

Case study: Embedding best practice volunteer management

From Good Intentions to Good Governance: Building a Sustainable CALD Volunteer Framework

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. They recently assisted a South Sudanese community group to strengthen their volunteer management practices and build a more sustainable model for the future.

They worked alongside the volunteer committee of the Panyang Society for Human Development, a South Sudanese community group comprised of dedicated, Dinka-speaking, predominantly Arabic-reading volunteers. Their 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 committee was passionate and driven, but operated informally. Their focus was to ensure their flagship annual event was not only successful, but sustainable, reducing burnout and risk for their volunteers.

Emerging Challenges

While the group was already delivering successful events, they faced common challenges for emerging volunteer-involving organisations. These were not just operational issues, but barriers that limited who could participate and how sustainable the work could be.

1. Reliance on key individuals

Knowledge and processes were not documented, making the organisation vulnerable if key people stepped away.

2. High burnout risk

The same small group carried most responsibilities each year, leading to fatigue and increased pressure.

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3. Informal practices

A lack of clear roles, expectations, and onboarding processes created confusion and limited their ability to attract a wider volunteer base.

4. Compliance gaps

There was a limited understanding of volunteer insurance, safety, and risk management, increasing potential risk for both the organisation and its volunteers.

The shared goal was to move from an *ad-hoc* model to a best practice volunteer management approach.

Encouraging Adoption of Best Practice

It was clear that imposing a rigid, Western-style model would not work in this context. Success depended on a respectful, collaborative approach.

- **Trusted relationship:** An introduction via a multicultural support service provided a strong foundation, making it easier to build rapport and engagement.
- **Cultural respect:** The approach positioned Volunteering Loddon Mallee as facilitators rather than experts. Time was taken to listen and understand the group's cultural context and community dynamics before suggesting changes.
- **Practical and relevant support:** The focus was on tools that addressed immediate challenges, such as reducing stress and sharing the workload. This made best practice appealing and directly beneficial, rather than imposed.

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Implemented Changes

Working together, the committee and Volunteering Loddon Mallee co-designed practical changes across three key pillars of best practice:

Best practice area	Co-designed changes
Recruitment and Onboarding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Simple role descriptions for key positions (e.g., “Food Coordinator”, “Ticketing Manager”).• A Volunteer Induction Checklist to ensure new helpers felt valued and informed from the start.
Volunteer Support and Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A Volunteer Agreement outlining mutual expectations, including safety and respect.• A simple, culturally appropriate Recognition Plan based on their feedback (e.g., public acknowledgement during the event and a shared community meal afterwards).
Risk Management and Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A practical Risk Assessment workshop for the festival, identifying common hazards (eg., trip risks, food handling).• Clear explanations of volunteer insurance, including what it covers and why it matters, along with support to include this in funding requests.

Supporting Implementation

Adoption of these practices was encouraged through simple, accessible methods that aligned with the group’s context.

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- **Workshopping, not lecturing:** Interactive sessions with key members of the committee used the group's own event as the basis for learning, making concepts immediately relevant and practical.
- **"Try this" templates:** Simple, editable templates for role descriptions and checklists, removing the barrier of starting from scratch and making it easier to test new approaches.
- **Language and culture first:** Materials were kept in plain English and discussed verbally in detail to ensure comprehension. Concepts were adapted to suit a communal decision-making style.
- **Positive framing:** Best practice was positioned as a way to make it easier and protect the community, rather than as a compliance requirement.

Outcomes and Impact

- ✓ **Reduced committee burnout:** Clear roles and delegated responsibilities meant the workload was shared more evenly.
- ✓ **Increased volunteer confidence:** New volunteers had a clearer understanding of their roles and felt more supported.
- ✓ **Improved sustainability:** Documented processes reduced reliance on key individuals and created a framework to support other community initiatives in the future.
- ✓ **Stronger external engagement:** The group now engages with local council and funders from a position of demonstrated professionalism and good governance, strengthening their advocacy power.

"We knew our community, but we didn't know the rules. Now we feel safe, and our volunteers feel looked after."

– Committee member, Panyang Society for Human Development

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Lessons for Leaders of Volunteers

Supporting culturally and linguistically diverse volunteer groups often involves adapting how best practice is introduced and applied.

- 1. Start with trust, not theory:** Invest time in building relationships. Listen more than you talk in the first meeting to create the conditions for meaningful change.
- 2. Simplify and adapt:** Focus on core principles of best practice. Avoid jargon and co-design tools that are relevant to the group's specific size, culture and way of working.
- 3. Solve a pressing problem:** Use an immediate challenge (e.g., an upcoming event) as a practical way to introduce broader concepts.
- 4. Demystify compliance:** Explain why policies like insurance and safety are important in a way that resonates (e.g., "This is how we protect our community members if they injure themselves while they are volunteering.")
- 5. Celebrate the journey:** Acknowledge that moving to best practice is a process. Celebrate small wins, like adopting a single new template, as these can have a significant impact over time.

With this guidance, the organisation is now more resilient, sustainable, and better equipped to manage its volunteer program. The committee owns these practices, ensuring that their volunteer efforts continue to enrich the community and support the organisation's mission.

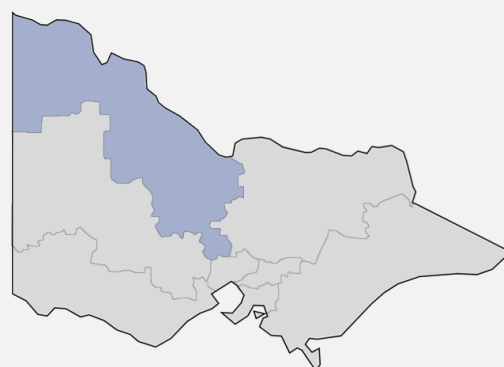
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<https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/leading-volunteers/vma-2022-2026/>



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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.