

Working with Volunteers in Community

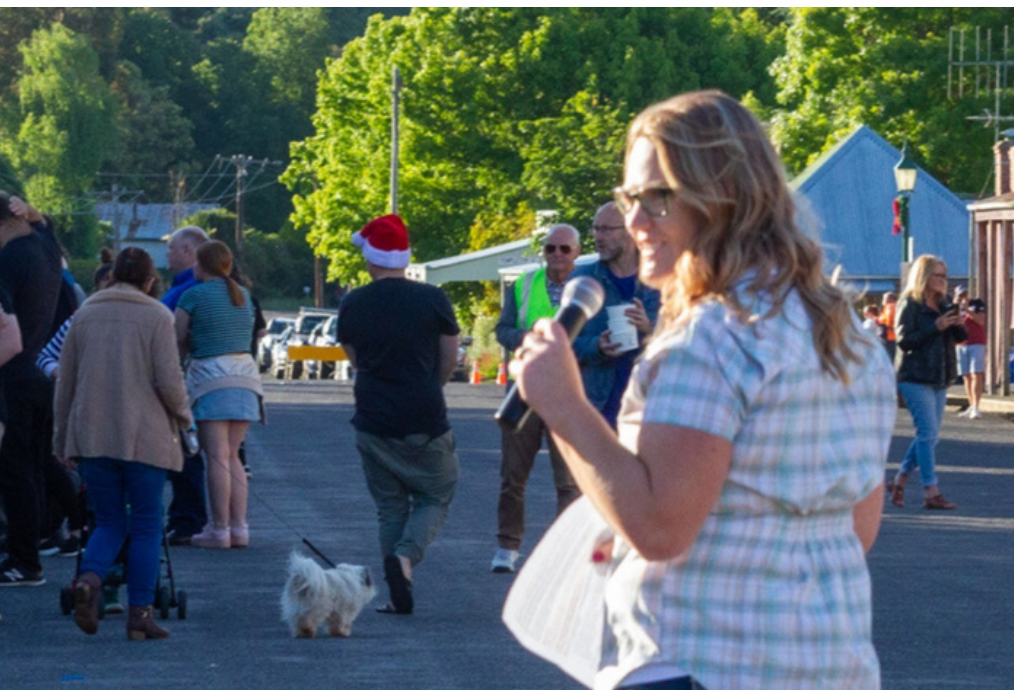


from connecting through to leadership

Traditionally many groups and organisations have focused on two pronged approach to managing volunteers - recruit and retain (get them and keep them) . It has become the natural way we speak about volunteering in organisations. However our experience is that a very different model is required, especially in community volunteering settings. In this approach working with volunteers is in part about recognising volunteers are centre to building our communities. We are building community whether it is as a community of care, a community of practice, an organisational community and / or our whole community.

Central to this mindset of community building are the following:

- Regarding volunteers as people who contribute to our work as community members with agency and a sense of being part of this effort.
- Working with rather than managing, which means seeing people as humans rather than human resources.
- Involving volunteers as integral to organisational processes rather than as a consulted or a subsidiary group.
- Valuing process as well as outcomes with a understanding of the power of small informal groups and the relationships they develop.
- Looking within the community for the resources rather than initially seeking external resources. Using strengths based or asset approach in working with people, which recognises that each of us have gifts and talents which can make a contribution



Clunes Volunteering Local

www.volunteeringlocal.org

While there are many elements of effectively working with volunteers in this way, this article focuses on how a series of stages be used to connect and integrate the volunteer into the group or organisation setting and elicit greater autonomy (provide agency) and enable greater participation and impact for those who volunteer. This approach more closely follows the experience of becoming involved in the community.

This model proposes five steps for involving and working with volunteer

1. Create the Space and the Culture for Volunteering
2. Promote Volunteer Opportunities and Connect with Volunteers
3. Engage volunteers in the work and culture of the organisation
4. Build belonging
5. Provide leadership opportunities.

Much of the initial literature about managing volunteers was borrowed from traditional workplace management literature rather than community based practice. This has been exacerbated by a significant focus on the larger volunteer not-for-profit volunteering programs, episodic and corporate volunteering in the research on volunteering.

