Volunteer leadership in an Alternative Future

"Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt … Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to 'normality', trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists … Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine the world anew. This one is no different." - Arundhati Roy

Like a lot of activities of a free society, volunteering has been considerably diminished as a result of coronavirus. In fact, from our recent membership survey, 36% have fully suspended engagement, while a further 47% have somewhat suspended engagement. For leaders of volunteers, this has raised many issues of volunteer leadership, for example:

- Duty of care (both to front-line volunteers and to stand down volunteers)
- Maintaining engagement with volunteers who have been stood down
- Requirements to re-imagine both existing and new roles as a result of coronavirus compliance

As trusted community leaders, adding our own threads to the safety net that ensures people's resilience, leaders of volunteers are in a unique position to reframe our programs and rebuild our role in enabling people the potential to thrive in a changed environment.

"The return to a wounded pre-crisis world is still the default. We need to be realistic about whether change can endure in different circumstances. It is important to be ready with practical ideas as we move into a different stage of the pandemic, and eventually beyond it." – Matthew Taylor

[Ian Burridge of the UK's RSA has wireframed four types of response to COVID-19](#) that adapted for volunteer leadership, provide us with a useful window to see through some alternative futures to the coronavirus crisis.

Table 1: Ian Burridge's framework for Understanding crisis response measures
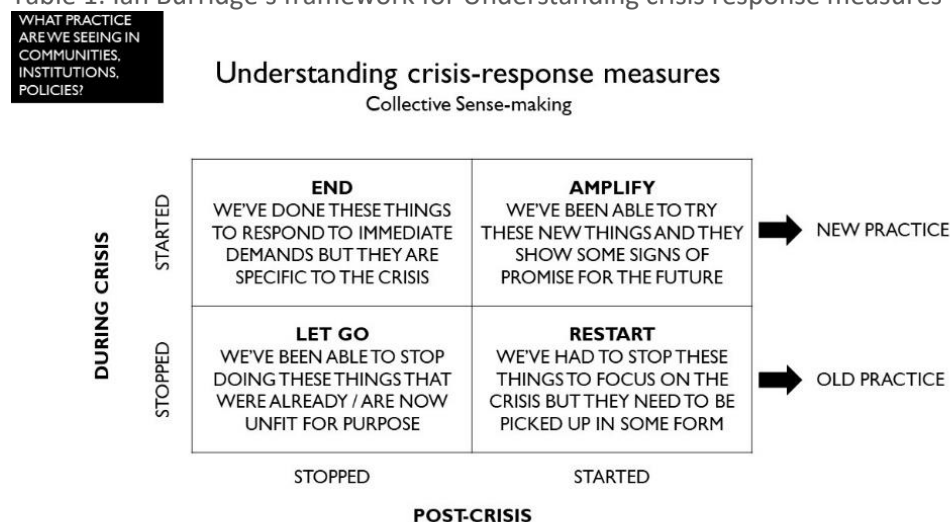
Obsolete activity (i.e. the LET GO quadrant)

What activities have you not missed while working from home/in a technology predominant environment?

One example is how the crisis has effectively transformed our former requirement to organise in-person. One of the greatest challenges presented to volunteers (in my experience) is the commitment to physically be somewhere for on-boarding (e.g. induction/training etc.). The travel time, parking, release from existing work/parenting issues means we have worked out what can be done from the comfort of one's environment.

Obviously, virtual/online is not a panacea recruitment practice given the social cues and connections people demonstrate when together, but hopefully we can accept that we can let go of such regimented recruitment routines.

Paused activity (i.e. the RESTART quadrant)

Obviously, there is a lot of activity that was stopped in its tracks in order to divert capacity to the crisis response. However, we will inevitably start these activities back up again.

Social opportunities have been considerably restricted as a result of COVID-19. Volunteers who found their identity, purpose and value in team efforts have been marginalised. Whether it has been the club coach, opportunity shop worker, or planting group, people have missed out on this sense of connection and reciprocity which gives depth to our life.

The core challenge in these areas post-crisis is to figure out how to restart these measures in ways that are sensitive to the changed context and are not simply a blind copy and paste of the pre-virus approach which just reinforcing old systems.

The Volunteering Australia *National Standards for Volunteer Involvement*, and *VolPoll* our soon to be released online self-assessment platform for smaller organisations provide leaders with various ways of developing the resilience and scalability of their future volunteer involvement.

Temporary measures (i.e. the END quadrant)

Some things that we have had to do in response to the immediate demands of the crisis are inappropriate to become part of the new normal.

In my son's day-care centre, parents and visitors are not allowed past a white line immediately after the entry. Such restrictive approaches to external threats of infection have created not only a heavy physical distancing regime but also an emotional dissonance from his learning and education. Volunteers in health and welfare environments will likely feel a similar strain for some time yet as they grapple with the invisible lines of peoples' bubbles while trying not to add additional stress to an already complex operating environment.

Ensuring that the benefits of volunteers to our most vulnerable is probably going to take some careful moderation for some time yet. This will likely require our balanced voice is heard when it may seem volunteers will be distrusted more than is warranted.

Innovative measures (i.e. the AMPLIFY quadrant)

While we have seen drastic reductions in formal volunteering (organisation-supported), the rise and rise of informal volunteering (e.g. neighbours helping neighbours) has been inspirational. The proliferation of viral kindness networks (e.g. Good Karma community networks), emergency platforms (e.g. emergency support volunteering, EV CREW) and the Queensland Care Army.

Ostensibly, the question then becomes how do we support and harness this community effort into the longer term? Naturally, there are no straight forward answers, but what can your organisation do to capture their hearts and minds as they gain the helpers' high? What special offers and opportunities does your organisation provide them to build on their grassroots success?

Moving towards a more hopeful future

The seas of change were already upon us with many leaders of volunteers experiencing pressure to recruit new and retain existing volunteers in an environment of declining median hours volunteered per person and an increasing demand for short-term, flexible volunteering opportunities.

Therefore, how do we build on individuals' psychological sense of community, the social norms from supporting one another through this crisis, and the satisfaction of being part of something bigger than ourselves? Hyde et al. (2016) suggests three types of episodic volunteers (EVs) need to be considered:

> **Novice EVs (first time volunteers):** often have self-oriented motives such as spending time with family/friends and having fun are linked to EV retention. Novice EV are also concerned about the expectations of others regarding their volunteering, so finding ways to promote their satisfaction will ensure their longer-term retention.

> **Transition (volunteered sporadically for 2-4 years) and Sustained EV (volunteered 5 or 6 years consecutively):** Satisfaction is a significant predictor of retention. For example, the

> degree to which the episodic volunteering experience fulfils initial motives for volunteering or matches original expectations about volunteering will strongly predict their latter engagement.

Conclusion

Burridge's framework for understanding crisis response measures offers us a window in which we may be able to apply our practice as leaders of volunteers. What practices can we AMPLIFY, END and LET GO?

Specifically, we should be considering each activity in accordance with our volunteers' strategic and cultural contribution to our communities. Without doing this critical thinking, we may ourselves become victims of the coronavirus.