



Understanding Volunteer Leadership and Engagement in Multicultural Settings

Discussion Paper

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Introduction

In the vibrant celebration of National Volunteer Week, Umbrella Multicultural Community Care Services Inc. hosted an enlightening panel discussion titled "Celebrating Language and Cultural Diversity in Volunteering." This event was pivotal in highlighting the invaluable contributions of multicultural, multilingual and multi-faith volunteers who utilise their multilingual skills to foster community cohesion and support.

The discussion spotlighted the unique challenges and opportunities within organisations, particularly when engaging culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) volunteers. Notably, there is a significant gap in available data on the participation of CaLD groups in volunteer organisations, including a lack of information on CaLD leaders within these groups. This aligns with findings from the recent study "The Free-Fall of Volunteer Leaders in Australian Grassroots Associations," which underscores a critical shortage of volunteer leaders and the challenges in recruiting and retaining them, particularly among grassroots associations that are essential for community connectedness.

During this gathering, panellists Christine Reger from the German School, Satish Nair, former president of the Indian Society of WA, Fatima Faqiri, CEO of the Hazara Women Support Network, and Elaine Cheang, president of Co-Connect, shared their insights and experiences. They delved into the complexities of leading multicultural and multilingual organisations that predominantly operate through the dedication of volunteers.

This discussion paper aims to capture the essence of their shared experiences and the strategies they employ to overcome the unique challenges volunteer leaders face in diverse settings.

The insights provided by our panellists offer not just valuable lessons but also serve as a source of inspiration on leadership, mental health management, succession planning, and integrating newly arrived community members into volunteering roles. These narratives are not just instructive but also deeply inspirational, showcasing the resilience and commitment of those at the forefront of volunteer service in multicultural communities.

As we prepare this paper, we reflect on the stories and solutions shared during the panel, aiming to create a broader understanding and appreciation of the struggles and triumphs of migrant communities and the organisations that operate by and for volunteers. This document serves as a testament to the power of diversity and the spirit of volunteerism that drives our community forward.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Peak Bodies

To enhance the effectiveness of multicultural and multilingual volunteer organisations and support their vital work, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers and peak bodies:

1. **Distinct Advocacy for Language and Cultural Preservation:**
 - Recognising that volunteering within cultural groups is not merely a hobby, sports activity, or social service. Advocating for and recognising volunteer activities focusing on maintaining culture and language is essential. They are deeply connected to people's identity, heritage, and sense of self, necessitating distinct advocacy and support mechanisms tailored to their unique needs.
2. **Support for Mental Health Initiatives:**
 - Encourage and financially support the development of mental health programs tailored for volunteers, especially those in high-demand roles such as presidents and chairs. These programs should include training on mental health awareness, stress management, and coping mechanisms.
3. **Promote and Support Succession Planning:**
 - Offer workshops, resources, and guidance on best practices for succession planning within volunteer organisations. This support should help organisations maintain continuity, nurture new leaders, and ensure the knowledge has passed to the next generation of volunteer leaders.
4. **Establish and Support Networking Platforms:**
 - Create and support platforms that facilitate networking and mentorship among volunteer leaders from diverse backgrounds. These platforms can be vital in sharing best practices, experiences, and resources.
5. **Recognition and Awards for Best Practices:**
 - Introduce recognition programs and awards for individual volunteer leaders from multicultural and multilingual backgrounds who demonstrate excellence in engaging and supporting their organisations and other volunteers. Such recognition rewards successful practices and sets a benchmark for others.
6. **Develop Comprehensive Data Collection Strategies:**
 - Policymakers and peak bodies should implement systems to collect comprehensive data on the participation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) groups in volunteering, especially leadership within these groups. This data should include information on the challenges and successes these groups face, as well as their leadership roles within organisations.

Leadership in Multicultural and Multilingual Organisations and Challenges

Leading a multicultural and multilingual volunteer organisation involves navigating a complex array of challenges that stem from diverse cultural backgrounds, varying language capabilities, and the logistical demands of coordinating volunteer activities. The panellists shared their personal experiences and strategies, highlighting the key issues they face and their approaches to effectively manage these challenges.

“What challenges have you faced as a volunteer leader in a multicultural and multilingual organisation that also predominantly works with volunteers, and how did you overcome them?”

Time Management and Coordination Challenges Christine from the Goethe Society emphasised the critical nature of time management in a volunteer-driven environment, particularly when volunteers balance multiple roles both within and outside the organisation. She noted: "For many of us, the biggest challenge is undoubtedly time management. It takes considerable dedication to coordinate everyone's schedules, especially since most of us are balancing work and family responsibilities, including caring for young children... We're constantly juggling professional responsibilities, family obligations, and our commitment to volunteering." This statement underscores the ongoing struggle to find mutually convenient times for meetings and activities, which is further complicated by the personal commitments of each volunteer.

