

Are 'professional' HR practices compatible with volunteer management?

“True affinity and beyond?...”

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Introduction

This question invariably produces the expression of strong views from volunteer programme managers and volunteers alike, and generally ends in 'tears before bedtime'.

The trouble is, volunteering is frequently at the heart of people's deeply held beliefs, and any views expressed on the subject are cherished and clung to with a sense of ethical honour. So when something happens that apparently conflicts with these views, your average volunteer (e.g. you & me) strikes an impressive indignant pose and conveys general grumpiness to the next half a dozen or so unfortunate souls they meet.

Legend has it (allegedly) that the source of the whole problem can be traced back to a fateful winters day in 1963 at Fulbourne Hospital in Cambridgeshire, where an unspecified number of cloak-clad senior managers huddled around a dimly lit NHS desk-lamp, and spawned the concept of advertising a post for a paid voluntary services organiser. A mere 17 years later there were over 1000 paid volunteer managers employed by the NHS, local authorities and volunteer bureaux.

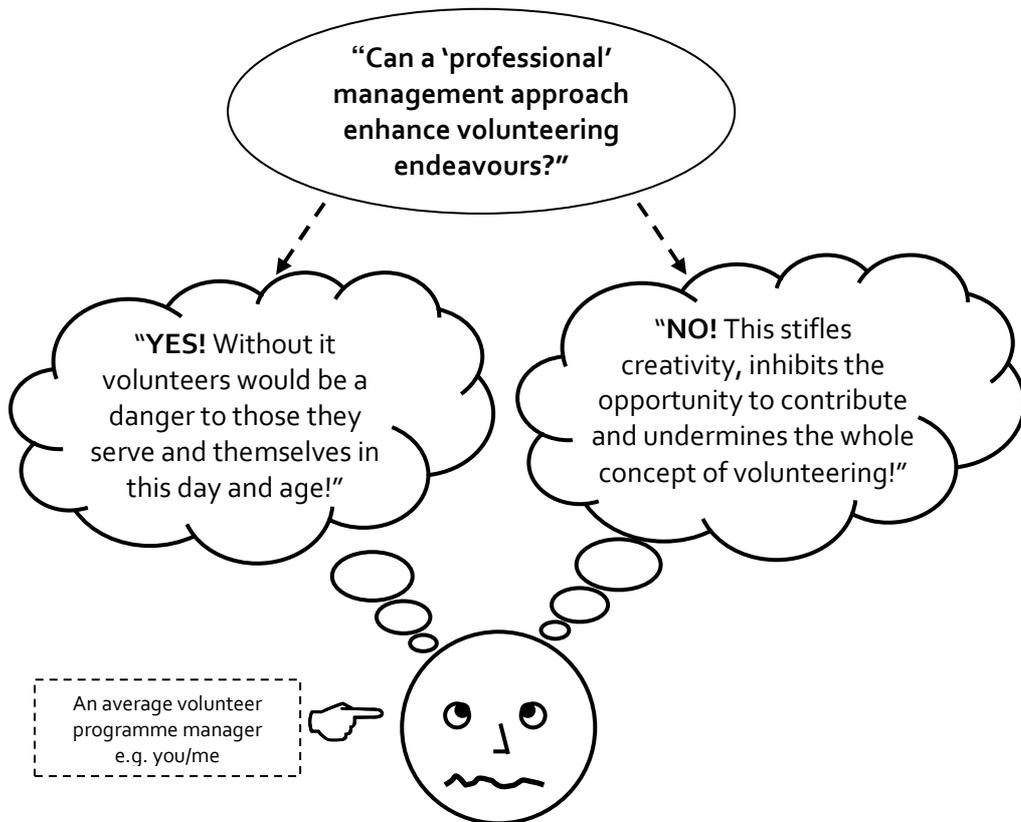
Ever since this time the issue of 'professionalisation' of volunteer services has been controversial at best and caused "blood on the floor" (J L Pearce 1993) at worst. Conflict between different volunteering organisations in the NHS with contrasting cultures is clearly acknowledged, and has been known to lead to 'Tabards at Dawn'!

[NB ironically, you will note that the word 'professionalisation' despite frequent use is still rejected by pc spell-checkers...]

As this report is essentially a resource for the CIPD accredited course the Certificate in Personnel Practice for Volunteer Services Managers, it focuses on reviewing why the 'workplace' model of volunteer management is so prevalent, and the pitfalls to avoid when adopting 'modern' management styles to ensure a volunteer programme supports volunteering endeavours.

