

Your NGO platform, as most voluntary initiatives, is likely to be a combination of these two models. For example, to ensure regular opening hours and a reliable co-ordination function your NGO platform might need to define roles and rules. To encourage the development of new initiatives a collectivist model might be more effective. Think about individuals who might fit into one or both of these categories and ask them to make a specific contribution.

Power and control

Last not least, the question of who is in charge. Volunteers have the power to join or leave the project at any time of their choosing, we cannot make volunteers do anything against their will. Giving volunteers the power to make strategic decisions about the design and operation of the NGO platform would seem essential if their long term commitment is sought. Adopting a model where the municipality retains significant control over resources or strategic decisions, for example by funding a co-ordinator, is likely to counteract attempts to transfer responsibility for the operation of the NGO platform to volunteers. However, cultural norms, values and socio-economic conditions are drivers that will shape the development of your NGO platform.

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