Maintaining Volunteer Engagement and Organisational Culture Satish, former President of the Indian Society of WA, spoke about the challenges of maintaining a cohesive volunteer base within a large and diverse community. He described the difficulty of ensuring that volunteers are committed and aligned with the organisation's culture: "The Society acts as the peak body for the Indian community here in Perth, encompassing around 119 associations... However, finding committed volunteers who really resonate with the organisation's culture and are willing to commit more time is a significant challenge. It's not an easy task to keep such a large network of volunteers coordinated and motivated."

Inclusive Practices for Diverse Volunteer Backgrounds Fatima, CEO of the Hazara Women Support Network, highlighted the unique challenges faced by volunteers coming from regions affected by socio-political instability. She emphasised the importance of inclusivity and understanding: "One of the main challenges is engaging volunteers, particularly from communities affected by war, famine, and socio-political issues... My approach has always been inclusive: welcoming volunteers regardless of language barriers or their ability to navigate local communities. Simple tasks like holding a door or distributing handouts are gateways to greater involvement, providing a sense of belonging and empowerment."

Resource Limitations and Scheduling Conflicts Elaine from Co-Connect discussed the practical challenges of running volunteer activities, especially when resources are limited, and most activities are scheduled during after hours: "One of the significant challenges our small NGO faces is the scarcity of resources which limits our ability to run more engaging projects. Additionally, most of our projects are scheduled during weekends, making it difficult to secure volunteers who can commit during these times due to family obligations and other personal commitments."

The Importance of Succession Planning in Multicultural and Multilingual Organisations

Succession planning is a critical strategy for sustaining leadership and continuity within volunteer organisations, especially those that operate in multicultural and multilingual contexts. The panellists shared their varied experiences and insights on how they approach succession planning to ensure the long-term health and effectiveness of their organisations.

“Can you share your experiences with succession planning in volunteer roles? Why is it important for multicultural and multilingual organisations?”

Structured Succession Policies Satish highlighted the constitutional measures ISWA has implemented to ensure fresh leadership and continuous innovation: "We have a constitution that states committee members can only serve for eight consecutive years before they must take a four-year break. This policy ensures that new members have the opportunity to step in, bringing fresh ideas and perspectives, which is vital for the dynamism and health of our organisation." This approach not only prevents burnout among long-serving volunteers but also fosters a dynamic environment where new ideas can thrive.

Engagement and Training of Emerging Leaders Fatima from the Hazara Women Support Network discussed the proactive steps her organisation takes to prepare volunteers for leadership roles: "We actively engage our team members in leadership development opportunities. We offer them courses and encourage them to shadow current leaders to learn on the job... For instance, our vice president, our chair, and even my own daughter have participated in leadership programs. This ongoing education is vital for them to understand how to run an association effectively and advocate for our causes." This method ensures that potential leaders are well-prepared and informed, reducing the risk associated with leadership transitions.

Learning from Past Challenges Christine from the Goethe Society shared a candid reflection on the challenges her organisation faced during a leadership transition period: "When our long-serving Treasurer and President stepped down, we faced significant challenges... We had to rush to upskill new secretaries, a new vice president, and a new president. Unfortunately, within six months, two had resigned due to the workload and other commitments." Christine emphasised the importance of having a structured plan, a good document management system and adequate preparation for new leaders to ensure a smooth transition.

Holistic Support and Integration Elaine from Co-Connect emphasised the importance of aligning volunteers' skills and passions with organisational needs while ensuring they feel valued and supported: "It's crucial that the needs and skills of our volunteers, as well as their passions, align with those of our organisation before we assign them roles that suit their interests. This alignment helps ensure that they are not only committed but also effective in their roles." By focusing on strategic alignment and support, Elaine's organisation ensures that succession planning is both effective and enriching for all parties involved.

Through these discussions, it becomes evident that effective succession planning in multicultural and multilingual organisations requires a blend of strategic policy-making, proactive leadership development, learning from past experiences, and ensuring a supportive environment for all volunteers. These strategies collectively enhance the resilience and adaptability of organisations, enabling them to thrive in diverse settings.

The Importance of Mental Health in High-Demand Volunteer Positions

Maintaining mental health is a pivotal concern for volunteers, especially those in leadership roles within multicultural and multilingual organisations. The panellists shared their strategies and personal insights on how they manage the demands of their positions while ensuring their mental well-being and that of their teams.

“How do you take care of your mental health while volunteering in a high demanding position, and what tips or resources can you suggest for other volunteers?”

Setting Boundaries and Ensuring Personal Care Christine from the Goethe Society emphasised the necessity of setting boundaries and the importance of personal self-care: "Absolutely, mental health is critical, especially in volunteer roles where the demands can be high. It's essential to set clear boundaries. Regular check-ins with team members about their feelings and workload are crucial to ensure that no one is overwhelmed... For personal self-care, it's important to sometimes say no." Christine highlights how personal limits and regular wellness check-ins can prevent burnout and foster a supportive environment.