Mark Creyton



While discussions on how to manage volunteers have become more sophisticated it is still this strong framework that underpins much of the work in the volunteer space. We would hear and see this focus in much of our daily work with different volunteer groups and organisations. The model is further embedded by proposing a very different approach for those who work with volunteers and those who work in community development settings (yet in practice they often share much in common).

This community volunteering model was initially developed by Mark Creyton, through his work with over 10,000 volunteering groups and organisations (as part of his work with Volunteering Qld). He realised that while most people spoke of recruiting and retaining, in practice the most successful programs followed a more community based approach. This was particularly apparent in "all volunteer" and smaller volunteer organisations, community volunteering programs and many regional communities. The model was further confirmed through the Willing and Able project which explored with best strategies for working with volunteers in regional museums and galleries across Queensland. It also found much resonance with youth led groups and organisations in Volunteering Queensland's Youth Leading Youth in 2010. Mark has gone on to work with this model over many years in a variety of settings.

This model has been the basis of the Clunes Volunteering Local project.



THE PROJECT: REBUILDING CLUNES' CAPACITY THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

Clunes in Victoria (Dja Dja Wurrung Country) has a long history of volunteering, leading to social cohesion through volunteering. Prior to the pandemic Clunes had a volunteering rate of 33.2% (well above the state average of 18%). There was a reason for this: volunteering provided three vital pathways that were hard to replicate via other means: including social connection, employment pathways (including confidence, practical and soft skills, and adding to a person's resume) and an active retirement both nearby and close to the population being 50 years or over.

Since the pandemic, volunteering levels have dropped significantly, with 1 in 3 people no longer volunteering.

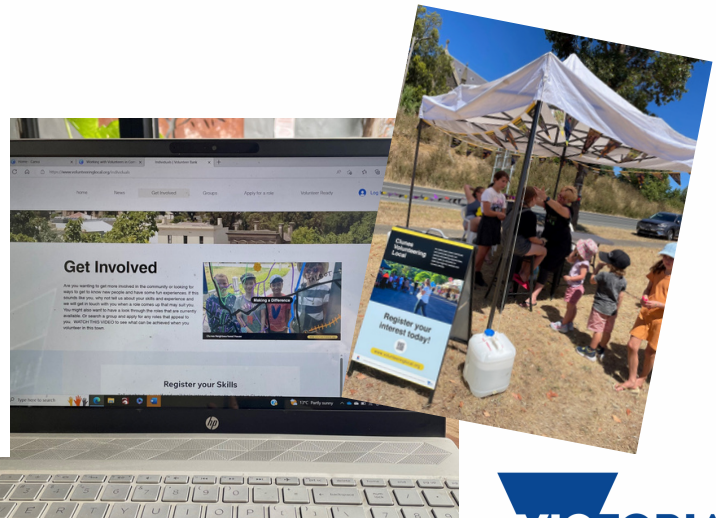
In many communities this drop in volunteering has led to reduced service offerings, community groups having to work really hard with fewer resources, increased mental health risks for people and reduced social cohesion. Clunes experience has been no different: if volunteering isn't reinvigorated in Clunes, our community runs the risk of losing the social capital and cohesion we have worked hard to create, as well as the hard-earned economic growth levels, employability, employment drivers we have created to offset the challenges associated with being a small town.

Fortunately we now have a welcome boost to help us combat these risks.

WWW.VOLUNTEERINGLOCAL.ORG

In August 2022 Clunes was successful in gaining just one of 19 grants awarded to support local planning and innovation projects to engage volunteers, increase the volunteer base, and strengthen volunteering in local communities. Called **Volunteering Local**, this 6-month project is funded by the State Government of Victoria, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. The project takes a uniquely place-based approach to volunteering, focusing on reducing barriers to volunteering in Clunes, working collaboratively to make it easier for people to volunteer and find new ways of volunteering there. It will be showcasing the different contributions volunteers make to our town. In October 2022 this project was further boosted by support from the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal, Strengthening Rural Communities Program.

