

Paper Presentation

Topic: Innovations and Good Practices in Volunteering

Participatory Culture, Volunteerism and Social Work Organization

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Participatory Culture, Volunteerism and Social Work Organization

Participatory Culture, Volunteerism and Social Work Organization is a most unique programme that has been organized by St. James Settlement, Hong Kong, since 2002. It aims to encourage the innovations of all types of workers in different social work settings, and also to develop the talents and potentials of volunteers. To appreciate the creative role of workers in organizing voluntary activities, outstanding workers are presented awards that recognize their remarkable contributions to the organization and the wider community. In a word, this programme emphasizes the participatory role of both workers and volunteers in creating a supportive, innovative and rewarding culture in social work organizations.

Initiated by the senior management of St. James Settlement, *Participatory Culture, Volunteerism and Social Work Organization* has made valuable contributions to the organization that aims to enhance the participatory role of both workers and volunteers in delivering voluntary services to the community. First of all, all staffs as well as volunteers would be able to develop a great sense of belonging to the organization. While outstanding workers are presented the awards they deserve in ceremony, they find that their efforts are publicly recognized. They also strongly feel that they are duly respected by the organization. As the staffs who participate in the programme play a crucial role in maintaining, developing and inspiring projects that promote the participation of volunteers in community, it is very important that all of them have a positive mind and attitude. The programme can be considered as a process of education that positively rewards and recognizes their great effort.

Secondly, what is also important is that other staffs of the organization have also benefited from the programme. After those outstanding workers are rewarded, their innovative ideas are also promoted to all staffs of the organization. It aims to let other staffs learn from them, so that they can also improve themselves and integrate into the existing programmes that promote innovative voluntary activities. It is also a good opportunity that encourages informal exchanges among workers with a view to integrating different

approaches in leading and organizing voluntary programmes and activities. It is an informal way to encourage all staffs to try their best to improve the existing services and also to maintain best voluntary services to the community.

Preparation

To prepare and promote *Participatory Culture, Volunteerism and Social Work Organization*, a working group *Volunteers Co-operation Committee* has been formed. It involves colleagues from several fields of work, such as elderly service, youth service, community service, family service and so forth. The backgrounds of these representatives can provide a wide range of valuable suggestions. In the meantime, they are also our ambassadors, helping us to promote our ideas and programmes in their own departments.

To begin with, all working members set different categories of awards for outstanding workers and programmes. We have finally named three main awards. The first one is 'The Outstanding Volunteers' Programme Award'. It emphasizes that the awarded worker should possess practical skills to facilitate the participation of volunteers, so that they can be empowered to become more independent. The second one is 'The Most Creative Volunteers' Programme Award'. The aim of it is to encourage colleagues to use innovative ideas to develop voluntary programmes, so that the client can benefit from them. The third one is 'The Best Promotion Volunteers' Programme Award'. It intends to encourage our colleagues to use better promotion strategies to attract the attention of the public and in the meantime to positively construct the image of voluntary services.

The Committee has invited colleagues who have lot of experiences leading and handling voluntary service to provide training workshops. Other colleagues could learn basic knowledge, social work principles and even group work approach in organizing volunteers. They are also shared some practical difficulties in handling volunteers. In the meantime, the experienced colleagues also become personal consultants of other colleagues. Although they have learnt some knowledge from the workshops, it is understood that they might still face a lot of problems in practice. The experienced colleagues are their mentors who can provide suitable advises. In this light, a positive learning circle is created in our organization.

To enhance the participation of all workers in the programme, the working group also invited non-professional workers (e.g., clerical workers), most of whom have no experience whatsoever of directly working with volunteers, to play a leading role in facilitating voluntary activities. The main thrust of the idea was not only to encourage professional workers to take part in voluntary services, but also to facilitate non-professional colleagues to organize some voluntary programmes or services. In order to enhance non-professional

colleagues' skills in organizing and leading voluntary programmes, the Committee has organized a training course and some training workshops for them. They aim to teach them how to lead volunteers, how to maintain a good relationship with them and also how to handle some difficult volunteers. After the training course, the participants have actually expressed that they have successfully transformed the newly learnt skills to their daily work.

Besides recruiting non-professional colleagues to taking part in the programme, we have also promoted the programme to the middle management. It is understood that their participation would create a supportive environment in and through which all participants can really put into practice the ideas of this programme. To encourage their support, we have created a new award called 'The Most Supportive Management Award'. Actually, the leadership style of the middle management has significant influence on the colleagues' willingness in participating in voluntary services. If the management team can understand and support their colleagues to use a new approach in leading voluntary services, the participating colleagues can have more room to develop a wider network of volunteers.

The Awarded Programmes

To recognize the innovations of these activities and programmes, the Committee invited all colleagues to nominate some most outstanding programmes and activities for awards. It has consequently created a very supportive culture in our organization, in which each worker and volunteer can appreciate the innovations of one another. It also helps to promote and establish a distinct culture of volunteerism.

To encourage our colleagues to use new ideas, concepts and approaches in organizing voluntary activities, 'The Outstanding Volunteers' Programme Award' was presented to the worker who has led a group of female woman volunteers. It is commonly known that Chinese society is patriarchal. Men have formal and ultimate power in society. While men work in the public domain, women tend to be housewives in the private domain primarily responsible for childcare, food processing, cloth processing and other necessary housework. It is still very difficult for women to become active volunteers. Under these circumstances, the worker has planned a new voluntary programme for the female volunteers to participate. It is to inspire their talents, help them to become independent and ultimately empower themselves in the society. Soup delivering service has been launched. Its target is the lonely elderly living in central and western district. The volunteers are responsible for designing soup menu, buying suitable ingredients, delivering soups, and visiting and even taking care of the elderly. They have then played a leading part in delivering the services. As a result, the female volunteers can completely make use of their ability and strengths in providing better services to those who need special help and care.

