

Strategies for involving multi-ethnic volunteers

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We have often heard it said that outside of Israel, Australia has the most multicultural population on earth. That is, Australia has more people from different countries and cultures living in our fair shores than just about anywhere else on this planet!

This important group within of our community are often collectively referred to as being from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds - or CALD for short, and while certainly not unique to Australia, the topic of how best to involve people from CALD backgrounds is a common theme amongst volunteerism groups the world over.

So just how representative of our culturally diverse population is your program?

Now before proceeding, let's acknowledge that many CALD groups do in fact already volunteer within their own communities in many ways - and as a result don't necessarily come along knocking on the doors of more mainstream volunteer programs. Equally, however, let us make it clear that this article seeks to specifically address the issues surrounding the involvement of people from CALD backgrounds who do want to participate in the types of formalized programs that most readers of this hot topic would operate.

So how do we go about creating program environments that are more inviting to people from CALD background

Firstly, what do you expect of people from CALD backgrounds?

Ever heard someone say that people from non-English speaking backgrounds should be "more Australian"? This narrow sentiment is most often expressed when a person can't speak English as well as the local population. But what does being "more Australian" really mean? Does it mean come and look like us and sound like us? Does it mean 'do away with your customs and traditions' and instead adopt the Aussie mentality?

Just as importantly, what does it mean for your volunteer program? Do you want more volunteers who can do more of the same old things, or can you use a variety of different cultural experiences to enhance the programs you are already running?

As already stated, it is not unusual that individuals from CALD backgrounds often choose to remain restricted to their own communities, even though this may mean they miss out on services provided by many organizations, including the opportunity to volunteer. Expecting individuals to break away from a community which provides support, acceptance and meaning, can be unrealistic and we need to be mindful of what we can offer to ensure that these people still have a high level of support should they wish to participate in our environment.

To emphasize this point, article co-author Peter Heyworth, while living in Hong Kong, found there was a very strong expatriate community residing there and that it was possible to live and function within this community without ever meeting or talking to a Chinese person!

Appreciating the reasons about how CALD communities are formed will help us to understand why it is that this group is under-represented in our volunteer workforce.

Reasons that CALD populations may be reluctant to participate in mainstream volunteering may include:

- language barriers;
- a perception that your organization is not user friendly.;
- previous bad experiences;
- or the fact that your organization has a lack of CALD clients (or even other CALD volunteers).

Yet, in saying this, it is very important to realize that there are many people who are happy to break out of their cultural structures and pursue volunteer opportunities if they are presented to them in the right way. However, unless we actively provide environments where people are accepted, they will, quite understandably, retreat to a safer place - their own community.

Secondly, what are you prepared to do (or what have you done) in order to develop a CALD program?

This is where our council *shines* however there's always room for improvement!

Too frequently it is possible to find volunteer programs and even managers of volunteer programs who quite willingly say they are accepting of volunteers from CALD backgrounds, however the reality is that their practices state the opposite. Organizational culture, the attitudes of other volunteers and paid staff and the tasks a CALD volunteer is asked to undertake, may in fact all transmit quite a different message.

To successfully integrate CALD volunteers into your programs, your organization will need to firstly examine its own views on this involvement. Questions that need to be asked might include:

- What is the nature of your current workforce?
- Why do you want people from CALD backgrounds? A good question to reflect upon and to be able to articulate the answer to...
- Do you want to set up a specific program for a particular CALD community and therefore require volunteers from that community?
- What resources is the organization prepared to put into this development?

A third issue to examine is how you plan to integrate CALD volunteers with your current workforce?

- Will it be important to conduct CALD sensitivity workshops with existing volunteers to discuss the issues around accepting someone with different cultural and religious practices and values?
- What training can you as a volunteer program manager undertake to better understand the issues surrounding the involvement of CALD volunteers?
- Do you have policies and procedures in place that adequately address issues such as racial discrimination?

Other tips for involving more CALD volunteers might include:

- Considering how your work environment may be offensive to volunteers from other cultures (eg. a calendar or display magazine which shows women dressed in swim wear, could be viewed as insulting, extremely offensive and denigrating to some. Do you have an area where Muslim volunteers can pray in private if required?)
- Will you need to modify your approach to advertising, with an aim to being more culturally sensitive?
- Do you have access to a translation service if you need one? The Translator and Interpreter Service (TIS) in Australia is a useful contact for people for interpreters . both over the phone and in person.
- Can training and promotional materials about your program be presented in different languages?
- Target your approaches to specific CALD populations, rather than simply trying to increase the number of CALD volunteers per se. After all, there is not much point recruiting 5 new Asian volunteers for the three new Estonian clients your program just took on!
- Identify local CALD groups with whom you may be able to develop an ongoing partnership. You will find that they will frequently appreciate being asked to be involved in your organization and you will benefit by exposing existing volunteers to cultural insights and richness. Cultural awareness and insights can often be gained by running events showcasing food or customs as people are often interested in telling others about their country of origin.

Utilizing the services of CALD volunteers can be very rewarding and profitable for your existing volunteer workforce and will also make your program more relevant to the ethnic profile of the local community.

<http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org/news-views/viewpoints/doc/strategies-for-involving-multi-ethnic.html>