In Clunes there are more than 40 community and social groups active at different times. Other than groups are completely volunteer-led and informal. This project will start with five of these community organisations: Clunes Youth & Community Association, Clunes Football and Netball Club, Clunes Museum, Clunes and Clunes Neighbourhood House. This diverse group have volunteered opportunities that cater for a different target markets (as representatives of a broad cross-section of our population) and are some of the more family-oriented organisations where people volunteer in town. Working together across the pilot group, our goal is to develop practical and easy-to-use volunteering tools to help recruit and retain volunteers in town, as well as learning and promotional opportunities their staff will be involved in the development of.



A community collaboration funded by the Victorian State Government, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and FRRR. Undertaken in Clunes, Victoria. Dja Dja Wurrung Country.





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iving your time for the common good and without expectation of financial gain is something more than half of Australia's adult population did before COVID-19. Now only 1 in 3 people regularly volunteer. While that statistic sounds dire, the way people volunteer and how their communities connect with them has dramatically changed as well, and this is helping places like Clunes, Victoria reimagine volunteering to rebuild.

“Too often volunteering is seen to be about the work that needs doing,” said Lana de Kort, Manager for Clunes Neighbourhood House (and previously the General Manager, state volunteering peak body, Volunteering Queensland). “But in reality, successful volunteering experiences are about having a profound connection with your community and shared aspirations.”

“That’s where the real power of volunteering lies. Transforming lives in simple or extraordinary ways.”

Reimagining Volunteering

Since COVID changed the way we live our lives, getting involved in your community through volunteering is no longer as straight forward as it once was. With so many people no longer volunteering, communities could be forgiven for surrendering to the downward trend. But in Clunes, this threat to the town’s capacity provided a blue-sky opportunity to reimagine volunteering.

Clunes in Victoria (Dja Dja Wurrung Country) has a long history of building capacity and social cohesion through volunteering. Prior to the pandemic Clunes boasted a volunteering rate of 30.2% (well above the state average of 19%). So perhaps it is no surprise in August 2022 Clunes was selected to receive just one of 19 grants awarded to support local partnership and innovation projects to re-engage volunteers, broaden the volunteer base, and strengthen volunteering in local communities.

Called Volunteering Local, this 6-month project was funded by the State Government of Victoria, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. The project took a uniquely place-based approach to volunteering, focusing on reducing barriers to volunteering in Clunes, working collaboratively to make it easier for people to volunteer and finding new ways of volunteering here, as well as showcasing the different contributions volunteers make to the town.

“In Clunes there were more than 40 community and social groups active at different times,” said Lana de Kort, Manager of Clunes Neighbourhood House who is the lead for this town project, “Many of these groups are completely volunteer-led and involving.”

The Volunteering Local project started with five of these community organisations; Clunes Tourist & Development Association, Clunes Football and Netball Club, Clunes Museum, Creative Clunes and Clunes Neighbourhood House.

“This diverse group had volunteer opportunities that appeal to a different target market (so are representative of a broad cross-section of our population) and are some of the more formally structured organisations where people volunteer in town.”



“Working together with this pilot group, our goal was to develop practical (and easy to use) volunteering tools to help recruit and retain volunteers in town, as well as learning and promotional opportunities that will also be inclusive of the more informal groups,” said Lana.

We built a website (www.volunteeringlocal.org) for all groups to advertise opportunities, providing a single entry point for anyone in town wishing to find a way to connect through volunteering, and we worked with groups to define those roles and promote them.

“This was important foundational work for volunteering in our community, but not the truly important work,” said Lana. “The important work we did focused on people’s experiences and culture.”

The project’s ability to do this was boosted by support from the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal, Strengthening Rural Communities Program, allowing Clunes to add an innovative training and development component to the project, involving Mark Creyton.

“We could see early on, that developing and sharing tools to better promote and manage volunteers wasn’t going to be enough. They were just the scaffolding we needed. Instead we needed to walk our way through the community volunteering model,” said Lana.

“To do this, we had to step outside the recruit/retain mindset and think about the people who might volunteer with our groups, why they’d want to be part of our ‘tribe’, and what their experience would be as we began to work alongside one another.”

In order to do that, we needed to address all of the five steps in the community volunteering model, and in a short timeframe that was a tall ask, but we got started.

