

Faith-Based Volunteer Management Study

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By Tsering Dhundup and Manna Sainju

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Supervising Professor: Prof. Michal Avram, Trent University
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By

Manna Sainju

&

Tsering Dhundup

Abstract

A faith-based volunteer management project was conducted over a period of 4 months by two Trent University students as a part of their fourth year course. The project was conducted on Dharma Center of Canada, which was established in Kinmount, Halliburton County in 1968. The research included two components, firstly, to find best practices in volunteer management and secondly, to find out if Peterborough and Halliburton communities have needs that can be met by the Dharma Center. To find the best practices, the researchers contacted 6 faith-based rural retreat centers in North America. It was found that the most common trend amongst the retreat centers on volunteer attraction methods was through word of mouth through friends.

[Statue honouring volunteers: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/trykemom/138460889/>]

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Introduction

Volunteers are an integral part of the civil society and the concept of volunteerism encompasses not just the activities performed but also the learning process that individuals experience. Volunteerism can be perceived as a way of paying back to the society that nurtured not just yourself but all beings on the earth. Thus the reward of volunteering is felt within oneself in the form of satisfaction and respect for all. Many organizations, especially non-profit organizations (NPO) rely on volunteer assistance to realize their goals. In analysing the concept of volunteerism, David H. Smith noted that “volunteerism represents a category of human activity that is so varied it defies adequate description” (Clary et al, 2008). For the purpose of this report we will use a narrow definition of volunteer. A volunteer is defined as an individual who is willing to devote his or her time, without remuneration of any kind, to support an organization or community to bring out positive changes.

Context

The research was conducted by two fourth year students of Trent University on the Dharma Centre of Canada (DCC) as a part of a fourth year International Development Studies course, IDST 422: Assessment of Development Projects. The centre is located in Kinmount, Halliburton County and is one of the first Buddhist retreat centres in North America. The centre was founded by Late Venerable Namgyal Rinpoche in 1966 under the principles of Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism. Since the death of the charismatic Rinpoche in the year 2003, the centre has suffered from loss of volunteers that used to number in hundreds during Late Venerable Namgyal Rinpoche's presence.

There are two objectives of this research. First objective is to find the best practices of volunteerism in faith based rural retreat centres (FBRRC). This includes volunteer attraction and retentions methods and the tasks allocated to volunteers. Second purpose of the research is to conduct a survey in Peterborough and Halliburton County through the umbrella organizations to investigate whether there are communal needs for DCC services. Thus, the project can potentially benefit the DCC for better management of volunteers.

Methodology

The research was designed by using various research methods taught in IDST 422 class. This is a qualitative research. Purposive sampling was used to find a list of FBRRC in North America that operated within Buddhist tradition. Due to the location of these centers, telephone interviews were used to collect information. Questions used in the interviews were specifically and strategically designed to understand volunteer management strategies used by different FBRRC. For the second objective, purposive sampling was used again to list umbrella organizations on the assumption that stressful jobs such as teaching and business management create the need for relaxation and peace of mind. A short questionnaire was sent to the umbrella organizations through email and respondents directly emailed back their answered questionnaires in researchers email address. Face to face interviews were also conducted with 3 existing members and volunteers of DCC to grasp a better understanding of the Center's past and current volunteer management policies.

Findings from the research reveal that web-site advertising plays a crucial role in attracting volunteers in today's computerized world. The survey results show that DCC will potentially benefit if it expands its services in the downtown areas. This research report will begin by reviewing various scholarly literatures on the concept of volunteerism and general ways of attracting volunteers, followed by methodology section. The findings of the research will be laid out in categories before analyzing the data. The conclusion is followed by a list of possible solutions that the DCC can adopt to increase volunteer participation at the Center.

Literature Review

Except for a few numbers of academics who have written extensively on volunteer programs, not much has been written on best practices of volunteer management in faith-based retreat centers. The following reviews will examine the existing literature on volunteerism as suggested by the host organization and also analyze past researches on this field.

