Making an Impact: Enhancing the effectiveness of unfunded and small voluntary organisations and groups

By Mark Creyton

This paper developed out of my own work and the pleasure I have had in working with many people who lead community groups and organisations. In this paper I want to focus on two types of groups: All volunteer groups (AVGs) in which there are no paid staff and small voluntary organisations (SVOs) in which there are one or two paid staff.

My feelings about these groups can be succinctly summarised by 2 quotes. Firstly

> "I have never been especially impressed by the heroics of people convinced they are about to change the world. I am more awed by those who struggle to make one small difference after another." **Ellen Goodman**

Every day these groups are making a difference in the lives of people, in the lives of animals and in the environment in which we live. The very quality of our lives is enhanced in every aspect through their work.

These groups are exciting to work with. They can be flexible and act quickly on issues with less of a bureaucratic approach. They attract special and creative people who are passionate about their work and are willing to try innovative approaches to issues. There is a sense of friends working together to achieve something they care about.

Yet I am also reminded of the challenges for these groups by my second quote:

> "In order for people to be happy in their work….
>
> They must be fit for it.
>
> They must not do too much of it
>
> And they must have a sense of success in it." **John Ruskin**

Many community leaders feel under-prepared and under-resourced to undertake the work they are involved in. Many are overwhelmed by the amount of work they have to do and finding it is always the same few who do all the work. And for many they feel that they are not achieving what they would like to, or even that they no longer know what they set out to achieve. They join because they are passionate about a cause, but find themselves dealing with reports, risk management and seeking funding.

Let us for a moment to consider a more formal or academic approach to the importance and impact of AVGs and SVOs.

There is much discussion these days about the power of civil society and community. Civil society is used to describe that the sphere of society in which we participate through voluntary choice. Our lives are commonly seen to take place in and be influenced by three spheres of activity: the state or government, the markets or business, and civil society which includes voluntary groups and associations, a free press, family and religious institutions. Central to civil society are the many groups and organisations that provide opportunities for citizen participation and engagement

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including grassroots associations, social movements, self-help groups and local action. In 1996 Australia had around 700,000 civil society organisations of which only 34,000 employed staff (Lyons, 2001).

Collectively these groups fulfil three distinct and critical functions within our societies.

Firstly some groups have a community building and community problem-solving role. People coming together to address issues that affect their communities and to enhance their lives. Whether it is in emergency services, parents and citizens groups, social issues or sport and recreation, these groups provide a place for us to actively participate and to have a sense being able to contribute social goods to our community.

Secondly some of these groups have a campaigning or advocacy role. These groups challenge government or the market, they attempt to change and mobilise public opinion, and they propose alternative approaches and solutions to the ways things are done. Whether it is through visiting local politicians, writing letters or door-to-door lobbying, these groups have a major impact.

Thirdly some have a defensive role. By defensive role I mean that they offer and maintain a range of alternative perspectives, values and approaches to the mainstream culture and discourses. These groups provide us with a safe place to explore our points of view, to form and change our opinions, a place to be ourselves and, if we want, to be different. Support groups, self-help groups and cultural groups are just a few which offer us a place away from the dominant worldview.

Some SVOs and AVGs are involved in all three functions.

In addition to their functional roles these groups offer many benefits for the society including opportunities to build social capital and trust and places to try innovative or different approaches to issues. These groups provide forums for discussion and deliberation about the issues which confront our lives and provide avenues for meaningful engagement.

So what makes for effectiveness in these groups?

Rochester (1999), at the Centre for Voluntary Organisations based in London, has undertaken a major research project on the capacity of Small Voluntary Agencies. This project focused on organisations employing between 1 and 5 staff.

As part of the findings the research team suggested that there are four principles which greatly enhance effectiveness in small agencies.

They are:

Balancing the informal and the formal Effective agencies are those which are able to maintain the informal nature of staff (paid and unpaid) relationships. Relationships which are built on trust and respect. They use approaches that encourage and support individual creativity, initiative and passion. At the same time, these agencies have clear and documented boundaries for all staff, clear areas of responsibility and authority and have established systems, policies and procedures to achieve their goals.

