

Volunteering at Triratna Buddhist Centres: a handbook for Centre Managers

(edited in 2019 from original by Lokabandhu, 2009 - comments welcome - info@triratnadevelopment.org)

The Volunteer-Centre relationship

Managing volunteers is basically about making the most of inspiration, relationships and skills in your Sangha.

People will volunteer for a reason, wanting to contribute but also expecting to get something out of it and, in the long run, if their expectations in one or both these areas aren't being met, they'll probably leave. If they leave, their enthusiasm, energy and experience will leave with them. Their needs will include the need for recognition, for making a contribution, and for relationship.

Besides their individual needs, there's great potential in volunteering to create sangha and ways for people to come into contact with the sangha and to experience teamwork as spiritual practice. It's potentially a win-win situation as you get all that AND some practical help!

However the above should make it clear that you need to invest in your volunteers - you need to give them significant amounts of your time and energy and attention.

Attracting volunteers

The last thing you want is a polarisation between a few people in the Centre office (feeling overworked and resentful) and the rest of the Sangha (feeling uninformed and excluded). A good volunteering plan can help bridge that gap and help everyone feel involved in running the Centre.

Crucial to this is a good system for communicating what kind of help is really needed and when - and what people can expect when they do volunteer. You need to attract your volunteers; this will involve you thinking through how to phrase your 'ask', what channels to use to communicate what you need help with - perhaps a mixture of electronic (emails) and old-fashioned notice-boards and class announcements. Different Centres have different patterns of classes, different numbers of people passing through and reading the notices - there's no one right way...

Try and be really clear what you're looking for - Buddhafield use hundreds of volunteers for their Festival and retreats, and have a special page (including application form) on their website. Bristol had a pinboard with jobs cards that people could take down and do, Birmingham have a

list that people can choose a job and tick off... Karuna have a special [website](#) entirely for volunteers.

Managing volunteers

It's important to understand and address volunteer's needs and expectations vis-à-vis their relationship with the Centre. Often these will include contact (kalyana mitrata) with Order Members or others more centrally involved – which can put a strain on the Centre Team, if these expectations are focussed on them and they're not prepared for them.

High on the list is creating and maintaining a culture around the centre of **Appreciation and Celebration**. As with fundraising, saying 'thank you' is crucial. It's very positive to consciously acknowledge so many people all giving freely of their time and energy. Apart from making the Centre a much pleasanter place to be around, this'll also make it much easier to make criticisms if any are needed anytime!

Spotting opportunities to use volunteers is something of an art – taking the initiative to ask someone to do something, then stepping back so they really take it on – yet having clear deadlines etc...

If there are many volunteers around a Centre it is likely to be worth organising them in teams (eg a Shrine Decor team, Cleaning, Maintenance; Dharma Activities; Shop Work; the many Class Teams; Fundraising...) In that way it's possible for one volunteer to supervise others, leaving the Centre team freer to get on with other things – or to spend time more socially with people.

Be realistic in what you expect of volunteers. People with the time to volunteer probably have that amount of free time for a reason - this may include some disability, old age, or whatever - all of which may reduce their capacity to function effectively. Also, volunteers' circumstances change and you can't expect them to volunteer forever.

All this means that it can be hard to find what North London calls 'high-calibre volunteers' – people who can take real ongoing responsibility for the Centre's affairs. Some things you may just have to pay for! At the same time, some very skilled people will be happy to offer their expertise and they do say, if you want something done, ask a busy person to do it...

Who's a volunteer – we all are! North London recently identified over 60 people in their Sangha who help run the Centre in one way or another. Buddhafield have around 500 volunteers who together run the Buddhafield Festival. Karuna's appeals have for many years consisted almost entirely of volunteers. Most of your Dharma teachers will be volunteers. It takes time and energy to manage your volunteers, but it should be an investment that pays off handsomely. Bristol's three-person centre team includes one specifically working as 'volunteer coordinator'. Finally - last but by no means least - look for ways to keep the volunteer relationship fresh and healthy!

The Induction

A new volunteer's induction is very important: it is a one-off event in which the basic relationship between them and the Centre can be clearly established. It's an opportunity for the ground rules to be clearly laid out; it's also a meeting at which lasting impressions will be formed. Welcoming a new volunteer is an investment of time and energy by the existing team - recognise and embrace it as an opportunity. Establishing a positive relationship should be easy and one of the strengths of our Sangha – however it is even more likely to go well if approached carefully and consciously.

It is worth preparing a fairly structured approach to the induction session: it will inevitably be a bit ad-hoc at first, but if it is reviewed each time it can quickly be refined and perfected.

Part of the induction session is likely to be communicating what the core purpose of the Centre is – which will of course reveal whether or not you're really clear about it! For example one Centre clarified theirs as being to 'Embody Buddha; communicate Dharma; create Sangha'. If you can't state it simply and immediately maybe something is amiss?

Suggested components for the induction are:

- History (bringing them up to speed with things)
- Decision-making processes around the Centre (making it clear where the new volunteer's opinion will and won't be sought!)
- Talking through the 'deal' – what the tasks are, what time and skills are being offered, etc
- Talking through the management structure – who to turn to for guidance or if in trouble
- Talking through various 'what-if"s' in advance of them happening will help the new volunteer feel confident and more able to take genuine responsibility, ie to avoid frequently turning to Centre staff for advice and reassurance.
- Talking through what the new volunteer"s expectations are and whether or how they can be met.

Volunteer Policies

Areas in which to consider formulating policy include:

- Induction (see above)
- Terms and Conditions of volunteering (eg retreats, expenses). Practice in this area varies across Triratna Centres, but is generally fairly ad-hoc. Sheffield have 'Dana Days' for volunteers – basically special day retreats with meditation, study, work, lunch, and a ritual. Buddhafield have a policy where volunteers are offered a free retreat after helping on 'X' retreats/events;
- Health and Safety (including First-Aid and Fire procedures)

- Insurance. The Centre's insurance policy should cover volunteers but should be checked – they may fall under 'employees' or the 'public liability' section – hopefully not in a crack between the two!
- Data Protection
- Equal Opportunities Policy
- Disability
- working with anyone considered Vulnerable or Children (In the UK at least there are a lot of rules around eg child-minding – much better to advertise it as 'share-care' rather than a 'crèche'!)
- the Complaints procedure. Just in case!

Other Rewards and 'Perks'

Different Centres have evolved different approaches to the 'deal' they offer their volunteers. There's no 'right way' – but two core principles are surely clarity and generosity. Make sure the communication is really clear right from the start - even if that means being clear that the details are not yet worked out! If you're going to offer people benefits like a free retreat try and get really clear what the deal is: what sort of retreat, after how much time volunteering...? And so on. If you're offering lunch vouchers, what's the deal there? You should consider what the implications, if any, may be for the volunteers' benefits or tax position.

Make sure you have calculated what the 'perks' will cost the Centre - a good 'strategy' is look for things that the volunteer will really appreciate but which won't necessarily cost the Centre much, like a place on a partly-filled retreat. Other ideas are to invite volunteers to some or all team meetings, to arrange occasional study classes or meditation/puja as a way of bringing people together and keeping it fun/alive. Birmingham used to have an afternoon each year to thank the volunteers – basically a lunch together, but we could also have made a bit more of it perhaps and used it as an opportunity to involve people in the latest plans to develop things etc. Even if not many volunteers came people like to be invited!

External resources

ncvo.org.uk and its sister sites [Volunteering Wales](#) and [Volunteer Scotland](#) are great resources, though they may sometimes recommend procedures that would seem somewhat formal for us.