Lana de Kort



Lana lives in Clunes, Victoria. She is a wife, mum, farmer, a small business owner and for the past eight years, the manager of the local Neighbourhood House (www.clunesnh.org). Two years ago, she and the CNH committee also launched a social enterprise (www.boomclunes.org) designed to contribute to the health of the local economy and diversify income so that the town could afford to focus on their own needs.

Before moving (back, the country is where she grew up) to Clunes, Lana had worked for more than 20 years in business, management, and community in cities, regional centres and remote areas. This included 10 years as the General Manager, Volunteering Queensland, and a similar stint as the Executive Manager, Australian Institute of Management Qld & NT. Naturally innovative and highly collaborative, Lana’s approach makes real sense at a grassroots level where people want to focus on rolling up their sleeves and getting on with making the change they want to see happen.





Step One

Creating the Space and the Culture for Volunteering

Too often we assume that volunteers will simply fit into our existing groups and organisations. However highest rates of volunteer attrition occur in their first few weeks of volunteering. We need to create the right space with a culture which is open, appropriate and welcoming, a place where volunteer has clarity about the organisation and their role and there is scope for agency and personal development (alongside support).

A central challenge is how create more inclusive volunteer programs and ensure all community members have equal access and are encouraged to volunteer. We have found that a simple set of questions can assist the organisations better understand themselves and how they best address their volunteer involvement. (An initial version of these questions was developed through the Willing and Able program).

1. The Why

- Why do we want volunteers to work in this group/organisation?
- How would we like to work with our volunteers?
- What does the organisation offer volunteers?
- Who currently volunteers, and who might volunteer in our community?
- What would happen if volunteers were not involved?

2. The Culture.

- What the attitudes, beliefs, and traditions are fundamental to whom we are as a group/organisation?
- What is our way of working - e.g. formal, informal or chaotic?
- What impression and impact will our current staff and culture have on new volunteers?
- How open are we to new people, different people, and changes in how we work?
- What are our attitudes and beliefs regarding the idea of volunteering?

3. Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships

- How is the work of the organisation structured and allocated?
- How formal are the roles, lines of responsibility and job descriptions? How do we see each other in the organisation, e.g. workers, colleagues, neighbours, friends, comrades? Is this across the organisation, between different groups of people?
- Where are the areas of potential conflicts?
- What current relationships exist, and how inclusive are they?

4. Resources For Community Involvement In Your Program

- What resources (physical, financial and human) will we need within our organisation to sustain a healthy volunteer program?
- Are we able to get ongoing funding to continue the program?
- Have we identified leaders with adequate time to coordinate and support volunteers?



5. Barriers To Community Involvement

- What obstacles might volunteers face that might prevent them from joining or working within our organisation?
- If you have attempted to develop a volunteer program before and it has not been successful, why has this been so?
- Why do some people not volunteer with us, and how can we address these barriers?



Each year this volunteer-led organisation, supported by 1.5 parttime staff and a volunteer 'Volunteer Co-ordinator', holds the Clunes Booktown Festival. Internationally recognised, this festival was launched more than a decade ago to stimulate tourism and the local economy. In 2023 the two-day festival involved more than 70 book traders, author events, panels, book signings and entertainment. It's a major undertaking and volunteers play a big part in not only planning the festival, but also setting up for it and hosting it over the weekend it's held.

The pandemic hit Booktown (like all big public events) hard. Typically reliant on past volunteers returning each year, the impact of the COVID years was telling and the number of volunteers had dropped. Those who were still involved, many who'd been there since it was founded, were less able to do the heavy lifting (literally) and new volunteers needed to be attracted.

"Participating in the Volunteering Local project made us really think about why volunteers might want to be involved with us," said Sue Beal, CEO of Creative Clunes Inc, "About their motivations and how we could fulfil those while still achieving the 'tasks' we needed to perform to run the festival."

In just 6 months, Creative Clunes used the simple questions in Step one of the Community Volunteering model to guide how they talked about volunteering, the culture they sought to nurture, the roles they developed and implemented, and the resources they developed.

"I think the biggest shift for us was in the language we used, working with volunteers to work out how we'd tackle tasks rather than just directing," said Sue, "This shift resulted in other changes too, including better resources to maintain a healthy volunteer program, and the introduction of more feedback sessions, involving our volunteer board, with all those involved in the festival."

