

Introduction to Advanced Volunteer Management

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The following article was first published as a Hot Topic on the OzVPM website during March 2005

Later this month, I'll be involved in co-hosting the first ever 'Australian Retreat for Advanced Volunteer Management'. It promises to be three days of thought provoking dialogue with volunteer managers who consider themselves as being at a point in their professional development, where they are past the 'basics' of their craft - and who want to be challenged at a whole new level.

As a Faculty member with the 'Institute of Advanced Volunteer Management'ⁱ (IAVM), a three day residential conference, held in the United Kingdom each year, my appetite for providing advanced level volunteer management training has already been well and truly ignited and the opportunity to share with volunteer program managers (VPM's) in the Australasian region, through the retreat experience, is indeed an exciting prospect.

However, my involvement with both the retreat and the Institute have led me to ask myself (and others) just what it is we mean when we refer to '*advanced*' volunteer management?

- Does it mean that we have a few years on the job under our belt and a diploma hanging on our wall?
- Is it something for which you automatically qualify once you reach some unspoken but predetermined length of service?
- In Australia it is possible to study for a 'Diploma of Advanced Volunteer Management' – so is it something you can learn?
- Can you only 'get it' by managing large scale volunteer programs with many hundreds of team members?
- Do you need to have managed volunteers at all in order to be considered to have an advanced level of understanding in our field?
- Where does 'basic' end and 'advanced' begin? Indeed, is there an intermediate stage and what the heck does *that* look like?

The usual response I receive when I ask the question, '*so what is advanced?*' commonly revolves around two concepts and two concepts only – longevity and program size. Occasionally I'll hear comments about qualifications and the need to be educated more formally in the field, but as a general rule the feedback I receive suggests that a person working at an advanced level is simply someone who has managed large scale volunteer programs over a protracted period of time. While both of these are indeed important characteristics, neither of these qualities alone, in my opinion, are enough to justify a status considered to be advanced.

So just what are the characteristics we might look for?

Below I have listed what I believe to be the ten key attributes that a VPM should be able to demonstrate in order to be considered as operating at an *advanced* level, along with a brief discussion about each.

Quality # 1 – Previous Experience

Having previously managed volunteer programs would seem an automatic prerequisite to the development of an advanced level understanding in the field of volunteer management – and indeed, there is no doubt that having had a direct exposure to managing volunteer resources in a ‘hands on’ capacity certainly helps to put theory into practice.

But just how important is it to have held a volunteer leadership position or more importantly, *‘Do you need to have managed a volunteer program at all in order to gain an advanced level understanding of volunteer program management?’*

Now I am sure many of you are sitting there nodding and thinking *‘...but of course you do!’* however, the question may not be as straight forward as it may first seem. To date I have framed this article specifically around determining the operational level of volunteer managers themselves - and I’ll continue to make that the focus for the remainder of this essay.

However it is necessary to digress at this point and ask the question posed above without volunteer managers being our sole point of reference. So let me ask it again. *Can someone who has never managed a volunteer program operate at an advanced level of understanding in our field?*

Well yes of course they can!

Consider trainers who teach ‘advanced level’ volunteer management diplomas, academics who research volunteer management practices or consultants who have dedicated their lives to furthering volunteerism, but who may have never managed a volunteer program in their lives. What of doctoral students who may have just completed a thesis on the subject? Let’s face it, many of these very people mentioned are the ones who have educated and assisted *you* to get to where you are today!

The first thing that this understanding does is destroy the theory that being *advanced* is all about having operated in the field for a long time in a ‘hands on’ capacity, and from that point of view, previous experience is only useful to a certain degree in determining whether or not a volunteer program manager is advanced.

The second realisation it brings home for me, is a reminder of just how broad the volunteerism movement really is, and the need for us to be able to embrace trainers, consultants, researchers and academics as a part of the broader ‘whole’, rather than seeing ourselves, as practitioners, as being somehow a separate category.

But for now, let’s agree that for the remainder of this article that we are talking specifically about VPM’s and what makes them *advanced*.

Quality # 2 – Longevity

Like previous experience, longevity in our field can be a great indicator of a VPM's level of operation. It can also be tremendously unreliable, especially when taken as the sole measurement, in isolation from other factors. I am sure most of us can think readily of examples where a relatively new VPM has joined your local volunteer management network, and who in no time, is running rings around many of those who have been sitting around the table for a much longer period.

What longevity in our profession does do, is offer VPM's a greater opportunity to experience a broader range of situations, people and problems which in turn (hopefully) shape their understanding of the nuances associated with successful volunteer resource management. After all, it is through problem solving and being exposed to a variety of situations that we often do our best learning and undertake our quickest professional growth!

Quality # 3 – Program Size

While many people will swear black and blue that size *does* matter –I am not convinced that bigger is necessarily best!

