



Case Study: Vantage Point

Engaging People from a New Vantage Point:

A Brief Case Study of Vantage Point's Decade of Transition

Vantage Point is an innovative capacity-building organization that sees communities and the world through a people lens. The voices of the people who have played a key role in their decade of transformation are reflected in this case study, to inform, inspire, and invite other voluntary organizations to travel along new paths toward building strong, sustainable community organizations with a focus on continuity of leadership while meaningfully engaging people. With a mission **to inspire and build leadership in the voluntary sector**, Vantage Point “recognizes that people are the competitive advantage of the voluntary sector”. Founded in 1943, and formerly known as Volunteer Vancouver, it is provincially incorporated as a not-for-profit society with charitable status federally and is expanding its scope to provide service across the country, with international links as well.

“People care about communities – not organizations”

At the turn of the millennium, Vantage Point's journey towards a new understanding of people engagement was quietly underway, with a new executive director, in a new era. Volunteer centres were asking themselves who their primary audience was (volunteers or voluntary organizations?). Technological advancements had eliminated time and geography as key structures in the way people work, live, and play, creating a virtual, global community open 24 hours a day. The standards of practice of volunteer resource management, and the assumptions they were based on, were starting to unravel.

Let us begin with 6 assumptions Vantage Point challenged along the way:

1. There are not enough people willing to volunteer
2. Private companies must be paid for their expertise
3. A long-term commitment is needed to make the volunteer training investment worthwhile
4. Professionals are busy and they would rather write a cheque than volunteer their time & talent
5. If an organization takes volunteer engagement seriously, they need a single designated person to co-ordinate volunteers
6. Volunteers complement and support the work of paid professionals

Not enough volunteers? We heard from a Community Investment Director from a locally based, multi-national software company. The company is looking at employee volunteer engagement as a vehicle for contributing to community while developing human resources. With the average age of her workforce 26 years of age, she wanted a holistic approach that would

open their eyes, feed their passions, and stretch minds. When she first began calling organizations, all she was being offered was weekend painting jobs, handing out water, and stocking shelves.

“I realized that it was not a problem of supply (available volunteers) but one of demand (meaningful opportunities)”.

Private Companies only want to give money? Given that corporations have can give “money, product, or people”, this executive was also looking for a way to integrate these strategies so that the company’s community investment could have more impact. She was interested a longer-term authentic approach that would empower employees, speak to their individual readiness, and involve a range of activities around an issue, along the following continuum:

Awareness – Understanding – Exposure/Contact – Engagement – Reflection/Integration

Long-term Commitment Needed? An independent management consultant, who volunteered with the Volunteer Leadership Development Program at Vantage Point, observed how much impact an intensive short-term intervention can be to the future of an organization. The long-term benefits of engaging a volunteer for a few of days to facilitate a strategic planning session, serve as a mediator between an executive director and board chair to clarify their respective roles, review a board governance model, or redesign an organization’s web-site can be felt for years to come. Whether these people are retired executives, public servants, or small business operators, these external resources come to you with the skills you are missing and you do not need to provide training. They know the skill, they only require context about the organization.

“Having a seasoned management guru come in to your organization, at a critical time, without any preconceptions, and offer you two hours of their best thinking, can put you back on track for the next 20 years!”

Prefer to give money rather than time and talent? A busy professional software designer talked about the importance of being connected to the community he lives in and how volunteering his time allows him to see and feel the difference he his making in a way that writing cheque can never do for him. While he continues to donate to a number of causes, he does not consider it a substitute for sharing his skills and time.

“With a busy schedule and the amount of travelling he needs to do, he is able to give to community, on his time and even when he is on the other side of the world. “

Centralized Volunteer Resource Management? Great Human Resource Management practices are important in organizations in the public, private, and voluntary sector. While there may be someone responsible for ensuring the latest standards, legislation, and social trends are integrated into the practice, their role is to support all those who engage and manage people.

A former program manager at Vantage Point talked about the shift from providing training exclusively to Managers and Co-ordinators of Volunteers to a focus on organizational leadership. With a people lens, all those in paid and volunteer leadership roles in an organization will understand the principles of engaging members of the community in their work. Volunteer engagement ought to be a core competency for any position in an organization in the same way that computer literacy has become a core competency to most positions, as opposed to only those with administrative responsibilities. This approach must come from the leadership

and this is why Vantage Point gears its services to Executive Directors/CEO's and Board Chairs.

One challenge was (as Volunteer Vancouver) the main contacts in member organizations were the co-ordinators and managers of volunteer programs. Developing a leadership constituency required intentional network building. While workshops and events continued for everyone, promotion was geared to Executive Directors and Board chairs. In fact the names of the new initiatives reflected the intended audiences such as the Board Chair Academy, leadership coaching program, and the Executive Director Learning Circle.

“In order to change our course, we needed to over-steer the ship for a while”

Volunteers Complement and Support Paid Staff? With the changing demographics, Vantage Point saw it was important to stay relevant to different characteristics shared by new cohorts of potential volunteers wanting to engage with community. Whether we are talking about youth, baby boomers, or young retirees, we are seeing people motivated to offer newly acquired skills or share career-long experiences. The workplace and education system have produced people with more specialized skills with a focus on certification and professional credentials. This means that what they can bring to an organization is often outside the qualifications and skills-set of the more generalist - professional staff in not-for-profit and voluntary organizations. This emerging reality calls into question what kinds of task you might pay someone to do and what roles might be appealing to those wanting to volunteer their time.

