VOLUNTEERISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A Case Study of the Calgary Children's Initiative

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VOLUNTEER
BÉNÉVOLES
CANADA

LE BÉNÉVOLAT ET LE CHANGEMENT SOCIAL :
Étude de cas du projet *Calgary Children's Initiative*

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Involving volunteers in long-term social change initiatives

- Community support is key to keeping volunteers motivated in long-term social change initiatives.

- To win community support, long-term social change projects should involve volunteers in articulating and disseminating messages about progress.

- Clear expectations of volunteers, clear accountability mechanisms, and measurable objectives help volunteers work toward long-term social change.

- Appropriate and timely training is key to effective and satisfying volunteer involvement.

Introduction

What challenges do organizations face when they seek to involve volunteers in gaining community support for long-term social change? What challenges do they face in keeping these volunteers committed and passionate about a long-term vision? How can organizations manage long-term change initiatives to ensure volunteer effectiveness? These questions are of interest to all nonprofit organizations that bring volunteers together to work for long-term, sustainable change.

As part of a research project for the International Year of Volunteers, we studied the Calgary Children's Initiative of the United Way of Calgary and Area.[1] The findings of this study, although conducted at the initial stage of a long-term project, provide us with some preliminary answers these questions.

While caution is required in generalizing findings from case studies, we believe that it is important to share the findings of this study. Our hope is that, as other similar initiatives are implemented and evaluated, the body of knowledge relating to the engagement of volunteers in social change processes can be compared and evaluated. In this way, we hope to establish general principles and recommendations regarding this unique type of volunteer activity.

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[1] The study was done in collaboration with the United Way of Calgary and Area.

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The Research Project

In conducting our case study of the Calgary Children's Initiative (CCI), we used three different data collection methods: document analysis, individual interviews, and focus groups. Document analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was used to gain an understanding of the developmental phase of the project and as a reference point from which to interpret the interview and focus group data. Documents used included background reports, communication and promotional materials, and minutes of meetings.

There were three different groups of volunteers involved in the CCI: the Council of Champions, Working Groups, and Action Groups. Hour-long interviews were conducted with members of the Council of Champions, each of the staff members of the CCI, and one member of the United Way management.[2] Focus groups were conducted with each of the Working Groups and with one Action Group.

Focus group and individual interview questions focused on:

- What motivated these people to volunteer for the Initiative.
- What aspects of the Initiative have helped them maintain their commitment.
- What aspects of the Initiative have been frustrating or difficult.
- What changes they would recommend to enhance the role and effectiveness of volunteers within the Initiative.

Preliminary results were presented to — and feedback was elicited from — 25 participants at a workshop for CCI partner agencies. The findings of the interviews, focus groups, workshop feedback, and document analysis have been incorporated into this report.

Calgary Children's Initiative

The United Way of Calgary and Area has a long history of investing in initiatives and programs that support the healthy development of children. During 1997-98, it held a series of community consultations that highlighted concerns about the ability of the various sectors of society to ensure long-term successful outcomes for children. The Calgary Children's Initiative arose from these consultations.

Since its inception, CCI's stated goals have been "to initiate a process of social change with the intention of impacting the lives of all children in Calgary" and to "make our city a better place for children to live and grow." CCI emphasizes "coordinated action that will achieve measurable social change" and focuses on

six specific outcomes:

- All babies are born healthy.
- All children and youth are well cared for and safe.
- All children are ready to learn.
- All children and youth practice healthy behaviours.
- All children are successful in school.
- All youth are successful in making the transition to adulthood (Clarke, 1999).

[2] Interviewees were selected using a purposeful sampling method. Purposeful sampling is a method of selecting a sample according to predetermined criteria such as depth of experience or involvement.

CCI's organizational structure was designed to gain community-wide support for the Initiative. Volunteers are involved at three levels, with each level requiring different skills and a different degree of commitment.

The Council of Champions

The volunteers who sit on the Council of Champions are community leaders who are seen as the "movers and shakers" in the city and, as such, are able to provide leadership and credibility to the Initiative. A member of the Council summed up its role as follows:

> The role of the Council of Champions is to provide an executive level sponsorship to facilitate the implementation of CCI. We remove barriers where there are barriers identified in terms of achieving the objectives of the Initiative and work plan.

The Council of Champions includes presidents and chief executive officers of corporations and post secondary institutions, superintendents of boards of education, and representatives from justice, health, and social service agencies. CCI staff members provide administrative support to the Council. The Council of Champions meets quarterly to provide fiduciary guidance to CCI, identify and implement strategies to influence related policy, and provide general advice and support.