Firstly, it is important to note the various myths surrounding volunteerism. For instance, there is common belief that volunteers are cost free workers and that volunteers can help or even save organizations with financial difficulties. While this may be true to some extent, the efficacy of volunteer management strategies determines the ability of volunteers to significantly contribute their resources. Thus, it is very important to implement management strategies that suit the organizational norms and cater to the volunteer needs. As Clary et al (1994) state, volunteer participation can help organizations realize the benefits of using volunteers only if they have a well structured management policy. This suggests that organizations should adopt mechanisms

that administer volunteer efforts and manage its novel human resources effectively. Volunteers should also be allocated their time freely and should not be coerced. Compulsive timing and presence is seen as a negating agent in volunteer management.

Lindemeier (2008) in his paper examines the ways in which advertisement strategies may influence willingness to volunteer. Based on two experiments, he states that advertisement-induced (ad-induced) emotional arousal and message framing can generate willingness to volunteer, especially on men. Thus, the communication policies of NPOs become an important determinant in the recruitment of new volunteers.

Also, the organizations should use advertising messages that are compatible with the potential volunteer's functional motivation to volunteer (Clary et al, 1994). For instance, an emphasis on the fact that doing voluntary service is socially respected has a positive impact on people's willingness to volunteer.

Marta and Pozzi (2008) proposed an interesting model of sustained volunteerism in young people based on the fact that young adulthood is the key phase in life for development of personal and social identity. Volunteer commitment at this stage of personal growth assumes specific meanings and shapes the identity of the individual. Thus targeting youth volunteers may be rewarding even in the long run.

A literature on the impacts of information and communication technology (ICT) on volunteer management shows, that by using various technological tools such as a volunteer recruitment software program, NPOs can enhance its capacity to tap into volunteer resources with efficacy.

Harrison and Murray (2002) found that most volunteer organizations and programs in Canada are at the basic level in the use of ICT. In their research, levels of ICT were categorized into 3 levels. Level 1: using websites for information hosting, level 2: websites as an interactive portal and level 3: horizontality in which organizations collaborate by sharing useful information through linked databases. NPOs need to develop more interactive websites through which online matching services can be used as a major resource of volunteer recruitment.

Methodology

This qualitative research has two different objectives. The first goal is to find the best practices of voluntarism by reviewing volunteer management practices of other FBRRC similar to the DCC in North America. The 6 FBRRC were located through the purposive sampling procedure. Initially, it was planned to include at least one non-Buddhist retreat centre. However, due to lack of correspondence and time limitations from the side of the non-Buddhist retreat centres, only Buddhist dharma centres were involved. The names of the 6 faith-based rural retreat centers discussed in this research are: Spirit Rock (California), Bhavana Society (Virginia), Arrow River (Ontario), Tisarana Monastery (Perth, ON), Palyul Foundation (Madoc, ON) and Gainsville Vipassana Society (Virginia).

The second goal of this research is to locate community groups and organizations in the surrounding area of Peterborough and Halliburton County who would like DCC to expand its services in their community or organizations. Purposive sampling was used to find organizations for the survey.

Procedure

The list of organizations that were retrieved through purposive sampling was first requested to participate in the research through email by the researchers. Most of the participants from these organizations were volunteer coordinators in their respective organizations. However, in some organization that functioned without a volunteer co-ordinator, the executive director was requested to participate. The motive was to extract accurate and diverse information regarding volunteer management in the respective organizations. Almost all the organizations agreed on the request for participation. An informed consent form was attached with all the interview questionnaires and survey questions with an emphasis on the confidentiality of the identity of the participants.

Telephone interviews were conducted to study the volunteer management strategies used by the 6 FBRRC. Due to the busy schedule of some participants, not all the interview questions were completed through direct conversations on the telephone. Instead, they were requested to type and save the answers in the questionnaire and then send them back to the researchers through email. Out of the 6 participants, 3 agreed for telephone interviews. The other participants submitted the answers through email.

For the second goal of the research, 3 organizations were located through purposive sampling. Mostly comprised of community groups, the secondary participants were either potential groups or present receivers of the DCC services. The survey participants were members from three umbrella organizations which are the Peterborough Chamber of Commerce, Secondary School Teachers Association and Nutrition Society of Lindsey.