The report visits studies undertaken by the Institute of Volunteering Research around the unsolved problem of 'compatibility' and seeks to cross-reference these with unsophisticated models of strategy & management, organisational development theory, and also with the current direction of the HR profession. The conclusion focuses on the importance of adopting appropriate management practices and the importance for the volunteer programme manager to appreciate the implications of the range of approaches available.

So here you are contemplating the 'Great Question', and it is easy to relate to both of the views below in any given circumstance...



Drivers of the 'workplace' model

In order to define the landscape this question sits on, let's first consider what issue have contributed to the development of a 'workplace' model of volunteer management. The 'PESTLE' framework is used for this exercise.

	Issue	Implications to VM
Political	Government focus on developing 'active citizenship' via a variety of young people's educational and vocational initiatives	Need to incorporate structured experiences that link with learning providers and liaise with various agencies
	Government support for employee volunteering initiatives (e.g. Business in the Community)	Opportunity to tap into a range of 'professional' skills, but a requirement for clear 'contracting' with businesses
	Government departments seeking to provide 'joined-up' volunteering (e.g. NHS Consistency Project')	Likely to create standardisation of 'statutory service' volunteering, and may impact on VCS organisations
	Pressure for volunteers to be protected under human rights & equal opportunities legislation	Need to keep a watching brief on avoiding discriminatory practices

<p>Economic</p>	<p>Government funding via contracting for provision of public services</p> <p>Increased competition to deliver services</p> <p>Funders (as opposed to donors) focus on 'pump-priming' new projects.</p> <p>Funders want value for money, evidence of outcomes etc.</p> <p>Funders want commitment to equal opportunities, diversity etc.</p>	<p>Focus on service level agreements, accountability and the 'bottom line'</p> <p>Need to hire in expertise</p> <p>Need to cut costs (sometimes radically)</p> <p>Creates a culture of change and uncertainty as new initiatives and 'fixed-term' staff are sought.</p> <p>Need for target-setting, accountability etc.</p> <p>Need for formal policies, monitoring, recruiting under-represented groups etc.</p>
<p>Social</p>	<p>A developing 'compensation culture'</p> <p>More options for those interested in volunteering</p> <p>Volunteer Management becoming increasingly recognised as a valid professional discipline</p> <p>Expectations that volunteering can provide experience, qualifications and a gateway to employment</p> <p>Increasing focus on 'short-term' volunteering, rather than volunteering-for-life' with one organisation</p> <p>Levels of education increasing</p> <p>Increased number of women in the workforce (and more grandparents with child-care responsibilities). Also part-time workers combining paid work with volunteering</p> <p>Staff in public sector roles (where volunteers are increasingly being placed) can be unfamiliar with concept of volunteering</p> <p>Public perception that volunteer-led activities are 'amateurish', and as such sub-standard.</p>	<p>Need for legislative compliance, risk management & training of volunteers (with appropriate record keeping)</p> <p>Need to offer quality volunteering experiences</p> <p>Expectations of professional development from new entrants to the profession</p> <p>Need to establish structured experiences that link up with a variety of other initiatives</p> <p>Need to streamline volunteer recruitment, induction and monitor quality of placements etc.</p> <p>Volunteers are seeking more challenging volunteer roles</p> <p>A need to react to the changing demographic of volunteering - forcing organisations away from traditional models, and towards more creative approaches</p> <p>Need to have a well-planned & structured approach to minimise conflict and manage expectations of all parties</p> <p>Need to set targets, monitor progress and publicise results of volunteer programmes to a range of stakeholders</p>