The Working Groups

Three Working Groups focus on three periods or "windows of opportunity" of child development: conception to age 5, ages 5 to12 and ages 12 to 18. Each Working Group consists of between eight and 15 managerial staff from nonprofit and government agencies that provide service to children and families, a staff person to provide administrative support, and a chair. Although all members except the staff person are viewed by CCI as volunteers, many were appointed by their agencies as agency representatives and view their involvement as part of their employment. Some members do, however, commit time outside of their normal working day to the Working Groups.

The Working Groups bring together volunteers from a wide range of social, health, and educational agencies. These volunteers are recruited by CCI staff and members of the Council of Champions, who, according to a CCI staff member are looking,

> for key stakeholders with substantial knowledge about the best practices to help children lead better lives.

Each Working Group is charged with establishing a vision for its window of opportunity and developing strategies for achieving that vision. The groups have established ways of working that differ from the more traditional "funding of proposals" approach of the United Way or an advisory body approach. These ways of working include investing in innovative programming, evaluating the impact of services and creating new knowledge, strengthening the community's foundations, engaging others in designing solutions to problems related to children, and promoting changes in the way society thinks about children and youth.

The Action Groups

While the Council of Champions and the Working Groups were conceived as requiring a fairly long-term commitment, the Action Groups are established as needed to examine particular issues, make recommendations, implement projects, or facilitate collaborations with other community agencies. Action Group members are service providers and volunteers who provide services to communities. These groups terminate upon completion of their specific tasks.

Lessons Learned

The remainder of this report focuses on lessons learned from CCI about:

- involving volunteers in gaining community support for social change initiatives;
- keeping volunteers involved for the long term; and,
- managing long-term social change initiatives to ensure volunteer effectiveness.

Involving volunteers in gaining community-wide support

The CCI was structured to involve the community at three levels. CEOs of major educational and corporate bodies sit on the Council of Champions. Agency executive directors sit on the Working Groups. Community mobilizers design and implement the programs. The hope was that this structure would create support for the Initiative from all levels of the community.

The structure has, in fact, allowed many volunteers and community agencies to be involved at a range of levels. However, after two years of operation, the links to the community that CCI had hoped to forge did not appear to be clear or strong. Messages were not consistent from members at the different levels; moreover, the community still was not sure what CCI was about, where it was going, or who was helping it to get there. Many volunteers, however, saw this as a natural stage of growth that follows a period of strategic planning but precedes implementation.

Suggestions

While it is early in CCI to generate firm recommendations, some suggestions emerged from the study that may be useful to other organizations wishing to involve volunteers in gaining community support for long-term social change.

1) Use volunteers to inform the broader community about the goals and objectives of an initiative

If an initiative is to gain community support, its volunteers must be able to spread its essential messages. Volunteers need to communicate the vision, goals, and accomplishments of the initiative effectively. They need to be encouraged to talk about the work they are doing within their agencies and in the broader community. They also need to be provided with concise, clear, and consistent messages about the work of the initiative. In other words, volunteers need to be included in the articulation and dissemination of a communications plan.

2) Inform and/or involve the wider community in decision-making processes

Initiatives and organizations that want to involve the wider community need to encourage participation from a broad range of agencies and services, and ensure that decision-making processes are public and well known. Members of the community want to know what an initiative intends to do and how it intends to accomplish its goals. Agencies are more likely to be supportive when the decision-making processes are transparent and agencies can see their relationship to the work of the initiative. Volunteers need to be charged with communicating the work of the initiative to their agencies and the community. In turn, volunteers need to be present at a variety of community tables.

Keeping volunteers involved for the long term

One of the main challenges facing CCI has been translating the original idealism that staff and volunteers felt into long-term enthusiasm and commitment. Part of this challenge has to do with the pace at which results are achieved. Many volunteers are action-

oriented and want to see concrete results quickly. It is difficult for some to remain excited about a project when the results are not immediately obvious but, rather, may take the lifetime of a child to become apparent.

It's change that we're working for, and that's something that we grapple with all the time. When people ask us "What are you doing?" we have to explain that we are not task-oriented. Some of the things we do are hard to measure in terms of outcomes.

A second aspect of this challenge relates to the nature of CCI's long-term goal. The hope inherent in dreaming about changing a society's views of children is powerful. It leads people to strive to extend themselves beyond their everyday capabilities and to reach higher than they normally would. But the work of trying to turn the vision into reality can seem ambitious and never-ending. Study participants expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by the broad scope of CCI, the turnover of volunteers, and time pressures arising from their own organizational workload in addition to their commitment to CCI. Many participants also felt unsure about the anticipated future outcomes of CCI and how these would be accomplished and measured.