Balancing the day-to-day and the long-term Small agencies are often great at dealing with the core business and the issues that arise in the day-to-day work that they do. Yet being effective depends on ensuring that the organisation also stays in touch with the changing nature of the sector, spends time planning, budgeting and raising funds, as well as putting time into developing and supporting staff and systems. There is a focus on the important rather than just the urgent.
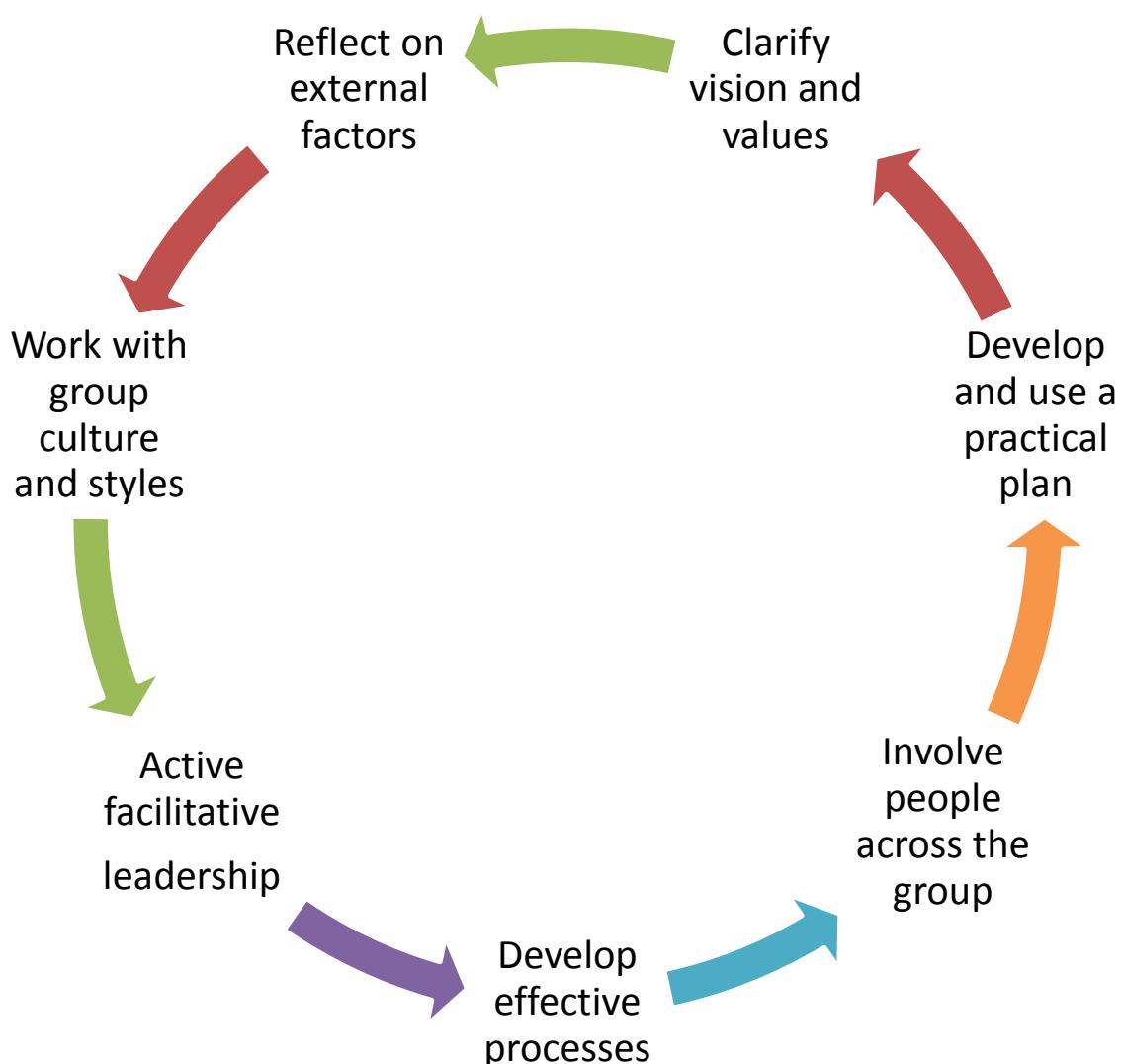
Spreading the Load In effective organisations, there are a range of systems and strategies to ensure the work is shared. It is recognised that work too often is left to an inner core of people, and those outside often feel not adequately skilled or involved to take up the role. Strategies include clearly establishing roles which can be delegated, team focus rather than individual focus, mentoring and succession planning.