These organizations were first contacted and requested for participation in the survey through email. After the organization agreed to participate in the research, survey questionnaire were e-mailed to the respective organizations. The members of the organizations were asked to answer the survey and were also requested to send the answered survey directly to the researcher's email address.

Interviews were also carried out with 3 existing members of the Dharma centre who have been members and also have volunteered in the Dharma Centre for many years. The interview questions were designed to understand the volunteer management strategies used by the DCC in the past through the perspective of some of the oldest members of the DCC. The interviews were expected to generate some diverse information regarding the treatment of volunteers in the Dharma Centre of Canada from their past experiences. The 3 volunteers were separately interviewed in their respective residents.

Research responses are divided into categories and analysed accordingly using cross-case analysis. Cross-case analysis is used to compare and contrast the differences within the different retreat centres.

Research Limitations

The research was conducted by 2 fourth year students of International Development studies as a part of their fourth year course. Therefore, time and monetary limitations were the major problems in the conduction of a more thorough and in depth research.

Findings

Volunteer Management strategies

Volunteer management strategies at Bhavana Society included the use of the organization website as the main source for recruitment of volunteers. According to Katherine, a volunteer coordinator in Bhavana Society, volunteers have been coming to their organization due to their charismatic teacher, Abbot Henepolo Gunarantana. “Though the charismatic Abbot will be leaving the Bhavana Society in 2009, the rate of volunteers and organizational members who have signed up for events have not decreased” (Field Notes, 2009). Bhavana Society also provides food and lodging to their volunteers. However, at Spirit Rock, volunteers were attracted not only through website advertisement, but also through postings in meditation halls and announcements in yoga classes. Spirit Rock does not provide free food or lodging to all the volunteers, but only to those who help in cooking the meals. Volunteers at Spirit Rock are formally appreciated during an annual appreciation event. Volunteers also form the volunteer *sangha (group)* through which their interests are matched with upcoming events and are notified. Other organizations do not have formal methods of recognizing or socializing volunteers. Palyul Foundation depends on voluntary work of its existing members who donate their time and resources for the foundation. Arrow River also uses their website for advertising volunteer help and also through teaching trips done by its teacher, Punnadhammo Bhikkhu. Findings show that Arrow River and Tisarana Monastery gives credit to its good *karma* and strong interpersonal relationship with the volunteers for its volunteer retention.

Number of volunteers

Findings show that Spirit Rock had the most volunteers available. Bhavana society has 4

volunteers in total while Tisarana has more than 2 volunteers. Palyul Foundation has 6 volunteers from within their members. Arrow River has a permanent stewardship position in addition to 3 volunteers.

Volunteer tasks

Findings show that in all the retreat centers, volunteers are given the tasks of property maintenance, kitchen help and helping during the events. In Tisarana Monastery, volunteers are assigned with administrative work. At Spirit Rock and Palyul Foundation, volunteers are assigned administrative works such as website maintenance and helping administrative staffs for filing data, in addition to the above mentioned regular tasks. In Palyul Foundation, building maintenance and repairs are also done by the volunteers. Bhavana Society offers some distinct and creative tasks for volunteers. These tasks are video production of yoga classes and transcription of audio talks and tasks related to carpentry and electric skills. At Arrow River, most of the cooking and shopping is done by a steward but the maintenance and building is done by the volunteers. Members of Arrow River also volunteer to do secretarial work and other physical jobs.

Membership determination

Findings show that not all organizations follow similar methods of membership determination. At Bhavana Society, anyone who has a registered address can be included in their mailing lists. According to the interview report, there are 3500 such members at Bhavana society. In addition

to this, they have differing membership fees ranging from \$25 to \$ 500 to determine regular membership and lifetime membership respectively. According to Spirit Rock’s volunteer coordinator, the term ‘member’ is not applicable to their organizations’ service users because membership is not determined through fees paid but that the people are welcomed to attend Spirit Rock events according to their needs. Tisarana Monastery and Palyul Foundation do not have membership fees specifically. At the Palyul Foundation, one becomes a member through interest and involvement in organizational practices.

