

Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement: Roundtable Discussions



Monday, April 16, 2012

On the morning of April 16, 2012, Volunteer Canada, in partnership with the Governor General of Canada, hosted a roundtable discussion on the professionalization of the voluntary sector to mark the beginning of National Volunteer Week. The event was attended by more than 50 participants, including volunteer managers from national organizations, executives of companies with internal volunteer programs, and government policy makers. Conversations explored how voluntary organizations have professionalized their volunteer engagement practices, and how the Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement can be used to better engage volunteers in organizations of all sizes and circumstances.

The Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement provides a philosophical framework for volunteer-involving organizations to evaluate their support and inclusion of volunteers. Created for managers of volunteers, boards of directors, senior staff, and volunteers, the CCVI is intended to guide best practices in volunteer management and inspire discussion within organizations and within the voluntary sector at large.

Volunteer Canada created The Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement in December 2000 as a kickoff to the International Year of Volunteers in 2001. The Code outlines the Values, Guiding Principles, and Standards for effective and meaningful volunteer involvement. It features a Standards Checklist to guide organizations in evaluating and improving their volunteer management practices. Volunteer Canada updated and revised the Code throughout 2011, incorporating the insights and experience of experts from across the country. The roundtable event served as the official launch for the 2012 Edition of the Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement, and the day's discussions focused on the applicability and impact of the Code within voluntary organizations.

Roundtable participants were given three questions to focus their discussions. The first centred on the Code as a professionalized framework for how organizations engage volunteers, in order to demonstrate the value of volunteer contributions and to maximize the impact they have on an organization's mission. The question asked whether the Code contributes to Canada's reputation as a smart and caring nation. Most participants agreed that as a theoretical framework, the CCVI sets a professional tone for voluntary organizations and sends a message of respect to prospective and current volunteers. The document provides valuable guidelines for the effective integration of volunteers within an organization, and allows the diverse array of volunteer-involving organizations to work from a common framework.

Many attendees of the roundtables, however, believed there is work to be done to move the Code from an optional series of guidelines to a necessary set of practices for all volunteer-involving organizations across Canada. It was mentioned that transforming the Code into a certification program that was marketed throughout the country would help make its adoption more mandatory. If volunteers are educated about the importance of the Code and how it serves their needs and

interests, they may begin to ask organizations whether they have adopted it before agreeing to get involved in their work. This would provide further incentive for organizations to adopt the Code and integrate the Principles and Standards into their daily work. Participants also mentioned that a feedback mechanism would be useful, so organizations can share their challenges and successes with integrating the Code into their core work, and so they can receive support with any issues they encounter.

The second question of the roundtables approached the professionalization of the voluntary sector from a different angle, as it asked whether volunteering has become over-professionalized to the point that spontaneous, organic involvement is discouraged. The question explored how the sector can find an appropriate balance between a professional, safe framework for volunteer engagement, and an inclusive environment that is welcoming to prospective volunteers. Many volunteer managers present at the roundtables said volunteers they work with generally wish to be treated as professionals and integrated into an organization in the same way as paid staff members. Most believed the sector has not over-professionalized its practices, but organizations should ensure they are still accommodating and flexible in terms of informal and episodic involvement. Proper recruitment and training were described as necessary to mitigate risk and ensure a safe environment for volunteers, clients, and employees. Several participants noted the voluntary sector has to discover ways to continue professionalizing volunteer engagement while simplifying the recruitment and management process to ensure it is not cumbersome to staff or a barrier to prospective volunteers.

The final question of the day examined the differences between paid and unpaid talent within the voluntary sector, and whether human resource practices should include distinct approaches to the management of employees and volunteers. The views of attendees differed greatly on this question. Many believed that the same HR policies should be in place for recruiting and involving volunteers, though it must be recognized that the motivations, expectations and availability of volunteers differs from those of paid employees. As such, attendees noted that employees need to be properly trained to manage volunteers; they must see themselves as human resources staff and should have the same skills and knowledge as HR managers. Others believed there is a difference in the way volunteers should be integrated into an organization, as the expectations placed on voluntary staff may differ from those placed on paid staff. One participant noted that while volunteers and employees may not need to be treated equally, they must be treated equitably.

As the roundtable discussions came to a close, the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada, offered some closing remarks gleaned from his time circulating among the various conversations. He noted that volunteerism is a part of the Canadian cultural identity, and a key feature of our reputation as a smart and caring nation. His Excellency remarked that while volunteerism is ingrained in the social fabric of Canada, the motivations guiding involvement are personal, and vary widely along a spectrum of engagement. As such, the Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement is valuable in its ability to inform and guide the way organizations involve volunteers in their work, but at the same time, volunteerism must retain its inclusive, welcoming nature, and organizations should not become overly formal in their relationships with volunteers.