Like longevity, managing large scale volunteer programs does offer VPM's the opportunity, by sheer weight of numbers, to be exposed to a greater range of people and situations than someone operating a much smaller program. It also offers logistical circumstances that can only be found in large scale programs such as operating across multiple sites.

However, the opposite is also true, as programs with fewer workers also have peculiarities, strengths and benefits only found in smaller programs. Consider too that many small programs often deal with specialised causes which often come with their own sets of unique support needs. For example, how can anyone suggest you gain more advanced level skills through managing 500 hospital based volunteers as opposed to leading a team of 25 volunteers working in a hospice setting or battered women's shelter?

So managing *only* large scale programs is not necessarily a good indicator of having developed cutting edge skills and knowledge. Having a broad range of experiences is what counts, and the opportunity to have managed a variety of programs of different sizes – in a range of settings, would provide the best grounding for the development of advanced level practices.

Quality # 4 – Professional Development & Education

I'm a strong advocate for new VPM's getting involved in both formal and informal volunteer management training and educational opportunities, as I believe it is here you can quickly and easily gain a grounding in the basic skills and philosophies behind operating as a successful leader of volunteer resources. However I don't for one minute believe that earning a Certificate or Diploma alone, makes you any more '*advanced*' than someone who has never had the chance to undertake formal education at all.

For me, the most important quality to be demonstrated is an appetite and desire to undertake either formal education or professional development opportunities on an

ongoing basis. Wanting to learn indicates a willingness to grow and an admission that they don't know everything – both good qualities in their own right.

Volunteer Managers who understand this need are certainly on the road to developing an advanced attitude towards their profession.

Quality # 5 – Networking

To be considered *advanced* I believe it is imperative that VPM's choose to network regularly with as wide a circle of peers as possible. In this day and age, networking doesn't even need to take you from your computer – yet I remain amazed at the relatively small number of VPM's who don't make contact with others doing the same work as them – even in their own town.

Remember, the wider the range of networks, the more exposure you'll get to differing opinions.

Quality # 6 – Giving back to the sector

As an extension to networking, I believe another quality that shines through in the truly *advanced* is a willingness to give back to the volunteerism sector in a variety of ways. Indeed, advanced VPM's understand that this is not a choice – it is a necessity, imperative if we are to continue to grow volunteerism.

Being advanced you see, is about far more than holding a bucket full of knowledge – it's about understanding the potential that you hold and finding ways to assist others to share in the experience you have gathered.

Involvement in mentoring schemes (either formally or informally), contributing to newsgroup discussions, being active in your local volunteer centre or VPM network or even writing a journal article are all simple ways that a VPM can contribute back to the world of volunteerism.

Quality # 7 – Remaining on the cutting edge

Another key quality exhibited by *advanced* practitioners is a willingness to keep up-to-date with the latest research and trends. Subscribing to journals, reading newsgroup postings and attending conferences or seminars are all ways that this particular trait can be demonstrated.

Quality # 8 – Understanding the evolution

Advanced level practitioners also have an ability to see some of the big picture issues affecting volunteerism. That is, they are able to look outside of their own program and make observations about broader trends and issues. They'll read the paper and understand how demographics may impact on their volunteer program. They'll learn of new trends and proactively apply them to their program. In short, they understand that volunteer management is evolutionary – that what works today won't work in 10 years time – and they are always on the lookout to make sure their programs are ahead of the game.

Quality # 9 - Self belief

Another important intrinsic quality is a quiet confidence and self belief. Advanced level practitioners don't simply hang their hat alongside the 'Advanced Diploma' that hangs on their wall - they are actually comfortable with the thought that they 'know their stuff'. They have thought through the issues and know why they believe what they believe.

Quality # 10 – Advocacy

The final quality that I believe shines through is an almost automatic 'advocacy response' to dealings within volunteer management. Regardless of whether this occurs at an operational or a personal level, you'll not hear advanced level practitioners responding to career questions with answers such as '*Oh I just manage volunteers!*' Rather, they will take every opportunity to talk up not only their own jobs but the importance of volunteerism as a whole.

Summary

So there are the ten factors I believe should be evident, to at least some degree, for volunteer program managers to consider themselves to be operating at an advanced level! Of course the reality is that some of us will exhibit more of these traits or be stronger on some points than others, but an attainment of all of these factors to at least some degree, is a good indicator of an individual's level of expertise.

The most important point to understand in all of this is that being *advanced* is about more than simply having some broad head knowledge and practical hands on experience. Rather it is really about taking that next important step of having volunteer management become something more than simply what you do on a weekday between office hours. It's about understanding the changing power of volunteerism as a societal force and of appreciating our role as volunteer management professionals as a dynamic part of that process.

ⁱ IAVM is hosted by CSV Consulting, the UK's largest provider of volunteer management training. To learn more about them and IAVM, please visit their website at <http://www.csv.org.uk/>

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