The other award was the ‘The Most Creative Volunteers’ Programme Award’. *Playback Theatre* is widely regarded as the most creative programme. It recruits the elderly to use live theatre as a public forum to articulate the needs of the elderly in different neighbourhoods. As far as we know, it is an innovative program that has not been organized in any elderly centres in the territory. According to our experiences, the elderly are not used to expressing their special feelings towards their family and friends. In the meantime, most of them are very shy and do not know how to express their feelings properly. Through Playback Theatre, a group of elderly volunteers is trained to use live theatre performance to help other elderly to express their feelings. To begin with, the trained elderly volunteers would start by inviting the elderly audience to present their stories on a special event or topic, such as the death of one of their family members. The volunteers immediately capture their feelings and then perform a short drama to reflect their feelings. The strength of this programme is that the participating elderly would become more sensitive and expressive about their feelings. For those elderly volunteers who act in the theatre, they would also experience a process of self-treatment. Through participating in the performance, the elderly have learnt how to face problems, express themselves in public, and most important of all develop a positive attitude towards their lives.

Youth Daily is another programmes presented ‘The Most Creative Volunteers’ Programme Award’. The programme has been introduced by a non-professional colleague. The colleague shared that she always had difficulty leading young volunteers to form a group responsible for publishing a newspaper. Not only that she did not possess the necessary professional skills in leading the group, but also that she always had problems facilitating the volunteers to decide the style of the newspaper and the types of topic suitable for coverage. She sought further advice from her senior. She finally found out that the main idea of leading volunteers is to inspire them to have more creative ideas, instead of teaching them what to do. The paper was finally published. It has offered the teenagers an unprecedented opportunity to publish their own daily newspaper for the young people. From their point of view, it is a public sphere in and through which they can express their concerns over particular social issues. It was such a successful experience for them to learn how they should start a piece of work independently and work with others in a co-operative manner.

‘The Most Supportive Management Award’ is presented to the supervisors who devotedly initiate and assist his/her colleagues to organize unique voluntary programmes and activities. This award is given to a supervisor of a kindergarten school. She is very supportive in facilitating her colleagues to work with volunteers. For example, she would nominate a lot of active volunteers and then invite and encourage her colleagues to work with them. The special thing is that we always take for granted that a kindergarten school is

not supposed to be a place that requires volunteers in their daily work. It is because people tend to associate volunteers with social work services. As a result of the effort of the supervisor, her colleagues have started to work with volunteers. In doing so, she has actually changed her colleagues' misconception regarding the role of volunteers. They have learnt that they actually do not need to use much time to monitor their work. When the supervisor supports his/her colleagues to work with volunteers, they would become more confident in working with them. Although they may encounter some problems managing the volunteers, the supervisor would be very willing to spend time discussing with them and sorting things out.

The awarded colleagues would even share with the members of his/her voluntary groups. It would be a good way to let the volunteers share the happiness with the workers. They would feel that he/she is an important volunteer in the group. It is a good opportunity for them to build up positive team spirit.

Evaluation

To evaluate *Participatory Culture, Volunteerism and Social Work Organization*, the *Volunteer Co-operation Committee* has organized a meeting to discuss the outcome of this programme. Besides, the Committee has also conducted a survey to collect the colleagues' ideas and suggestions on this programme.

According to our survey, many of our colleagues strongly believe that *Participatory Culture, Volunteerism and Social Work Organization* has been a great success. It emphasizes the participation and innovations of all workers, promotes the central role of volunteers in society, develops their potential and creativity in serving the organization and the wider community, and most important of all gradually cultivates a positive culture of volunteers participation in different social work settings.

Despite the success, there is still room for improvements. Some colleagues have suggested that it would be very helpful if the Committee can publish a book to incorporate the experiences of organizing and leading volunteers programmes. It should include proposals, working approaches, session plans, and the pros and cons of a particular working method. This useful knowledge should be also accessible to other social work practitioners in other agencies, promoting a culture of sharing among workers of different backgrounds. Besides, the Committee has also learnt that a lot of colleagues have not joined the program. Some of them have indicated that it is difficult to recruit and maintain new volunteers in their departments. It is also suggested that more training and supervision on working with volunteers are required and that a complete list of active volunteers should be provided for those colleagues who are interested in working with them. The Committee is now exploring

the possibility of offering more resources for our colleagues to organize voluntary programmes. In the future, the Committee will take initiative to build up a wider network of volunteers. It is hoped that our colleagues can find suitable volunteers more conveniently and effectively, and our volunteers are able to work in a suitable department, where he/she can find excitement, enjoyment and satisfaction.

According to our survey, many colleagues would like to know how to practically integrate the awarded program into their daily work. While the awarded program may be a great success in one department, it may not be the case in other departmental contexts. Some colleagues suggest that if there is a trial period for them to try the successful programmes, they may be able to develop their approach in building up their own volunteer services in the long run. On the other hand, the difficulty in management has been widely discussed. Our colleagues reflect that it is more important to help them to solve the management problem. It involves managing the conflicts between volunteer, training volunteers and keeping a large amount of records. If colleagues have no experience handling the management involved, the programme might result in chaos. Therefore, they urge the Committee to help them to practise the management of volunteers.

In the future

The attitude of the management is always crucial. If the management can be more supportive, our colleagues would be able to be more innovative in introducing new voluntary projects and activities. Through incorporating volunteers in our daily work, it is hoped that our volunteers can empower themselves in the process of serving other people voluntarily.