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In continuation from my last article, "[How I found volunteer opportunities in India and while travelling](#)", I will explore volunteer leadership challenges in this article. Volunteering is a very fluid role and it doesn't always have a role description. Sometimes we pick up where others left off. Sometimes we are thrust into a leadership role when we are least prepared. We have to pick it up and run with it. The challenge with a leadership role in a volunteering context for me was unlike regular work environment, there is lack of formal training and people may not be willing to enroll for training either and spend more time to enhance volunteer leadership skills. We learn as we go, and each experience is unique.

Here, I want to share my own observations and learning from my own volunteering journey:

- **Volunteer project relationship with time:**

Volunteers give units of their time and it may very well be random schedules, and these inconsistencies with time have significant impact on the tasks, roles and responsibilities.

- **Managing and assigning tasks: Results vs responsibilities**

The best way to assign tasks I found was to have two categories based on time.

Volunteers committed to long periods of time can be given responsibilities and volunteers who come in irregularly can be given tasks for immediate results. For volunteers who come in infrequently, ask them. 'What results do you want to bring to the project?' Make a comprehensive list of small tasks. Ask people if they can spare 45-60 minutes a fortnight and ask them to choose the tasks they can complete. This has worked with excellent results. Not many people can say 'no' to 45-60 minutes a fortnight.

- **Volunteer vs employee:**

Most of our relationships are framed within the workplace and the same model of leadership and communication with people may not always work in volunteering scenarios. So,

understanding the difference between employee vs volunteer is important, as work environment is more rigid, and we can assume predictable expectations. Whereas a volunteer environment is fluid, organic and dynamic and it is best to let it flow but ensure to be in line with the purpose and meet the objectives.

Also, as a leader we have to remember that results may not come in the shape, form, size, source or timeframe that is familiar to us or meet our expectations.

Collaborative style of leadership rather than directive is the best way to go, unless it is an emergency. We have to know when we have to be in the foreground and when to be in the background. In other words, we have to know when we need to step out of the way and be a follower instead of a leader.

- **Managing expectations:**

The key is to manage our own expectations and of others. Some of the areas of differences in my experience has been - people have different expectations of outcomes, how to allocate resources, and people experience different intensities of the project's vision. Sometimes our mental association with a volunteer is by their profession i.e. an English teacher or dentist and we set the expectation that this is what they will contribute. However, they may not want to do that because they need a break from their regular work. Role descriptions and key criteria is not always clearly defined and written in volunteer scenarios which are usually fluid and dynamic especially with new people coming in and sometimes you experience "scope creep" where the project gets out of hand and gets overwhelming. My rule of thumb is to always take a reality check and clarify through communication with fellow team members.

- **Acknowledgement:**

I choose the word acknowledgement because I like to think that people volunteer because the experience is in itself rewarding. As a leader we have to be able to recognise what everyone brings to the table. People bring in tangible contributions like physical labour.

Intangible contributions such as creative ideas, process improvement, solution finding also need to be acknowledged. It is expressed in a few seconds and is fleeting but can impact a project significantly.

- **Know how to write a good testimonial:**

It is a critical skill for every volunteer leader. It is important to stay focused on service and results and stay detached from our expectations. A good testimonial helps the volunteer to get other volunteer opportunities easily. It keeps the service culture moving. Plus, it helps them see positive things that others are obvious about, but they themselves are unaware of. Key things to include in a volunteer testimonial are:

- The problem they solved
- The 'before' and 'after' scenario
- How they made things easier
- The benefits they brought
- What skills they used
- What was unique about them
- How were they useful to the project?

Finally, every volunteer leadership experience is unique and may not replicate itself. However, the strategies above that I have learnt, I believe would help me if I find myself in a leadership role.

In my next article, "Valuable lessons learnt from volunteering experiences". I will discuss some invaluable life lessons I have learnt during my volunteer journey.