"It feels like this journey has only just started. There is so much to accomplish but this year we were able to put our best foot forward and create solid foundations to build on." Creative Clunes attracted 154 volunteers, including a team of 94 student volunteers, to their festival in 2023. This included returning volunteers, new locals who signed up to volunteer as a result of a Volunteering Local pop-up shop, and enquiries from the Volunteering Local website (promoted through media and billboards around town).





Step Two

Promote Volunteer Opportunities and Connect with Volunteers

Promotion and initial involvement of volunteers is often the greatest challenge groups face. There are many approaches to getting the message out about volunteer opportunities, yet there are no magic solutions. Consider how do people become involved in community - to improve the lives of themselves and those they care for, for a greater sense of connection and belonging, through an invitation, to better understand their community and what it offers, for friendship or to assist a future pathway to work or retirement.

Some other things to consider in the current climate are:

- Consider what unique opportunities and benefits the group offers; too often, the message to volunteers is a generic 'we need volunteers'. Think outside the recruiting box.
- While many people want to make a difference and help in their community, they are also looking for the different experiences that volunteering offers.
- Consider how to include a variety of technologies in spreading the message, but remember that one of the most potent sources of volunteers is word of mouth.
- Keep it personal - put "people work" before "paperwork".
- Remember those with limited time or who can only volunteer for a specific event. Episodic volunteers can contribute significantly and often return again and again, if they have good experiences, and promote their work to others.
- Events can be a good method of engaging with many community members and demonstrating the value of the work and its opportunities.



“Clunes Museum has a traditional approach to volunteering”, said Sue Gubby, President of the Clunes Museum during the project. “We have a small, stable group of volunteers with clearly articulated role descriptions. We’ve worked hard to make sure they have what they need to do their job and have the relationships we’ve built to support the team.”

The Museum is an all volunteer organisation operating out of a Council facility. The culture of the museum is influenced by this co-location and the volunteer management structure that the Hepburn Shire Council overlay to support their activities. During the 6 month project the number of volunteers recruited and retained didn’t necessarily change, but awareness of us did.

“Promoting ourselves is not something we’ve done thoughtfully in the past. But the Volunteering Local project made us think about who we are, and how we want to promote our activities, particularly online,” said Sue, “We tweaked our volunteer information packs, our website and social media.

“Better yet, we popped that sandwich board out onto the street, highlighting that people can volunteer with us. It seems a simple thing, but it makes people think about how the museum operates and that they can get involved too.”



Step Three

Engage Volunteers in the Work and Culture of the Organisation

The highest rate in attrition for volunteers occurs during their first few weeks in a new group or organisation. While some of this can be attributed to a mismatch between volunteer and group expectations, often it is due to feeling not being welcome or not understanding what is required.

Engagement means involving the volunteer meaningfully and building sense of connection. This requires a deliberate and considered effort. We need to find ways to involve a new volunteer in our group from understanding the work to connecting with other volunteers and understanding the culture.

Some further things to consider in the current climate are :

- The first experience of volunteering is critical. Making the first experience a positive one means actively shape those first experiences, having someone accompany the new volunteer and include them in the group and answer all those questions.
- Providing experienced buddies to new volunteers can be a powerful strategy to engage them deeply. If you choose the right buddy.
- From early involvement create small opportunities which match the volunteers interest and skills. Try to ensure the volunteer has a chance to participate in the whole undertaking and not just a small segment of it.
- Ensure there is clarity about the work and how the organisation works. Ensure our structures, policy and procedures encourage initiative, while ensuring boundaries are clear.
- “Scaffold” and support new volunteers, with the aim of gradually engaging them deeply in the work of the organisation and having a chance for impact and agency. With careful consideration even a few hours a week can be a fully engaging and rewarding experience.



Clunes Neighbourhood House turned 40 years old during COVID. Part of a network of more than 400 neighbourhood houses in Victoria, this small community-led organisation has a history of punching above its weight thanks to the contribution of volunteers. At heart, its success in engaging volunteers lies in the work and culture of the organisation. It doesn't happen by chance. Clunes Neighbourhood House has a clear strategic direction that cascades down throughout all levels of its organisation, and back up again.