When volunteers feel overwhelmed with the size and scope of a project, they may not commit the necessary time, may feel unclear about what they are expected to do, or may feel that their time is not being well used. As a result, they may choose to leave the initiative.

Suggestions
A number of suggestions for keeping volunteers involved in long-term initiatives emerged from the study.

1) Develop awareness of the initiative in the wider community
Many volunteers initially became involved as a way of getting recognition for the work of their organizations. Being connected to a major initiative gives status to smaller or newer agencies. This recognition, however, hinges on community understanding and appreciation for the work of the initiative, and this study found that many members of the public and social services community were not familiar with CCI or what it is trying to accomplish.

Recognition within the general community requires clear messages, communication through strategies such as public forums, and a general call to action. Without community understanding of an initiative, there is little opportunity for the recognition that often encourages volunteers to stay involved. The assistance of professionals in communications and marketing to increase community awareness may be invaluable to the success of long-term social change initiatives and should be considered a worthwhile investment.

2) Establish clear expectations
Study participants suggested that CCI should clarify what it expects volunteers to deliver and how it will hold volunteers accountable for those deliverables. Agencies sometimes hesitate to demand accountability from busy professionals who are volunteering their time. However, participants in our study felt that accountability was crucial and that accountability mechanisms should be built into the terms of reference for volunteer positions. In the long run, it was felt that everyone's time would be more effectively used if expectations were clearer.

3) Establish benchmarks and milestones
One of the challenges of keeping volunteers engaged over the long term is demonstrating measurable outcomes. Volunteers and others want and need to see benchmarks or milestones of accomplishment to know that an initiative is moving forward. Those milestones need to be clearly articulated or demonstrated. While the vision of the initiative may be very long-term, volunteers need to see progress towards that vision within their term of service**.**

What difference will this make in twelve months – or in five years? You want to see the concrete deliverables in a twelve to twenty-four month period and yet they are often couched in language that is more like five to six years.

Managing the initiative to ensure volunteer effectiveness

There are many challenges inherent in managing complex volunteer initiatives such as CCI. Many people wanted to be a part of what promised to be a huge movement that would change forever the lives of children and families in Calgary. However, the sheer number and diversity of volunteers who wanted to participate created some difficulties. Volunteers were recruited because they had specific skills or knowledge needed to move the Initiative forward. Yet ensuring that all volunteers were actively engaged proved to be a challenge.

Another challenge was that participants proposed a vast array of activities and projects, but staffing levels made it impossible to move forward on every project immediately. Moreover, it would have been ineffective and inefficient to attempt to co-ordinate and maintain too many ongoing projects at once. But not moving forward immediately also raises a concern, namely, some volunteers may have been attracted to CCI because they wanted to work on a certain project. If some of these projects are not developed for some time, these volunteers may not be willing to continue their involvement.

Suggestions

To suggestions for improving the effectiveness of volunteers emerged from this study.

1) Prioritize and sequence projects

Rather than amassing large numbers of volunteers at any given time, an initiative should consider focusing on a few projects and selecting the volunteers who would work most effectively on those projects. This can be difficult. When an initiative is new and there are so many good ideas and opportunities, there is a risk of losing volunteers if everyone who is interested and willing to get involved is not included. However, this risk needs to be balanced by a need to prioritize activities to ensure that volunteers play a positive role.

Provide support and training for volunteers

When volunteers are highly trained and educated professionals, it is easy to assume that they can effectively fulfill their tasks or roles with little or no support or training. However, our study highlighted the need for some form of training for volunteers at every level, as well as some level of infrastructure support. For example, a volunteer who is a highly trained health professional may have little experience or expertise in marketing. A volunteer who is a human service professional may not know how to lobby effectively in the political arena. Providing new skills can result in efficient task completion, satisfied volunteers, and, eventually, a successful initiative. On the other hand, busy professionals have little patience for training in an area in which they are already proficient. Managers of volunteers need to assess training needs in light of the particular roles and tasks of the volunteers, and provide this training in a timely manner.

Conclusion

Our study of the Calgary Children's Initiative during its initial stage of development raised several issues concerning the use of volunteers to help effect a process of social change. We found that to ensure community support concise messages, and support for delivering those messages, need to be provided. To keep volunteers for the long-term, there must be recognition of the work they are doing in the broader community, visible milestones or benchmarks of progress, and clear definitions of roles and expectations. Professionals who act in a volunteer capacity are accustomed to clear terms of references and expectations of accountability. These should be provided in any volunteer initiative. To ensure that a large number of volunteers with professional skills and expertise are being effectively utilized, projects need to be prioritized and sequenced. Finally, timely and appropriate training needs to be provided to volunteers.

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