Technological	<p>Computerised personnel information systems provide the opportunity for increased planning and 'organisational performance'</p> <p>Opportunities to 'e-volunteer' on line (befriending via e-mail, research etc)</p>	<p>It is beneficial to have as much information on volunteers as possible (e.g. availability, skills, training records, preferences etc)</p> <p>Need to consider how to effectively recruit & provide support to volunteers never met in person</p>
Legal	<p>Fines for 'employing abusers'</p> <p>Recent tribunal cases focusing on the distinction between employee & volunteer status</p> <p>Developments and increase in profile of data protection issues (e.g. volunteers' personal data, client confidentiality etc)</p> <p>Employment legislation protecting employees tasks being 'given' to volunteers</p> <p>Many professions are increasingly subject to quality standards and audits</p>	<p>Need for more robust screening & supervision arrangements</p> <p>Need clear guidelines to avoid accidentally turning volunteers into employees</p> <p>Need for robust information management systems and adherence to procedures</p> <p>Need for partnership working with employers, unions etc.</p> <p>Need to evidence effective people management and risk management systems</p>
Ethical	<p>High profile 'problem' cases have resulted in higher expectations of client protection</p> <p>Corporate Social Responsibility encouraging private companies to support volunteering</p>	<p>Need for more robust screening & supervision arrangements</p> <p>Requires 'joined-up' approach to incorporate quality volunteering experiences</p>

Please don't feel that you have to memorise the above table (having written it an hour or so ago I've forgotten most of the issues already!). The key point is that (in accordance to Disraeli's observation) "the only constant is change" - things have just changed, and will continue to do so...

This exercise suggests that it's no wonder that the 'workplace' model has been adopted by many volunteering organisations. It is worth highlighting at this stage that it is nobody's 'fault' that volunteer management has developed in the way it has – it just has (and is likely to 'just has' even more!)

Problems with the 'workplace' model

If we then accept that this is our lot, then we need to understand the problems that the workplace model of volunteer management brings with it. A few initial thoughts are outlined below:

(*"The Right Stuff: New Ways of Thinking About Managing Volunteers"* - M Zimmeck 2001)

"complaints from volunteers - about lack of autonomy, inability to put knowledge and skills to best use, conflict with professional and other staff, second-class status and the 'swelling overburden of regulation' - are complaints about modern management practices"

"the 'bureaucratic' model regards managing volunteers as a means to an end"

and by inference:

- *crams volunteers and employees into hierarchical relationships*
- *is consistent in application of rules rather than values to individual relationships*
- *is unable to take risks and make intuitive leaps, e.g. by letting people have a try*
- *only values job-related personal relationships*
- *creates artificial barriers and puts expertise on a pedestal*
- *fails to cherish the unique status of volunteers as willing and unpaid workers*
- *controls the work of volunteers and makes available the least desirable tasks*

What is 'professional'

So, how can we avoid these negative aspects of the 'workplace' model? It would be helpful to define a couple of terms first - particularly that of 'professionalism'.

R Goodhall's research into UK charity shops (2000) revealed three different meanings of 'professional' as:

1. paid, as opposed to unpaid, voluntary or amateur
2. a member of a specific expert work community, as opposed to a non-professional
3. broadly competent and business-like, as opposed to 'unprofessional' incompetent and not business-like

The third of these meanings is given further attention as the most common and most ambiguous. For example, a volunteer can view their own behaviour positively as professional (competent), and yet consider 'professional' business-like systems that are practiced in their programme as inappropriate.

This is an important distinction, and if not recognised as such, colleagues can easily find themselves in conflict with each other. For example:

- (i) if volunteer reviews are designed to mirror the model of staff appraisals, it could be viewed both as a 'professional' approach in that it is a business-like system, and an 'unprofessional' approach due to the lack of recognition of the distinction between the nature of paid staff and volunteers.
- (ii) if volunteer reviews are carried out by skilful staff in a way that the volunteer is not particularly aware they are actually having a review, this could be viewed both as 'professional' in that this shows highly developed people management skills, and also as an 'unprofessional' approach in that the system appears ad-hoc and home-grown.

So, is 'professionalisation' good or bad?

Goodhall then adopts an interesting angle by considering three different attitudes towards the third meaning of professionalism and its relationship with voluntarism as follows:

- (i) professionalism assists with progress by limiting the hindrances that can be caused by unfocused voluntarism.
- (ii) professionalism can act against the organisational aims by corroding culture that expresses its *raison-d'être*.
- (iii) Professionalism and voluntarism are complementary to each other.

He then cites different types of charity shops being more effective by adopting leanings towards one of these approaches:

- large chains of charity shops lean towards (i),
- a local hospice shop tends towards (ii), and
- volunteer run shops actually favour (iii) – NB the definition of professionalism focuses on 'competence' here.

Volunteer-led organisations

This then suggests that volunteer-led organisations would actually support a professional approach, which is an interesting thought as any reference to the 'p'-word is often greeted with mutterings of disapproval and viewed as an anathema (or an abomination if feelings are running high).