Services offered

Tisarana monastery, Bhavana Society and Spirit Rock, have programs for youths and children. Tisarana Monastery provides programs for children aged between 5 to 12. They combine Dharma themes with activities such as craft, drama and modeling. Palyul Foundation and Arrow River provide fewer services than the others. All of the organizations offered similar services such as meditation classes, retreats, and teachings on Buddhism.

Survey Results

Following are the comprehensive results of the 25 questionnaire respondents:

Community Awareness about DCC- 40%

Interest in attending retreats at DCC- 45%

Social service needs- teachings on Buddhism, youth-focused programs, spiritual healing, and teachings on dietary habits.

Some suggestions for the DCC in accordance to the survey results are: expansion of DCC

services in downtown areas, organizing group retreats, cross cultural interaction through discussion forums and fund-raising events.

Interview Results with DCC Volunteers

Out of the 3 participants, the names of two participants have been kept confidential upon their request. All 3 participants are retirees and have volunteered in DCC for more than 2 decades. The participants are also existing members of DCC who voluntarily offer their time and services whenever there is a need. Only 1 participant has been on and off in DCC in the last 4 decades and who is also the current director-at-large of the DCC. All 3 participants are disciples of the Late Venerable Namgyal Rimpoche and greatly take interest in the affairs of the DCC. They specifically help the DCC by volunteering and taking initiatives to attract more volunteers through the word of mouth. Similarly, 2 other participants volunteer based on their availability but they admitted they were not consistent enough in their volunteer contribution. Thus, it was noted that all the volunteers could not commit themselves on consistent volunteering.

The tasks assigned to the participants differed according to their interest and capabilities. Two participants helped mostly in the kitchen, did household chores and property maintenance while Rab Wilkie, Director-at large did the ground work for 1 year before he was elected in the Board of Directors.

Regarding the question about volunteer management strategies of DCC in the past, all the participants' response was similar. Findings from the personal interviews show that volunteers in the past were mostly attracted through word of mouth within the DCC members, DCC newsletter advertisements and by welcoming an interested prospect. These strategies continue to form the

crust of current pattern of attracting volunteers at the DCC.

According to participants of the interview, the incentives offered to volunteers include free food and lodging based on their voluntary work and allowing them to attend teachings by various teachers. It was pointed out by one of the participants that the background and credibility of the teachers invited at the DCC also provided incentives for volunteers.

The interview findings also reveal that one of the challenges facing the DCC is a lack of motivated persons to lead and organize actual events even though there are quite a large number of people willing to help. This can be attributed to the location of the DCC and inability of interested volunteers to visit the center on a regular basis due to lack of transportation.

Volunteers at the DCC are appreciated in the DCC newsletters which are published four times a year. Volunteers are also given gifts during Christmas.

Analysis of interview data

Volunteer attraction methods

Lindenmeier (2008) suggests that advertisements for volunteers play a big role in attracting new volunteers and the advertisements should target task-related activities for volunteers to identify with. Thus, there are various factors to keep in mind when devising strategies to attract volunteers. As informed by the DCC members, DCC has few and non-appealing means of attracting volunteers, in that, only a general message stating 'volunteers needed' is advertised. According to Lindenmeier, persuasive advertising leads to increased rates of volunteer involvement especially, if the volunteer tasks is distinct, interesting and something that raises

individual interest. Findings show that Bhavana Society is the only such organization that offers a variety of creative tasks related volunteering opportunities such as video production and administrative works. As a result, Bhavana Society has been more successful in recruiting diverse set of volunteers.

Findings show that different services offered by the organizations that target different age groups, including children to youths, tend to attract more members, volunteers, and also create a broader network. This facilitates volunteer engagement in sustainable manner. The DCC currently has limited number of services and thus, is in the need to expand its services.