“Ensuring a volunteer’s first experience is positive has been vitally important for us,” said Peter Chandler, President, “Throughout the project we kept refining this. We moved beyond an induction process designed to ensure compliance, to working out how to make sure that the volunteer’s experience resonated at each point. That they felt welcome. That they knew who to go to if they needed anything. That they felt a part of something and didn’t operate alone.”

“Linking new volunteers to experienced buddies was a great ice-breaker. Providing we picked the right buddy, because everyone is different, it’s helped people feel welcome and connected. It’s also made what we do more sustainable, spreading leadership across all levels.”

Clunes Neighbourhood House is a growing organisation. During COVID it launched a social enterprise start-up designed to help contribute to the local economy, help the organisation diversify its revenue streams and gain new skills. Involving volunteers in the work of operating the house and the enterprise means Clunes Neighbourhood House has far greater capacity than our 1.8 FTE covers.

“In fact, in 2022 as a result of the contribution of volunteers we delivered nearly three times the value (at \$956,086) compared to our revenue.”



Step Four

Build Belonging

Belonging is the glue of community and engagement, when someone feels they are not simply fulfilling a role, but are part of a community who are making a difference. It is when you hear the volunteer talking about we. It is when someone's sense of identity includes their volunteer involvement and there is an aligning of personal with the group goals in some way.

Belonging can be as simple as hanging out with people and feeling a part. Groups that really work at this tend to value individual uniqueness while building shared connection. Each person in the group feels they are valued for something special about them while there is a strong sense of group cohesiveness and shared goals.

A sense of a belonging develops naturally when volunteers are engaged in groups with a genuine sense of purpose making an impact, working through challenges together and through developing friendships within the group. It can be heightened by memorable experiences, learning the impact of one's work, the telling of group stories and group.

Some further things to consider in the current climate are:

- Build shared experiences through opportunities to work together, to have social times together e.g. excursions to other groups, Xmas functions etc.
- Connect volunteers with group leaders, influential supporters, and key celebrations or working together days.
- Working on projects together can offer unique experiences and build belong. Look for ways to involve volunteers in a key aspect of a project. Allow them to see the project through from start to finish. Put people into teams working on larger projects. Incorporate "fun" into the hard work of large initiatives
- Look for ways to tell stories rather than simply provide facts or what happened. Share your organization's stories, history and stories of success, in a way that gives your volunteers of feeling part of a the group. Provide the stories through a variety of medium - face to face, one on one, through social media and so on.
- Know your volunteers' interests, passions, reasons for becoming involved, their own particular projects and seek to align opportunities that may be of special interest.
- Take lots of photos and short videos and post regularly. Some groups produce short books of photos at the end of the year for volunteers to take away. The group photographer might be a new role for a volunteer.



A country club that's faced its own challenges (including flooded facilities) over the decades, this motivated club embraced the Volunteering Local project with both hands.

"The Community Volunteering Model made sense to us. We are a family club and we know that if we want to attract families to our club, as players and volunteers, we need that culture to be front and centre in all we do," said Kath Milne, Committee member and long-time club member.

"The project gave us the kick we needed to keep remembering that every time we do something – whether it's sending out a social media post or saying hi on training night – it helps people feel like they belong," said Kath.

Before the project started we knew we felt under the pump. COVID hadn't been kind and our existing volunteers were carrying a heavy load. Sitting down to think about all the jobs we do on a game day was eye opening, but by working with our club members and sharing with them what we were doing, they felt a sense of belonging and increasingly, were willing to help.

"It's been encouraging seeing the billboards around town promoting volunteering and we've loved being part of the events held in town to showcase volunteer groups like ours. This has added to our sense of pride as a club and profile."

"In country towns I think that people tend to approach you direct, rather than via a website, if they are going to volunteer – and certainly that has been our experience. The profile of the club has been raised as a result of being involved, but it's been the change to work on building belonging that has been the big take out for us," Said Kath.





Step Five

Provide Leadership Opportunities

For many smaller organisations and groups, the great challenge is succession planning. We need to create pathways and opportunities for current and new volunteers to build their ability and comfort to take leadership, if we are to address this issue. While there are a few people who willing step up into leadership roles, we can engage far more through actively facilitating and support this.

