

The volunteer debate

Ken Langford responds to the discussion of volunteering in the November edition of *The Leisure Review* and takes issue with a number of the points made during the debate.

I was interested in the discussion voiced in the last edition of *The Leisure Review* related to the issues surrounding the government's comprehensive spending review. The panel of Steve Boocock, Alice Meason and Richard Ward, effectively chaired by Mick Owen, raised interesting points, although the suggestion that Manchester United started as a church club suggested a lack of accurate research which seemed to permeate the discussion with off the cuff unsubstantiated remarks being the norm. Manchester United FC actually started as Newton Heath Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway (LYR) FC. It was Manchester City FC that started at St Marks Church, West Gorton, Manchester in 1880!

Richard Ward advocates first finding a fanatic, his three Fs, "the nutter who is going to take it on", it being a sport development programme. He states further that there is nothing wrong when a 'fanatic' – his words – comes along and starts a club which grows for five or six years and then fades away. Well, I think he is wrong. The enthusiast, the dynamic motivator or Mr Totally Dependable is often saddled with the greatest workload in the club; which is acceptable while the enthusiasm is there. Unfortunately, people's circumstances change, the available time is no longer there. 'Anno domini' cannot be ignored. He feels used or 'put on' and, if he loses overall control, a decision goes against him or he feels he is taken for granted, he packs it all in. I recognise this scenario but it does not have to be this way.

I moved to Staffordshire in 1972 from Leeds and decided to start the Stafford and Stone Canoe Club. Previous experience of canoe clubs were, firstly, Manchester where the hon sec was routinely re-elected for years until there were no other suitable candidates who had their finger on the pulse to the extent that he did, or the range of experience and number of contacts that he did. At one time 80 to 100% of the British Canoe slalom teams were members of Manchester Canoe Club. When he finally stepped down, the fortunes of the club changed (there were many other reasons of which this was only one, but a very significant one) and the power base changed. Leeds Canoe Club was my second club because I moved to Yorkshire with my teaching job. Here too the secretary made a massive contribution to the club at local and national level but became indispensable and too hard an act to follow when he finally stepped down. When the club was formed in Staffordshire, the most important thing was to develop a structure in which no individual was so important that they could not be replaced. A club structure was established that actively brought new people in to serve on the committees. The system still operates and the club that started in 1973 has been the top slalom club in Great Britain for well over twenty years with links to local schools providing the 'new blood' and a structure that takes paddlers up to and including Olympic level. Where is the evidence? The club has won the national inter-clubs championships (in which competitors from all divisions from novice to premier and all classes – K1, C1, C2 and ladies – compete for points) in 20 out of the last 25 years. I think this means we must be doing something right. For my part, I served ten years as chairman, several more years as president and am now on the 'back benches' as a life member.

There is no place for the fanatic in a successful venture because the next step is a dictatorship; and dictators do not last long and often do a great deal of damage. Steve Boocock almost recognises this when he says that "though you've got bods who have been there for years, the fact that they've been there for years is inhibiting any growth or development". Yet such a comment is largely defeatist. If someone is involved in an

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organisation for 'years', is there no evaluation of their effectiveness? More significantly, do they have roles, goals, targets, etc? I suspect that the people to whom Steve refers just have a title and a nebulous role because nobody has challenged their effectiveness – because no-one knows what the role is! We moved some time ago from where clubs were simply child minders or providers of fun experiences. Even professional child minders are subject to OFSTED inspections to see that they are meeting the five aims outlined in the Every Child Matters: Change for Children agenda. Even when working with adults the same principles should apply. Outcomes should be as important in sport as they are in learning to play the piano. Competition is the option not the norm. The third aim of Every Child Matters states “enjoy AND achieve”, which implies that having fun is only the method by which people improve. It is not an aim in itself.

I now come to the assertion, by Richard, that “a professional coach will deliver better paddlers”. I will give him the benefit of the doubt and assume he is talking about a professional attitude rather than being paid. I have been involved as an international and Olympic slalom canoe coach for more than thirty years without payment, as is true of most coaches in amateur sport. Moreover, I have been successful in helping produce several world champions. If he is saying that paid coaches deliver better results, I would challenge him to show the relationship between payment and success.

Finally, I come to the assertion, by Richard, that “tension (exists) where the volunteer butts up against the professional. Part of the problem is... volunteers involved in volunteer management.” The truth is, it should not, but it does. Where there are tensions, the main cause is usually that which I mentioned earlier. People volunteer as a gesture to help or else they are press-ganged because they were in the wrong place when the vacancy arose, ie close enough to be nominated. In many cases the individual does not know the parameters of their role. They are given a title of 'committee member' or 'safety officer' or some such title. If the volunteer is dealt with in a professional way (even by a volunteer), the skills attributes of the individual would be determined and matched to a clear set of roles and responsibilities that need to be performed and targets against which outcomes can be measured. This should be true in any organisation that has a 'professional' attitude. However, in the case of voluntary help, it is also necessary to ascertain how much time is available and when. Seldom does a volunteer have unlimited time. Therefore, it is much more difficult to allocate individuals to titled positions (secretary, club house officer) without part of their assumed duties going unfulfilled. More seriously, the individuals themselves and others in the organisation may not be aware that certain important jobs have not been done. Thus tension is created and blame is allocated.

So where do we go from here in dealing with volunteers with a minimum of tension? Perhaps it is too easy to suggest a set of easy steps but I do so anyway:

- determine the aims for the organisation
- translate these into goals that meet the specific criteria of specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-constrained (SMART)
- list ALL the tasks that need to be completed to achieve these goals
- get the volunteers and match their qualities and abilities to the tasks
- allocate the tasks to individuals (giving consideration to available time)
- give titles to significant individuals (as points of contact)
- check that tasks are all covered and avoid unnecessary duplication.

Of course, this is totally unrealistic because we are not starting with a blank sheet of paper. Yet, as organisations that rely substantially on voluntary

help, we cannot ignore the checklist.

Ken Langford is a former teacher and lecturer who taught in further education for almost 30 years and in schools for a further five. He is a former British champion and was an international slalom canoeist for 12 years, competing in six world championships . He has coached at international level for over 30 years and now works part-time for ScUK lecturing in child protection, equity, disability and psychology. He still lives in Staffordshire.

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