“You can pay people to stuff envelopes”

Walking the Talk:

Vantage Point integrated their evolving understanding of engaging community through a people lens in every aspect of their own work. When People were hired or leadership volunteers were engaged, everyone heard this philosophy as context. It was clear Program Directors were expected to identify opportunities that would appeal to passionate, talented people in the community. Everyone's work was focused on delivering the mission.

The impetus for this came from their executive director and was integrated into all positions descriptions, performance appraisals, policies, and practices. In 2009, external resources performed 272 different roles at Vantage Point – including business analysts, curriculum developers, non-standard HR experts, designated Program Managers and strategists.

“We began to understand, when we clarified that specific expectation in the hiring process, Program Directors started to do their work differently. It became about learning from the exceptionally talented people in the community while those same individuals worked with the Program Directors to deliver the mission of Vantage Point.”

Forks in the Road:

The transformation from the organization formerly known as Volunteer Vancouver to what evolved into what is now known as Vantage Point was, for the most part, a gradual, organic process. Yet it is marked by a number of forks in the road and intentional decision-making points. Some of these were referenced in our discussion regarding the assumptions that were challenged. Of the people who shared their reflections on the journey, the following emerged:

- Do we work with people to find volunteer opportunities or work with organizations to engage volunteers?
- Do we talk about recruiting volunteers or about engaging community?

- Does the name Volunteer Vancouver still reflect who we are?

Working with Volunteers or Organizations? It was becoming more and more uncomfortable to be investing time and resources in promoting volunteering when the gap was growing between what volunteers were looking for and what organizations were offering. Follow-up surveys with people they had referred to organizations indicated there was a relatively low level of satisfaction with their contact with the organizations and only a small percentage were actually engaged in volunteer work, as a result of these services. It became an ethical issue for Vantage Point. Was it right to set people up for disappointment?

“How could we offer a service (finding a meaningful volunteer opportunity) when we really had no control of the quality of the product?”

One former board member recalls many long soul-searching debates around the table to determine the most effective strategic direction to have the greatest impact on the not-for-profit and voluntary sector and in communities. At the prospect of moving exclusively to working with organizations, many board members were initially concerned.

“Are we abandoning part of our mission and are we going to be letting people down?”

No one was pressured into making a decision that would have such a profound impact on the future of the organization. There was explicit agreement that that individual paces and levels of comfort would be respected in order for the shared vision to emerge.

Everyone agreed the govolunteer database of volunteer opportunities would be continued, as a self-directed tool for both prospective volunteers and volunteer-involving organizations. However, providing telephone or in-person support to people looking for volunteer opportunities would not be continued. People requiring support, such as those looking to volunteering as a means of integrating into Canada, people who want to improve their employment skills, or to re-enter the community, after institutional living, would be referred back to their settlement workers, employment counselors, and social workers.

Recruiting Volunteers or Engaging Community? A marketing professional we spoke with commented on the limitations that are created by the traditional tasks associated with the word volunteer. For many, the word means ongoing, direct service, in hospitals, recreation centres, and ball fields, and girl-guide troupes.

“Do you rebrand the word volunteer or do you adopt new vocabulary?”

Organizations that engage community look at the people resources of individuals, companies, and the public sector. They look at the skills, expertise, and services required to achieve their mission. They create compelling assignments and projects that attract people who want to combine their skills and passions.

“When the community is engaged in the organization by people offering their time and talents, they become a network of champions who will open up even more doors”

Volunteer Vancouver to Vantage Point The board of directors had many discussions over the decade about whether or not the name reflected this new way of engaging with community. Rather than changing their name early on, based on aspirations and a strategic plan, they waited until the transformation was well underway – until they had truly outgrown the name

Volunteer Vancouver, as it had been known, and they had authentically grown into Vantage Point. There are still some who are concerned that the name itself does not describe what it does and that it does not evoke an intuitive understanding about the spirit of giving time to community.

In the course of working through all the information they were gathering, the leadership at Vantage Point discovered from the National Survey on Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations **not-for-profit organizations** were challenged by:

1. No time to plan
2. Not finding the right board members
3. Shortage of volunteers
4. Financial uncertainty

In the community, potential volunteers were saying they were attracted to positions with:

1. A compelling mission
2. Ability to make a difference
3. Skills & experience required
4. Time specific

Vantage Point incorporated the last changes in the transition when the leadership understood clearly these talented people in community could be the capacity builders. There is an absolute correlation between what organizations require and what this group of specifically talented people can offer. The trick was to bring the two together. At Vantage Point they realized only strong organizations can significantly engage people – those paid with money and those paid in other ways.

In keeping with the mission, “We inspire and build leadership in the voluntary sector” the leadership at Vantage Point moved to working to inspire and build strong leadership in the community. One of the unique tactics of this building process is to engage people differently. That begins with a focus on the people we pay with money – primarily the Executive Director/CEO. If an organization is going to become strong, sustainable and focus on continuity of leadership, the Executive Director must build that organization through a focus on planning, building a strong and engaged board, and instituting good people practices.

For more information about Vantage Point, please visit www.thevantagepoint.ca