

Case study: Collaborating with volunteers for greater impact

Brotherhood of St. Laurence

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) is a social justice organisation working to address the fundamental causes of poverty in Australia. Our purpose is to advance a fair Australia through our leadership on policy reform, our partnerships with communities, and the quality of our services. BSL volunteers make up 33%* of our workforce, contributing their time, resources, and energy to help create meaningful, lasting change.

This case study provides tips and ideas for leaders of volunteers who would like to use a collaborative approach to better engage volunteers in the work they do. After working as a Volunteer Coordinator for over 12 years, I have been fortunate enough to collaborate with many volunteers as we worked together to achieve positive impact in our programs.

The example shared in this case study comes from my work coordinating the statewide Digital Literacy Program at the Brotherhood of St. Laurence. The program consists of 30 volunteers who meet one-on-one or in group settings with adult learners to support them in developing their computer skills and confidence.

Collaborating with volunteers

In 2025, through a partnership with a local council, I supported the implementation of a pilot project involving volunteer-led computer classes. Volunteers delivered informal computer training sessions to small groups of women accessing a community hub. Each session ran for 1 ½ hours, once a week, over a 6-week period.

To support the delivery of this project, I reached out to two BSL volunteers – one with extensive teaching experience, and one with extensive digital literacy experience. I invited both volunteers to our staff planning meetings so that we could get their input. This was important, because they would be the ones delivering the training, so I wanted their contribution and for them to have a sense of ownership of the project.

**33% as of March 2026*

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They both had such wonderful ideas that I would never have thought of! They understood what would and wouldn't work in a class/group training setting, and they drew on their experience and knowledge to design sessions that would best support the learners.

Throughout the journey of delivering the classes, the two volunteers came to me with lots of ideas and ways of adapting the training to suit the needs of those attending. Having observed the volunteers over a couple of weeks, I had complete confidence in their abilities and so I encouraged them to implement their ideas. Together they applied their expertise and skills in remarkable ways and with great success. We had 100% participant attendance for the full 6 weeks, with requests for the training to be extended. Participants were engaged, what they were learning was relevant, and the sessions were fun and interactive. Many of the women expressed their gratitude for the training, and the opportunity to grow their computer skills. The knowledge they gained helped them with applying for jobs and gave them the confidence they needed to engage more fully in our digital world.

If I had not included the volunteers in the planning of this training or encouraged them to use their skills to design the sessions in a way they thought best, we would have had a far less impressive result. By engaging the strengths of these two volunteers, we were able to collaborate in a way that benefited everyone involved.

When the program concluded, one of the volunteers gave me this feedback:

"Thank you so much. I appreciate the level of autonomy and freedom you allowed me in developing the program. To my surprise I enjoyed my return to teaching for that short while. Once again, thanks for your support."

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Practical tips for collaborating with volunteers for greater impact

The qualities we bring as leaders:

- **Consider what we value and care about.** If we don't care about the programs we are running, the volunteers won't either. Valuing the work is more than a surface level feeling. We sometimes need to get our hands dirty, step away from the desk, and experience what the volunteers are experiencing. Sharing in the work volunteers are doing will help us relate with them better. If we value the work and care about the process and experience that will reflect on how we work with volunteers.
- **Work as a team.** We need to not see volunteers as a means to an end, but as people who want to pursue the same outcomes for our programs and organisations as we do. Volunteers often have a greater emotional investment in our work, and so we need to honour that and switch our thinking from just engaging volunteers to meet our program objectives, to engaging volunteers so we can work together to create the impact we both want to see. In doing this, we are also going to provide a much richer experience for the volunteer.
- **Build relationships.** Take the time to show volunteers you care about them and their lives, like you would any of your work colleagues. Build connections that will turn into trust over time.
- **Communication.** Keep volunteers up to date on what is happening in your programs, including changes and challenges. If it's appropriate, as much as possible, invite volunteers to your planning meetings. Get their input and feedback and include them in your processes. Their contribution is so valuable, and so necessary if we want to achieve the desired outcomes.

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Collaboration in practice:

- **Set the tone from the start.** When you're interviewing volunteers and providing your onboarding training, be clear about what you hope to achieve with the volunteer as you both work together to deliver your program.
- **Have an open door policy.** Welcome ideas and feedback, and have some easy mechanisms in place throughout their journey as a volunteer to help support this. A few examples could be: set up debrief meetings, schedule regular catch ups, have an open feedback survey, or a suggestion box at your site.
- **Do, don't just say!** Listen to volunteers when they come to you with feedback, and always respond and act on ideas, feedback, and suggestions.
- **Encouragement.** Encourage people to use their unique skills in their volunteering. That might even mean adapting your volunteer roles or creating new ones.
- **Build a positive team culture.** Nurture belonging and connection.

Case study prepared with thanks to:

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Brotherhood of St. Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty



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