Accessing external sources of information, advice and support One liability of smallness is that often the agency does not have all its resources within its staff and volunteers to deal with its issues, nor does it have the funds to purchase expensive consultants. Effective organisations access both formal and informal methods of support, maximise networking and look outside the traditional volunteer resources.

In the past five years, at Volunteering Qld, we have developed a very practical model for these all volunteer groups and small voluntary organisations. We believe that this model assists groups and organisations to reach these principles of effectiveness.

Model

Reflect on external factors → Clarify vision and values → Develop and use a practical plan → Involve people across the group → Develop effective processes → Active facilitative leadership → Work with group culture and styles → (back to Reflect on external factors)

Let us consider each of these steps for creating of effective SVOs and AVGs.

1. Understand the external environment and reflect on its implications for how we work.

We exist in a much wider world. We need to understand the trends which impact on us including government policy and funding guidelines, demographic changes, changing social trends and values, legal decisions and so on. We need to understand who else is concerned with our issue including those who are potential partners or opponents.

Identifying what is happening in the external world and how it impacts on us is critical. More importantly, however, we need to reflect on how we as a group will deal with these external issues. How can we act to maximise the benefits and minimise the challenges. Only then can we choose to alter how we work or to actively resist the change and its impact.

Let us consider the current climate of increasing litigation and the focus on risk management. This is happening in our external environment. We may choose one or more ways to approach this issue as a group:

- We can explore insurance policies and more effective risk management approaches.
- We can decide that the risks associated with a certain activity are too great and we stop that activity.
- We can place our group within a large non-profit with the necessary infrastructure to provide effective risk management.
- We can decide to accept that if we are to be effective we need to live with a certain level of risk.

2. Agree on a clear vision and set of values in action.

John Carver (1997) describes this as the ends and means discussion. What are we aiming to achieve and how do we want to go about it. It is somewhat clichéd to stress how important vision is to the group, yet it is the future you want to create. It is essential: to focus people's energies, to provide a unifying goal and to inspire and maintain the passion. Vision is not a statement that sits up on a plaque on your wall, vision needs to be appropriate to the people in your group, your passion and the outcomes you are trying to achieve.

Many groups I work with do have a clear vision but they have not spent time agreeing on the values. They have focused on the ends but not the means. Too often the group faces major conflict when funding becomes available or a major decision has to be made and they realise they disagree about what is acceptable or unacceptable behaviour for the group.

3. Develop a clear and practical plan and use it!

Once the ends and the means are agreed on, we need a practical plan on how to achieve our vision. This is an essential element in balancing the long term and the everyday. Without such a plan we can be caught in the endless issues that arise from our day to day work. We focus always on the urgent and forget about the important.

Such a plan does not have to be a 20-page document. It can simply:

- list the key things we want to achieve for the year and what are the outcomes we are seeking
- some steps on how we are going achieve our outcomes
- who is responsible for making sure it gets done
- how will we measure if we are successful
- when it needs to be done.

Along with this you may develop a calendar of key events for all members.

Remember the reason for the plan is to have a document you can use. Strategic plans are so often developed but put on the shelf. Check it each meeting and see how you are progressing. Keep it simple, focus on what you want to achieve, don't get caught up in the language or in developing the perfect document. And remember "the most useless thing is doing something efficiently which does not have to be done at all" Peter Drucker.