Family Involvement and Shared Responsibilities Satish discussed the role of family support and shared responsibilities in managing stress and demands: "It's crucial to have open discussions with your family about the commitments involved... In my case, my wife was able to give time to the community as well, which has been a tremendous support. This mutual involvement helps manage responsibilities and strengthens our relationship, reducing potential conflicts at home." Satish's approach shows how involving family can provide emotional support and help balance the pressures of volunteer work.

Preparation and Time Management Fatima emphasised the importance of being well-prepared and managing one's time effectively: "It's not just about the time spent during the event but also the preparation before and after the tasks that follow... This helps in effectively planning and managing my commitments, knowing when to say 'no' to avoid over-committing." By carefully planning and acknowledging her limits, Fatima maintains her mental health while fulfilling her roles effectively.

Physical Activity and Resource Utilisation Elaine highlighted the benefits of physical activity and utilising available resources to manage stress: "To maintain mental health, I focus on staying active and incorporating exercise into my routine as much as possible... Additionally, we offer resources like online self-taught courses on Chinese pressure point massage, which allows our volunteers to learn relaxation techniques." Elaine's methods show how physical wellness activities and educational resources can significantly enhance volunteers' mental health.

Encouraging Newly Arrived Community Members to Volunteer

Encouraging newly arrived community members to engage in volunteer activities poses unique challenges, especially when navigating language barriers and cultural differences. The panellists shared effective strategies for integrating these individuals into volunteer roles, emphasising the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments.

“What advice would you give to newly arrived community members who are hesitant to volunteer due to language barriers or cultural differences? How can we better support them?”

Aligning Values and Providing Language Support Elaine from Co-Connect discussed the importance of aligning organisational values with the personal values of volunteers, especially those who are newly arrived: "For newly arrived community members, it's crucial that they select an NGO that aligns with their values and can support their language needs. This alignment helps ensure they feel comfortable and valued within the organisation. It's also important that these organisations provide clear opportunities for involvement that can help these volunteers develop their skills."

Fostering Inclusion and Skill Utilisation Fatima from the Hazara Women Support Network highlighted the importance of inclusivity and recognising the existing skills of volunteers: "In our organisation, we recognise that volunteers might come with language barriers or may not fully understand how their skills can be utilised in a new country. This recognition is crucial because these individuals often possess valuable skills that aren't immediately obvious due to language differences... We actively encourage our volunteers to apply their skills and provide spaces where they can thrive."

Creating Comfortable Environments and Building Networks Satish from the Indian Society of WA emphasised the need to make new volunteers feel comfortable and integrated into the community through social events and network building: "Our Indian community organisation is 56 years old, but we continually welcome new members. It's crucial to make them feel comfortable and integrated. We organise many sessions and events to help familiarise new volunteers with our operations and the community ethos, recognising that while many are eager to give back to their new home, some may need more time to settle in than others."

Utilising Personal Experiences to Connect Christine from the Goethe Society shared how personal experiences as a newly arrived volunteer helped her understand the challenges and implement better support systems: "When I first joined the Goethe Society, I was also new to the community and can personally attest to the challenges and feelings of isolation that come with being in a new country... We encourage all newcomers to join us because we provide that support system. Whether it's through connecting them with others from similar backgrounds or helping them utilise their skills within the community, we ensure they are not alone."

These insights illustrate the multifaceted strategies leaders of multicultural and multilingual volunteer organisations employ to encourage participation from newly arrived community members. By focusing on aligning values, fostering inclusivity, creating comfortable environments, and using personal experiences to enhance understanding, these leaders successfully integrate newcomers into meaningful volunteer roles.

Key Takeaways

The panel discussion on leading and supporting multicultural and multilingual volunteer organisations yielded several crucial insights that can guide current and future efforts in volunteer management and engagement:

1. **Time Management and Flexibility:** Effective coordination and management of time are paramount in multicultural settings, where volunteers often juggle multiple

commitments. Organisations need to be flexible and considerate of the diverse time constraints and personal obligations of their volunteers.

2. **Structured Succession Planning:** Implementing structured succession plans is essential to ensure the sustainability of leadership and the continuous influx of fresh ideas. Organisations should establish clear policies, document management system and provide training and mentorship programs to prepare new leaders for their roles.
3. **Mental Health Support:** Maintaining mental health is vital for volunteers, particularly those in demanding roles. Organisations should promote work-life balance, provide resources for stress management, and create an environment where volunteers feel comfortable discussing their mental health and boundaries.
4. **Inclusivity and Skill Recognition:** For newly arrived community members, feeling valued and recognised for their existing skills is crucial. Organisations should strive to be inclusive, providing language support and aligning volunteer opportunities with the individual's values and capabilities.
5. **Community Building and Support Networks:** Creating a welcoming environment and building strong support networks help integrate volunteers and reduce feelings of isolation. Regular social interactions can help volunteers feel more connected and valued.

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