

## A volunteer's perspective

### Val Howard, volunteer, in conservation with Julia Lever, Visiting Fellow at Cass CCE

How often do we consciously seek feedback from our volunteers on their experience of volunteering in our organisation? Do our HR policies and practices adequately include our unremunerated human resource?

Val Howard has been a volunteer for much of the last 20 years when she ceased full time teaching in an inner city with as many social as educational challenges. In this article we explore some insights from her experiences in a varied voluntary career which has included:

- “Helping out”, one afternoon a week at her young sons' school over a period of several years, initially at nursery and then at primary level, directly using her skills and experience as a trained teacher.
- In a variety of capacities for a regional charity working with life-limited children and their families including, housekeeping, life guarding for their hydrotherapy facility, fund raising and therapeutic massage
- Telephone counselling for a national help-line for children

#### **Motivation**

In the first role, Val responded to a request for help from her child's class teacher and describes her reasons as:

- “After 4 years away from teaching and at home full time I needed to get out of the house and do something else”;
- “I'd got this skill, spent years studying and working, so I thought I might as well offer it;”
- “and doing a job I loved without the mountains of paperwork which comes with doing it on a paid basis one afternoon a week was very manageable around home and children”.

She “helped out” with everything from painting to reading and science over a period of about seven years.

In her second experience of volunteering, Val recalls that she “came for lunch, watched the video, cried her eyes out and was hooked”.

Val's role has changed as the organisation has developed and after more than a dozen years she is still a committed volunteer for this charity.

Her third volunteering role was prompted by a volunteer counsellor speaking at a charity event, calling for more volunteers. This “call to arms” resonated with Val, (“it seemed to have my name on it”) and she contacted the charity to find what she should do to apply. After 10 weeks of intensive training, she is now about two years into this role whilst maintaining her support for the organisation which works with life limited children.

### **Assessment**

Val has experienced the full spectrum of “volunteer management” from the totally informal and unstructured, through reasonably well structured and supervised but constantly evolving to totally searching and close recruitment, monitoring and assessment.

Val believes that it is good that volunteering has “been tidied up a bit” and its management has become more professional. In her early experience she was aware of unqualified and sometimes even unsuitable volunteers whose motivation probably had more to do with promoting the interests of their own child/grand child rather than a genuine interest in working with other people's children.

As an old hand with her second organisation she pre-dates almost all paid staff but was fortunate to be around when the very first Volunteer Manager was setting-up the whole activity so she has seen the evolution from the informality of the early “pioneering” days to the more structured formality of a much larger second generation organisation.

Her most recent volunteer activity involved “the most terrifying application interview process I have ever experienced”. Volunteers deliver the front line service and are therefore monitored, assessed and very well supported in what is always an emotionally and stamina challenging role.

### **What she values**

“So much depends on who you work with”. Her two current roles provide congenial work colleagues and she is passionate about the benefits both organisations give to their service users. In one role “its great fun with a lot of laughs, and it needs to be when you are spending four hours cleaning loos, hoovering or working in the kitchen”.

She enjoys the opportunity to have a broad and varied role, “one minute doing housekeeping and the next giving a relaxation massage to a distressed parent or even a life-limited child”.

She likes to be challenged but with back-up; in her counselling role she finds herself “totally out of my comfort zone, every time”, so a good group dynamic and a natural support network amongst the 16 fellow volunteer counsellors is invaluable.

### **What she would improve**

Asked what would be her priorities were she to be a volunteer manager for a day she highlighted:

- Forewarning and where possible consultation about the need/reasons behind significant changes which affect the volunteer's role. It's not altogether convincing to be told periodically how valued you are when you are always “bottom of the food chain” in terms of information.
- Periodic social activities are “fun” but sometimes a forum in which to be heard would be preferable to a pat on the back rather than relying on an individual's initiative and preparedness to speak-up.
- Clear guidelines as to what the role is and ensuring that the individual is properly trained and updated
- Clear and consistent messages about what is expected of volunteers and where and how volunteer/staff boundaries exist/overlap.

- Deliberate care to find out more about individual volunteer's skills and strengths both to make them feel valued as individuals but as importantly to access a rich and often untapped resource of skills and experience to the benefit of the organisation.
- Maintaining the personal touch even in a growing or larger charity. Group emails are not engaging and easy to ignore which can result in feeling disengaged and disinclined to fill-in when there's no cover for absence. Always being "managed" as though you were just a name on a distribution list as opposed to receiving the occasional phone call is demotivating and could lead to wastage.
- Offering opportunities to extend and grow the individual, a volunteer career path within an organisation, which would increase the feeling of being valued as well as enriching the acknowledged talent within the organisation and reduce volunteer turnover.
- Develop an appropriate appraisal process, "everyone hates the idea and is nervous about it beforehand but it's usually a positive process" (and could be even more appreciated if it were on a 360 degree basis)
- When organisations amalgamate and staff teams are fighting for territory, volunteers get caught up in the melee, ensure they are included in change management programmes.
- Having spent the volunteer's time and the organisation's money on sometimes lengthy training, use the resulting skills effectively within the organisation;
- Where change is needed, communicate this deliberately rather than letting it drift out of use without explanation.

It would have to be a long day!

### **Thanks**

We are very grateful to Val Howard for her thoughtful and open feedback about her experience as a volunteer.