

Case study: Leading change towards inclusive practice

Building Committee Capacity: Navigating Cultural Bridges in Volunteer Leadership

Volunteering Loddon Mallee, part of the Bendigo Volunteer Resource Centre, provides specialist support to Leaders of Volunteers and Volunteer-Involving Organisations across the Loddon Mallee region. In a recent collaboration, they worked alongside the volunteer committee of a South Sudanese community group, 'Panyang Society for Human Development', comprised of dedicated, Dinka-speaking, predominantly Arabic-reading volunteers.

The committee's goal was to organise an annual cultural festival, with proceeds supporting education and health costs for displaced and impoverished victims of war in South Sudan.

The Challenge

Volunteering Loddon Mallee was initially asked to help the committee with a grant issue, but this revealed broader barriers affecting both the event and the organisation's sustainability. Many of these challenges were systemic, shaped by processes that did not account for cultural and linguistic diversity. As such, they saw the opportunity to address these through building the governance and operational capacity of the volunteer committee.

1. Systemic exclusion in administrative systems

The committee was locked out of essential administrative portals due to poorly designed systems, such as security questions that asked for "mother's maiden name," "first pet's name", or "favourite sports team". These assumptions did not translate across cultures. Combined with linguistic and digital barriers, this made it very difficult to access crucial funding.

2. Strategic funding gap

A well-intentioned but error-ridden grant application, submitted with external help, requested only \$3,500 against a minimum need of \$10,000 – despite the grant allowing up to that amount. This

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created a severe financial shortfall, placed pressure on volunteers, and risked the organisation's future.

3. Governance and advocacy hurdles

Being new to Australian systems, the committee members were hesitant and unsure how to appropriately seek letters of support from local officials. There was a concern about showing respect to authority figures, alongside a limited sense of their own ability to build networks and advocate for the community.

Addressing the Challenges

As specialists in volunteer management, Volunteering Loddon Mallee worked directly with the committee members in their capacity as Leaders of Volunteers, focusing on practical support that built long-term capability.

- **Demystifying systems & creating tools:** Practical, culturally-sensitive workarounds were developed to address the grant portal issues. This empowered the committee to access systems more confidently and independently in the future.
- **Providing strategic grant guidance:** The committee was mentored on the Australian funding landscape, including how to accurately cost an event, identify appropriate grant opportunities, and articulate their needs compellingly – a critical skill for any volunteer-led organisation. An additional grant was identified and successfully secured, addressing the funding shortfall.
- **Facilitating cultural bridge-building:** Support included coaching on Australian governance protocols, arranging introductory meetings with local MPs, and providing templates for respectful communication. This helped build confidence and capability in engaging with stakeholders and advocating for their community.

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Outcomes for the Volunteer Committee

- ✓ **Enhanced leadership capability:** The committee gained practical skills in financial planning, grant writing, and external stakeholder engagement.
- ✓ **Sustainable operations:** The full \$10,000 required was secured, ensuring the event's viability and reducing financial pressure on volunteers.
- ✓ **Increased confidence and inclusion:** The committee is now able to engage more confidently with local government and is recognised as a key stakeholder in multicultural discussions.
- ✓ **Strengthened volunteer base:** The successful event, attended by more than 300 people, reinforced the value of their volunteers' contributions and supported retention and recruitment.

“Before, we felt locked out. Now we know how to do things ourselves. That confidence means everything.”

– Committee member, Panyang Society for Human Development

Lessons for Leaders of Volunteers

Supporting culturally and linguistically diverse volunteer committees often requires more than simply providing advice. It involves recognising where exclusion exists and actively working to address it.

- 1. Review processes for hidden barriers:** Look closely at systems, forms, and procedures to identify and help dismantle systemic barriers. Requirements like security questions, identification or digital access can unintentionally exclude people.

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- 2. Be a cultural translator:** Act as a bridge not just between languages, but between systems and cultural contexts. Support may involve explaining how governance, funding, and advocacy work in practice, not just translating language.
- 3. Build capacity, not dependency:** Provide the tools, guidance, and coaching that enables committees to succeed on their own terms, fostering resilient and self-sufficient VIOs.



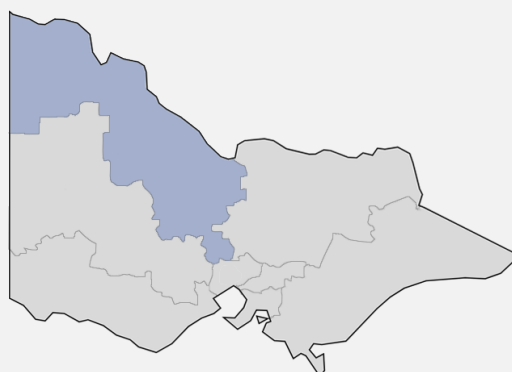
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<https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/leading-volunteers/vma-2022-2026/>



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Volunteering Victoria acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.