Interview findings from Gainesville Vipassana Society, suggested that people who have become familiar with the needs of an organization are more likely to assist in volunteering. Thus, it may be of interest to the DCC to interact with as many people as possible. Although Gainesville Vipassana Society does not possess a property like a retreat center, they are more successful in gathering community members for sitting groups and meditation lessons. It shows that organizations such as GVS can attract volunteers based on regular meetings and sitting groups. Out of all the organizations, GVS has the least services and does not have any property.

Membership determination in all the FBRRC does not play a significant role in volunteer management. All interested people

Incentives

Not all the rural retreats centres offered incentives to volunteers such as free food and lodging.

Findings show that Tisarana Monastery does not provide any incentives to their volunteers. However, this has not resulted in a reduced number of its volunteers. They always have more than 2 volunteers and have never faced volunteer shortages. Even in fairly developed (many members and volunteers) retreat centres such as Spirit Rock, incentives such as free lodging and food is not offered however, volunteers are welcome to eat the food they help prepare during Monday night classes. Therefore, it would be a fair assumption to state that there is no direct correlation between volunteerism and incentives. Myers & Carpenter (2007) suggest that altruism is the key that motivates volunteers, and through their research, they found that altruism is positively associated with volunteer service.

Global trends

As stated by Merrill (2006), global trends reveal that students and youths tend to give above average time to volunteer service in order to engage themselves, to build skills and for educational purposes. Middle-aged adults, on the other hand, have family pressure as well as demanding work pressure. But older adult and retirees, especially in today's world, are willing to serve as volunteers and share their experiences, wisdom and skills with the youth and other younger adults. This is also true based on our research findings which show that most of the volunteers in retreat centers consisted of students and retirees.

Charismatic leadership

Findings show that retreat centres with charismatic and influential teachers giving teachings have helped sustain volunteer and attracted more members. For instance, according to the findings from the telephone interview given by Kathy from Bhavana society, Abbot Henepola Gunaratana

is the founder of Bhavana Society and attracts attendees to his teachings from all over the world. However, it was also mentioned that in the year 2009, the Abbot will not be holding talks at Bhavana Society. Nevertheless, the rate of volunteers who have signed up for tasks and members committed to Bhavana Society have not decreased even during his absence. This proves that Bhavana Society has established a strong network amongst communities over the course of two decades.

Conclusion

Volunteer's contribution of their time and service has helped many non-profit organizations all around the world. However, the availability of the volunteer resource itself is not a determinant of the success of its host organization. Effective recruitment through the use of various methods, proper management through the introduction and implementation of various services is a must. As shown by the research, organizations that offer diverse services have attracted diverse volunteer prospects. Literature review on volunteerism reveal that coercion is negatively related to volunteer contribution, in that, timing for volunteers should not be made compulsive because the essence of volunteerism is being able to work freely. Through the academic journals and interviews that were conducted, it was found that there is no direct association between incentives provided and volunteer participation. It is generally through altruistic commitments that volunteers devote their time and resources. An emphasis on strong inter-personal relationship based on mutual benefit is a good way to retain existing volunteer and create new memberships. Likewise, it cannot be over emphasized that volunteers should be appreciated, helped, encouraged and promoted for setting examples for leadership scopes.

Possible ways ahead for DCC

If better communication with the volunteers is made about the speciality and uniqueness of the courses offered it may encourage increased volunteer participation.

If information about transportation provision for volunteers is made available on the website, volunteers would be likely to visit the Center.

If efforts are made to increase leadership in organizational committees within DCC, it may lead to efficient management of all resources.

Specific areas of interest-related tasks such as painting, carpentry should be encouraged through website advertisement which may attract interested people and benefit the DCC.

If possible, services provided by DCC may be diversified to attract diverse groups of people. (For instance children-focused and youth engagement programs)

If DCC targets educational institutions such as Trent University or any nearby schools and colleges, it may draw participation of students interested in social science or humanities.

To make it more effective and attractive, if an official letter of appreciation is given to students; it will motivate them since such appreciation letters helps to build up their resumes.

If DCC uses enhanced information communication technology to target volunteers, there might be chances of greater participation of volunteers.

ICT use is not only limited to volunteer recruitment, but the Board of Directors of DCC can also use ICT to communicate with each other.

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