Turning to C Rochester's work (1999), he describes a 'member-activist' model of voluntary organisation, where all the roles are played by volunteers. He describes how the organisation carries out its function, but also points out where conflict can exist.

For example:

- there are high levels of organisational ambiguity.
- there is no clear-cut division between those who own the organisation, those who undertake its work and those that benefit from its activities (they may be one and the same).
- problems can exist in reconciling the pursuit of long-term goals with meeting the immediate needs of individual members.
- it can be difficult to control the work of volunteers, who can also suffer from over-commitment and 'burn-out'.

Zimmeck, who slammed into the 'workplace' model (allegedly) earlier in this report, also cites a number of factors that limit the effectiveness of the 'home-grown' model:

- it can be messy and unwieldy as decision-making and task-sharing are time-consuming, frustrating and difficult to sustain.
- the focus can be on operational rather than strategic issues (J Freeman is gorgeously quoted here: "*Many collectives have concentrated on sharing the swabbings of the Titanic's deck but forgotten to post a lookout for the icebergs*").
- the absence of checks and balances may allow corruption to creep in.
- elitism can become institutionalised and discrimination can develop as recruits are sought 'in our own image'.

So, do volunteers like the professional management or not?

The answer is, according to research on a small sample of voluntary organisations (Holmes: 2004) – they don't really mind it.

A variety of organisations were scored on whether professional procedures were adopted in the volunteer programme, and the satisfaction of the volunteering experience was compared in each case. No correlation was found. This was tentatively attributed to:

- the influences leading to the adoption of professional procedures e.g. health & safety rules was viewed by volunteers as being outside the control of the organisation.
- the sample of volunteers (retired and generally from managerial backgrounds) appreciated the need for a structured approach to management.

The study concludes that further research is required, but one key lesson for the volunteer programme manager is that it is not the management style that is of paramount importance, but the perception of the management style in the mind of the volunteer.

This is illustrated by an adult hospice that was founded in Essex around 1980, and was run by a handful of volunteers and (low) paid staff in order to meet an emergent need within the local community. At this time any or all of the staff (paid & unpaid) could find themselves doing any of the tasks at any given time. 20 years later the number of beds had doubled, a day care centre and children's hospices had been added, home nursing services were provided, and a dozen charity shops existed to raise funds for the cause. This involved over 150 paid staff (part & full-time) and over 600 volunteers. Many of these volunteers saw significant change in procedures and management styles, but would have never ceased volunteering for the hospice. Whenever a new procedure is brought in that focuses on care standards, patient confidentiality, security of premises, financial accountability etc. there was seldom any raising of eyebrows. However, when volunteers were no longer allowed discounts on shop goods, this caused much grumblement in some quarters. The difficulty was two-fold:

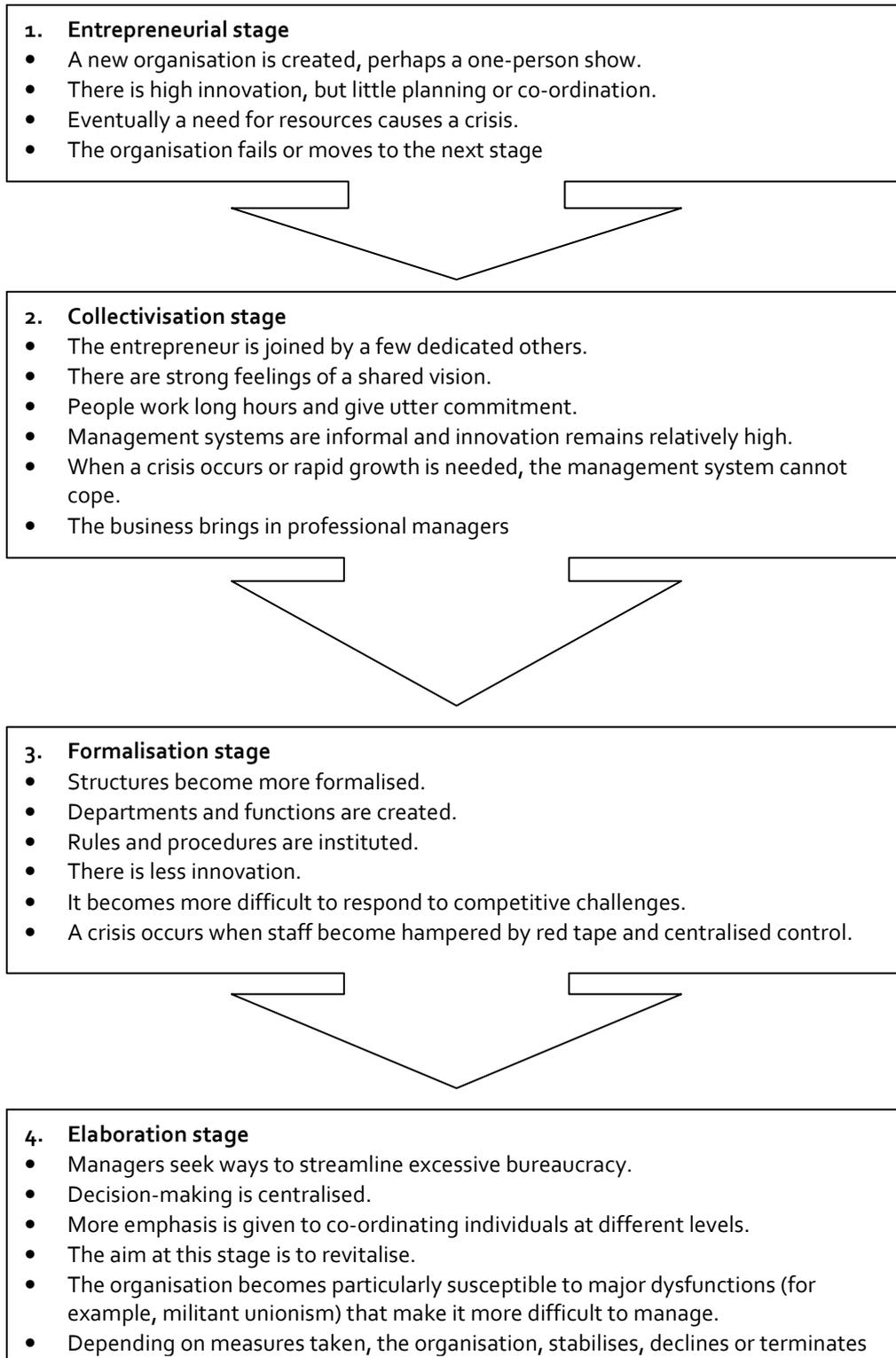
- (i) The rationale that original arrangements were unfair as non-shop volunteers had less chance to take advantage of discounts required a 'theoretical' appreciation, which conflicted with the 'pragmatic' approach of your shop volunteer.
- (ii) Long-standing volunteers saw this unilateral directive as a breach of the 'psychological contract' they had known and loved.

You may think that a number of volunteers left to offer their services to 'rival' charity shops that operated under the good old 'discount' regime – and you'd probably be right (allegedly).

The key point here is that as an organisation grows, changes are inevitable, and volunteer programme will undergo a degree of 'professionalisation', which may or may not have an adverse effect on volunteers [but if managed incompetently (unprofessionally) probably will!].

The Organisational Life Cycle

The flowchart below (CIPD: 1998) illustrates this quite well, and shows that organisational structure can be seen as a process of evolution. This in some ways is strangely comforting reading, as we can see that things happen because of a natural progression, not in fact as we had always suspected, because they are out to get us!



Taking stock...

Two main themes are emerging...

1. Professionalisation is being driven by a myriad of external factors, and by the natural process of organisational growth.
2. 'Professionalism' can be perceived differently by volunteers who may welcome it, resist it or respond indifferently (research is a bit thin, but evidence seems to suggest that 'it ain't what you do it's the way that you do it'.

So, Volunteer Programme Managers need to find a way to adopt systems that are integrated into the business plan and fit with the culture of voluntarism (so that all activity supports volunteer contribution, but does not detract from the volunteering ethos).

'Method in your madness' or 'madness in your method'?

The way this can be done is to have a robust 'method' of working but a healthy degree of 'madness' in the implementation (i.e. you achieve organisational objectives of being able to set objectives, forecast, plan, organise, direct, co-ordinate and control and review activities, whilst volunteers just think they are having a great time).