Initial steps may include

- Providing ways in which volunteers have a voice and input into decision-making.
- Making our decision processes transparent and working with volunteers to understand the way the group works through these processes.
- Seeing volunteer roles not as fixed and static, but rather as opportunities for further development.
- Working with volunteers to move from a situation in which their activities are supported and managed to one where they have far greater autonomy and decision making capability.
- Nurturing of those who seek more greater involvement.
- Providing opportunities for shadowing

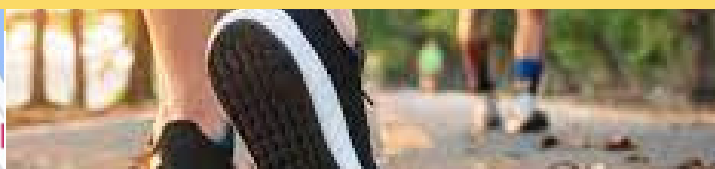


Celebrating its 50th year, the Clunes Tourist and Development Association changed during COVID as business and tourism was hit hard. Knowing what role the community organisation had in this living with COVID environment was tricky and in many ways, the group was going through a real reformation when this project started.

“The foundational elements of breaking down what volunteer roles we had and how we, as volunteers, would work together to achieve the aims of the group took up a lot of our time. But the process of understanding this also informed our thinking about leadership and succession,” said Dorothy Russell, President and local business owner.

“Ensuring due process and developing practices that enabled every volunteer to have a voice in decision making has led to people feeling like they have greater autonomy and involvement,” said Dorothy, “This has led to improvements in what we do and also new ideas – like a monthly dance at our Town Hall.”

“Providing opportunities for volunteers to shadow others has proven valuable. When our newsletter team resigned, we advertised for a Newsletter Editor and listed the role description on www.volunteeringlocal.org. When someone put up their hand we made sure they had a chance to shadow the outgoing team over several months until they were ready to operate on their own. It’s proved to be a much more constructive and supportive approach that just handing someone the task without support!”



Clunes Volunteering Local

www.volunteeringlocal.org

What we learnt?

Often the tagline 'Get involved' accompanies a call for volunteers. What we learnt through this project is that in community settings, the likelihood of getting involved is not predicted on fancy recruitment platforms or volunteer management practices that mirror employment processes. It's about much more than that.

Too often the pressures of needing to get on with the job – having a score keeper for every game, putting up a marquee at an event, producing a newsletter, archiving a historic artifact or delivering a meal to someone who needs it - take precedence to thinking about what we stand for, how that's reflected in all we do, and most importantly, the part volunteers play in that.

If you map what it means to work with volunteers in a community setting, the headings on the graph wouldn't say recruitment and retention. They'd say connection through to leadership.

Why? Because if we want to achieve our objectives we need to attract people to our groups that ultimately feel part of our tribe. Unpacking is complicated, and frankly, a long game.

Finding your tribe doesn't mean people who are a mirror image. In fact, the more inclusive we are, the more appeal we have because people see differences reflected – and embraced – in that mirror. Finding your tribe also doesn't mean following the leader (or the volunteer management practices that shape how you work in your group). Instead, it means working together and perhaps changing those practices so that you end up with leaders at all levels, and a more sustainable future as a result.

COVID hit volunteering hard. Now we are living with COVID we are dealing with the repercussions of that and all of us are realising it is not just a matter of snapping back. In fact, many of us are beginning to understand that one of the reasons why it is hard to find our feet once again is because people don't want to go back to that old 'normal' – including volunteers. So let's give ourselves permission to reimagine what volunteering would look - and feel- like if we had the space, time, knowledge and tools to reinvent it.



Clunes
Volunteering
Local

An online bank where individuals and community groups can access volunteering opportunities, share skills (or advertise for skills that might be needed) and connect directly.

Register your
skills today!



www.volunteeringlocal.org

Interested to hear more about:

Five Step Community Volunteering Model – visit www.volunteeringlocal.org

The Volunteering Local learning journey – visit www.volunteeringlocal.org

Project lead: www.clunesnh.org

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