

Voluntary Sector Essentials

Introduction

How do you run a successful voluntary sector project or organisation?

The problem is that everything we do depends on relationships, but relationships are often seen as fuzzy, intangible things, incapable of being organised and structured.

There is an element of truth in this: nobody can tell you how to have a good relationship with someone else. On the other hand, the things which make bad relationships are well documented, and we know how to avoid them.

So we can't tell you how to make relationships work, but we can tell you how to avoid making them fail. If you keep building a relationship, and you don't sabotage it, there's a good chance it will grow into something good.

In summary, there are seven key principles: three to build, three to protect, and one principle to bind them together.

To build, you need:

- energy;
- authority; and
- empathy.

To protect, you need:

- integrity;
- transparency; and
- accountability.

To bind them together, you need:

- boundaries.

The first three principles are essentially active: they are needed to establish an effective relationship in the first place. The second three principles are essentially passive: they are needed to stop the relationship going wrong. The final one makes the other six work.

To put it another way, the first three points are about doing something useful in the voluntary sector, and the second three are about working in a sustainable way – there is no point in providing a brilliant service if you burn out or find yourself in too much trouble to continue. And none of this will work if you do not understand what is appropriate, and act accordingly.

These same principles apply whether you are looking at working effectively in a voluntary organisation (either as a volunteer or as an employee) or whether you are looking at your personal life; and they are also critical when you look at the relationship of the voluntary sector organisation with the other organisations and structures in the sector and the wider environment.

To Build

Energy

For a relationship to work, you need to put energy into it. This is often termed ‘commitment’ but this is misleading: at the start of a relationship, you can’t know how much commitment you can or should give to the other person; all you can say is that, right now, I am prepared to put some energy into the relationship.

This offer will involve time – the most precious thing you have – and it may involve other things; if the relationship grows and develops, it certainly will. As the relationship grows, an implicit commitment grows with it, which needs to be managed carefully.

But however the relationship develops, it cannot start, and it cannot grow without some continued investment of energy. A relationship will always cost you something, and the most basic calculation of all is whether you are willing to pay that cost.

Authority

I am being very careful with my words here: we need authority. I am not saying that we need to exercise it. There’s a big difference.

In the voluntary sector, we can’t tell people what to do. We (the volunteers) engage on a voluntary basis, and the service users also benefit from what we have to offer on a voluntary basis.

So the question arises: if every relationship has a cost, why would someone want to build a relationship with you? In the context of a voluntary organisation, the question can be put: why should someone come to this project? Why should they use your service? There is no punishment, no penalty if they stay away.

The answer should be obvious: they come because they want to, not because they have to. They come because:

- what you offer is worth having;
- it is something they want; and
- you provide it in a way that is accessible – physically, emotionally and culturally.

You have authority because you do a good job. If you offer food, it tastes good and is nutritious. If you offer advice, it is relevant, accurate and comprehensive. If you offer a play facility for children, it is fun and safe.

Your authority comes from your performance: if you act, it works; if you speak, you know what you are talking about. In the voluntary sector, we can’t boss people around; but, if we have authority, we don’t need to.

Of course, what you have to offer people is much deeper than just a service, just the performance of an activity. We need relationships, and the most important aspect of the relationship is that you are prepared to be yourself with and for the other person. At this level, your authority stems from the willingness to be yourself.

Empathy

You have authority because what you provide is worth having. But it is only useful if it is accessible, and this is where empathy comes in.

The traditional word to use here is 'love' – but love is often (wrongly, I believe!) seen as weak and passive.

The great strength of the voluntary sector is that we are voluntary: we are not here because we are being paid to be here; we are here because we choose to be, because we care.

This makes all the difference in the world: I am here because I care about you, because I am on your side. Vulnerable people often feel that 'the system' is against them – and they often feel this way for very good reasons. I am not here as part of the system, trying to make you do things you don't want to do; I am here, on your side, trying to help you get what you want and what you need.

To Protect

Integrity

I am able to help you if I reach out to you (energy), I know what I am doing (authority), and I am on your side (empathy). But if you don't trust me, you are not likely to want what I have to offer, and this is why integrity is vital.

The point should be an obvious one: if you can't be trusted, you are no good to anybody. The only way to be trusted is to be trustworthy – to act with integrity.

We need to remember that integrity is much bigger than simply telling the truth, and telling the truth is much more than not lying.

Integrity is also about ensuring that the image the other person has of you is accurate, that their expectations of you are realistic. We all know how to mislead people by only telling them selected portions of the truth, so simply telling the truth is not enough: you can deceive me by failing to tell me things I ought to know.

Transparency

It should also be obvious that it is not appropriate for a volunteer or a voluntary sector organisation to engage in hidden or secret activity. You cannot be acting with integrity if you need to hide some of your actions from the clients or the public.

This flags up the question of boundaries. Everything you do as a volunteer should be known – or, at least, knowable – for at least two reasons: for your own safety, and for the project's records. What you do as a private individual is, of course, your own affair; but there must be no confusion between the two: you, and the people around you, must know when you are acting as a volunteer, and when you are not.

Of course, transparency must sit alongside confidentiality: how you record and process confidential information about people and situations is an ongoing challenge.

Some details of your meetings and conversations may need to be kept private for very good reasons; but the fact that these conversations and meetings took place, when, where, and who was present should all be recorded and accessible. The client's details and concerns may be kept confidential; the volunteer's activities and advice must be recorded. There are many dangers, including the danger of false accusations, and the only way to be safe is to be transparent in what you do.

The other major issue is that the project needs to report on its activities, both to celebrate the good that is achieved, and to provide as evidence in funding applications. If you are doing work on behalf of the project, this must be recorded so that the project can benefit from having done that work.

Accountability

Finally, you must be accountable in your relationships and your work. This is the bottom line difference between someone working for a project and a lone wolf; between a person in a relationship and someone just spending time talking to someone else.

Accountability is very simple: it is the obligation, when asked by the other person, or by someone else in the project, to say what you did and why you did it. It is okay to make mistakes - everybody does - but the project must know what has been done in its name, and you must be willing and able to say why - to give a full account of your actions.

The project, too, must be accountable: it uses public money, one way or another, and must demonstrate that it is able to give account for the use it makes of that money.

To Bind: Boundaries

You cannot do everything, and neither can the project or organisation. You need a way to decide what you will do – or, if not, you will drift randomly, be at the mercy of whoever shouts loudest, or work yourself into an early grave. Or all three.

Your wellbeing, both as an individual and an organisation, depends on your ability to set boundaries appropriately and enforce them effectively. Some boundaries (such as 'look but don't touch') may make intuitive sense, while others ('six items or less') seem completely arbitrary, but however you feel about them, you need to be clear where they are and what happens when they are breached.

The other six principles are all vital, but they are not absolutes, and to apply them well, you need to understand where they do not apply: you have to understand where the boundaries are – that is, where the boundaries need to be set, in order to promote the wellbeing of the people and the organisation.