4. Ensure meaningful and engaged involvement across the group or organisation.

SVOs and AVGs exist because passionate people are willing to be involved. They are sustainable only if they can effectively use all their resources, especially their people. Paid staff, volunteers and board members will all have complementary but clear roles, which are based on trust and personal connection.

In many groups there is a tendency for those most involved to take on or be given most of the work. The more skilled you become, the more work you receive, and soon the most involved are also the most worn out, and others feel excluded and/or not skilled enough to take on new roles. Sharing the load is a critical component of effective groups. This may include:

- forming task groups,
- buddying
- sharing of roles
- succession role planning
- developing a skills register
- developing clear roles for delegation
- setting up a list those willing to assist in events

5. Develop effective formal and informal processes.

I recently worked with one group that was thriving until they decided to formalise their work. They put a person, who was a touch authoritarian, into the role of coordinator. He started by asking those currently working in the group to fill in application forms and required them to attend team leader support meetings. Within a month the group was virtually inoperative.

Finding the balance between formal and informal is not easy. Developing on the work of the Centre for Voluntary Organisations, the formal processes you need to consider are:

- Ensure there are clear boundaries, with a clear definition of roles and responsibilities, all staff, paid and volunteer including the board.
- Ensure clear lines of responsibility and accountability and document and document it. When the board delegates authority they need to also put into place adequate reporting mechanisms.
- Put in adequate systems and process and this means policy in key areas. Graff (1997) suggests that policy development should be prioritised with first focus being the urgent areas in which there is risk for people or the group.

Ensuring you maintain your informal approaches means you need to consider:

- Is the language we use becoming bureaucratic or unfriendly.
- Does our culture encourage fun, innovation and creativity, or has it become all too serious for passionate people.
- Are relationships becoming formalised or can we still base them on mutuality and trust.
- How do our leaders deal with members and those who we work with.

6. Utilise active facilitative leadership styles and approaches

There are many paradoxes in leadership. Leaders in less formal organisations need to be perceived as visionary in some ways yet extremely pragmatic in others. Similarly leaders in these groups are required to be very action oriented while needing to be facilitative in the way they work in their groups. At Volunteering Qld we have developed a way of looking at leadership with a key focus on facilitative approaches. We work with leaders to validate and expand their skills in delegation, support, involvement, development, valuing and linking, while recognising the need for leaders to be role models in terms of doing.

Daniel Goleman (2002) identifies that effective leaders use a mix of six leadership styles to achieve results. While Goleman's key area of focus is corporate leadership there is something to reflect on for those who work within community settings. Four of these leadership styles generally foster resonance and positive results: visionary, coaching, affiliative and democratic, while two styles pacesetting and commanding tend to generate dissonance when used inappropriately or too often. A leader who develops a range of styles is able to deal with a range of situations in the most appropriate way.

7. Understand and work with group culture and styles

The moment we enter a group, the first thing we notice is its culture:

- How people communicate with each other: verbal and nonverbal.
- How we how view the world as a group: the stories we tell, those who are us and those who are not us.
- The unwritten code of conduct.
- How we approach solving problems, generating new ideas or dealing with conflict.

Groups that recognise, discuss, work with and at times challenge their own culture and styles can heighten their effectiveness by amazing amounts. Partly because they know what they can and cannot do, and are able to say no. Partly because the group is able to recognise when group style is causing problems and they are able to address it.

This process of the seven steps is not a once off process. Each impacts on the other. A good knowledge of how we work as a group allows us to determine how best to respond to external influences, how to approach our plan and so on.

I want to bring this paper to a close by suggesting that the work of these groups and the people in these groups are far too important to not spend time on maximising effectiveness and ensuring sustainability over the long term.

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The author welcomes your comments, thoughts, experiences and critiques in regards to this paper. Email Mark at mark.creyton@volunteeringqld.org.au