The Future of Volunteering

Susi Calder

SPARK
INSPIRING COMMUNITIES

The Future of Volunteering!
The general context of this talk is that we are in an environment where we need more volunteers and we are asking them to do more, whilst there are more and more demands on their time.

The Future of Volunteering is a scary title for a 10 minute piece. It's a scary title for a dissertation! But I think we're quite good at scary, and I think we should stop it.

Scaring Volunteers

Susi Calder

SPARK
INSPIRING COMMUNITIES

So I'm renaming this talk: "Scaring Volunteers!"
Like I said, I think we're pretty good at it.
Here's some examples of what I mean:

We NEED you! We need YOU! If you google "Volunteer flyer". It's a sea of "Volunteers Needed". You have to look really carefully to find WHAT, WHY, WHERE. You know, the stuff that's important
The over-riding message is the need – it can come off as desperate.   And there is nothing so attractive as desperation.

Volunteering is for life not just for Christmas.
I'm not a commitmentphobe but if the first thing someone says to me is that they want me for the rest of my life, I'm running. Can't we just get to know each other first? See if we get on?
We often talk about keeping volunteers, and we have this expectation that we should keep people as long as possible, volunteers can feel like they are trapped in a role, or about to be.

No presentation is complete without using a cat meme
tl;dr - Too long, didn't read!
Have you seen some of the paperwork that volunteers get given? 4 sides of A4
application form. Monitoring form. Timesheets. Induction paperwork. Policies.
Handbooks. Waivers.

"I haven't done anything yet!"

Of course we need policies and procedures, and volunteers need to know them. We
don't need to think of drowning people in paperwork as a fun pastime

Role descriptions – Looks like a job. Long list of stuff to do. Filled with MUST and WILL.

We use the language of employment, maybe changing a word here or there

"I thought I was volunteering?!"

Volunteering is a leisure time pursuit – whatever someone's motivation for doing it – they choose it. Freely.

We're really good at combining these things:
"We need someone to do this thing. Mary has been doing it for over 20 years. It takes up her whole life, and now it has broken her and she needs to stop. She does this very complicated thing, with a large list of responsibilities. If no-one takes over, then the whole thing will fail. Who's going to do it? I don't understand why everyone is so apathetic."

No, I can't imagine why someone wouldn't want to take that on.

We give people the feeling they are being used as cheap labour and unappreciated. Volunteering becomes a burden to them.

People don't mean to be scary about volunteering, but it's really common, and once you point it out (tactfully and carefully obviously), they quickly want to know how else to approach it.

So the Future of Volunteering is about being not scary.
Volunteering should not feel like a burden
There should be love, because volunteering is brilliant. Volunteering gives people a million things. A sense of purpose, friends, fun, skills, the list goes on. We know that volunteering is good for people, as well as the community it benefits.

But people don't always want to do things because they are good for them – it's human nature.

We need to think about volunteering as a two-way relationship, so we have think about it from the perspective of the volunteer, not just our organisational needs

When we recruit volunteers as cheap labour, that's how we value them
Volunteers aren't cheap labour and they bring so much more – vibrancy, community, passion, and on and on
What is the volunteers perspective?

We need to understand people's motivation for volunteering, and there are loads. When we understand someone's motivation, we can give them reasons to volunteer, we can be specific

Why should they give up their time and energy for you? People volunteer because they get something out of it. Sometimes that's as simple as feeling good about helping people. For others it's time not on their own, or developing skills, or feeling useful, or having fun, or being part of a community. When you understand that, how volunteering fits into their lives, you can mould volunteering to be a better fit for them.

Be clear about the benefits to them and the impact of their volunteering

Volunteers need to know they are appreciated. That they have value. We need to show them love. Be vested in your volunteers.

Think about how you ask your volunteers for feedback, and USE that feedback to make their experience better. Listening is powerful recognition.

Volunteering might be for life, but probably not with the same organisation. People's lives change and so do their priorities. They will leave. Get used to it. Make it easy to leave. And normal. With no pressure

Remove the burden. This does several things. People will tell you when they are leaving, rather than slinking off into the night. They'll feel less guilty about leaving, and be more likely to tell people about their experience. They will feel able to come back. You can also ask them WHY they are leaving! You need to know why people leave. Is there a trend? Can you do something about it?

Think about the commitment you are asking for from people. This is not just the length of service but also the general time commitments you're after. People are busy.

Can we split stuff up? Make it smaller, easier?

We live in a changing world. We cannot sit still. We will be left behind by the rest of the world if we do. Out of touch and out of volunteers. We have always done it this way is not a good reason to continue doing it this way. We sometimes think change is scary or difficult. Change is inevitable, without it we have no progress. Let's see change as exciting, exhilarating, let's put energy into it.

Technology has made a significant impact into the way people do all kinds of things.

Volunteering needs to change to better fit with people's lives and expectations. Technology can be a part of that.

Can we make volunteering easy to do remotely? Are we flexible? Are we communicating with people in the way that they tend to communicate? How do we do things quickly? Are we thinking ahead? What changes do we need to make? We should be asking ourselves these questions all the time. We should be part of the changing world.

How can technology help us? There isn't going to be a one-size fits all answer and technology won't be the only answer. Smart phones are everywhere, there are apps for everything. People are using wearables for all kinds of stuff. How can we incorporate this into volunteering? Let's ask our volunteers! Our volunteers are already brilliant, creative, with passion and ideas. How do they think it could be done better, quicker? We can talk to each other. Share ideas and solutions.

So there is good news. I don't think the future of volunteering is scary.

Volunteering is fundamentally about people.

The future of volunteering is shaped around the needs of both the organisation and the volunteer
The future of volunteering is flexible, changing, and brilliant
The future of volunteering depends on us

I challenge you to be the future of volunteering