All of a sudden effective volunteer management requires significantly developed skills and knowledge that can combine a concern for outcomes and a concern for people. The 'grid approach' to leadership (R R Blake & A A McCauley - 1991) considers both of these aspects and is presented below:

High	9	1,9							9,9	
Concern for people	8	Country Club Management Thoughtful attention to the needs of people for satisfying relationships, leads to a comfortable, friendly organisations atmosphere and work tempo.				Team Management Work accomplishment is from committed people; interdependence through a 'common stake' in organisation purposes leads to relationships of trust and respect.				
	7									
	6									
	5				Impoverished Management 5,5 Adequate organisation performance is possible through balancing the necessity to get out work with maintaining morale of people at a satisfactory level.					
	4									
Low	3	Impoverished Management Exertion of minimum effort to get required work done is appropriate to sustain organisational membership.				Authority-Compliance Efficiency in operations results from arranging conditions of work in such a way that human elements interfere to a minimum degree.				
	1	1,1							9,1	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
		Low	Concern for production						High	

This model indicates that effective volunteer management is likely to reside in the domain of the 'team manager', and as close to the 9,9 co-ordinates and time and resources will allow.

The main characteristics of this style are cited as:

- Wants to integrate task and people
- Tries to create situation where individual needs can be satisfied by achieving organisational objectives
- Will discuss problems and seek new ideas
- Not afraid of confrontation

And what of the current thinking and direction of HR?...

This report has sought to describe the landscape of volunteer management and signpost broad principles of effective practices for the volunteer programme manager. A view commonly held in the sector, is that 'personnel' HR management is too clumsy for application in this field. So, the final part of this discussion considers the current thinking and direction of the HR profession in the light of this traditionally held view.

Essentially, the HR profession has been developing a more 'people-centred' approach evidenced by the quotes below:

- 'Humanity' was a key theme at this year's CIPD annual conference, with many speakers encouraging delegates to play their part in ridding the workplace of 'toxic emotions'*

(*negative feelings that arise in the workplace when people feel trapped, bullied, unsupported or prevented from doing a good job.)

'Putting Humanity back into HR': CIPD Annual Conference 2004 - People Management: 11 Nov 2004

- *"We talk about employee empowerment, participation, workplace democracy and job enrichment. Yet many people are deeply discontented with how their organisations work..... There is an historic opportunity for the first time since the industrial revolution to create organisations in which people can bring their humanity to work every day."*

Gary Hamal - Keynote address (CIPD Annual Conference 2004)

- *"The message is that the workplace is not just about procedures - it is about fulfilment. People should feel encouraged, empowered and liberated to use their initiative. Staff ought to feel they can develop their capability without fear that they are going to be chopped of at the knee....organisations should be viewed as organisms rather than mechanistic systems."*

Geoff Armstrong - CIPD Director-General (CIPD Annual Conference 2004)

- *"All too often we've ignored the emotional dimension in our workplaces."*

David Crisp - HR Consultant (CIPD Annual Conference 2004)

The essence of the above discussion is that both professions are moving towards a responsible management of people, where both accountability and a focus on the person are central tenets. (This is illustrated in the renaming of HR in many companies; e.g. the HR department at the BBC is now known as 'BBC People';)

These points are captured by the comparison made by Willis (1993).

Volunteering can be seen as: Accountable, community-led, consultative, democratic, informal, innovative, motivation-based, pluralistic, responsible and volunteer-led.

Management can be seen as: Bureaucratic, changeable in structure, consultative, efficient, evaluative, formal, led by professional staff, productive, strategy-driven, 'top-down' and 'value for money'.

While believing these values were not incompatible, Willis' *preferred management ethos* was: Accountable, learning, listening, person-centred as well as task orientated, proactive, purposeful & visionary.

Conclusions

- The issue of 'professionalisation' is a source of conflict.
- The professionalisation of volunteer programmes is driven by both external influences and natural organisational growth.
- Professionalism as 'competence' is supported by volunteers.
- Professional as 'business-like' does not necessarily detract from the voluntary experience.
- The models of professionalism and voluntarism can meet where concern for people and outcomes are integrated.
- HR management thinking is currently focused on engaging staff and placing people in the centre of the business.

Recommendations

- Avoid 'jumping' into camps whenever 'professionalisation' of volunteer management programmes is discussed.
- Develop volunteer management systems that are 'fit-for-purpose' and disguise them however you can so that volunteers are relatively unaware of formal systems.

The level of planning and skill in designing effective volunteer management systems, that create the impression of a 'seamless' volunteering experience is not unlike the analogy of the swan that paddles furiously under the surface, but appears graceful to the onlooker.

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