



European Year of Volunteering 2011

Volunteering – The Borstals Programme

“Risk more than others think is safe
Care more than others think is wise
Dream more than others think is practical
Expect more than others think is possible”.

Maxim, Cadet.

Summary of discussion with Andy Kelmanson

In 1971, when working for CSV, Andy Kelmanson was responsible for developing a pioneering volunteering initiative for young offenders, named The Borstals Programme. This was developed in partnership with the Home Office and involved developing volunteering placements for young offenders from ‘open’ and ‘closed’ Borstals.

This programme was built on the philosophy that volunteering can change the lives of those who volunteer. However, this wasn’t to be a transactional relationship – it was to be a transformational one. The crux of the volunteering experience was to give the young offender the opportunity to help others and have the ‘experience of giving’ to other people. The programme was based on the principle that young offenders needed to see that they could be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. Therefore volunteering placements were arranged in settings where service-users needed practical ‘hands on’ support, such as children’s homes, schools, hospitals and old peoples’ homes, rather than in environmental projects or ‘once removed’ settings such as charity shops and offices.

Young offenders were given the opportunity to work directly with children and vulnerable adults needing help.

This was at a time before the introduction of CRB checks, the key symbol of the risk-averse, highly regulated culture that has since developed throughout the voluntary, private and statutory sectors. It seems that much more was possible back then – today we appear to have fewer opportunities to plan and organise volunteering experiences that have the potential for strong impact upon the lives of young offenders.

It would be easy to disregard this programme as naïve, irresponsible and impossible to replicate in the current day. However, this would risk losing the legacy of this work, its underpinning spirit and philosophy. It should be also be highlighted that the programme appears to be more pertinent today, at a time when red tape is being reviewed. Therefore the philosophy and principles upon which it was built, together with its successes and lessons learnt have relevance to us today.

So how did this work back in the 1970s?

(i) Interviews

Prison Service staff in Borstals initially identified young offenders they felt would benefit from the programme, and which they felt they could defend should anything go wrong. CSV staff then interviewed the young person to collect information about them and crucially, to get a sense of what made them 'tick'. The discussion explored their background and offending history and considered what kind of volunteering would provide a useful learning opportunity for them. Simply asking what the young person wanted to do was avoided as these young people had little realistic idea of what might be on offer, and such questions tended to be a distraction. The key issue was to match a young person with a volunteering opportunity where they could experience being part of the solution – finding themselves absorbed in relating to people who needed them and being involved in improving someone else's quality of life. Therefore the whole interview process focused on attributes and personality with skills and vocational development in the background.

(ii) Brokering volunteering placements

The strategy was to develop relationships with people rather than organisations. CSV staff identified people who were open to providing opportunities for 'non-straightforward' volunteers. They explored opportunities with those with whom they had a good history of volunteer brokerage, and also focused on individuals who were likely to respond positively to a 'you are the only one who can possibly help me' approach.

It was these personal relationships that made things work. The programme was transformational in nature and needed to involve people who understood this aspiration and were willing to 'risk more than others thought was safe', for the greater good.

(iii) Managing placements

Several thousand young offenders worked full time, residentially in 4 week 'face to face' placements where they were supervised on a constant basis by placement staff. Whilst all of this was taking place before CRB checking and its associated fear of negative publicity and legal claims, today's 'Pavlovian' response to perceived risk wasn't an established pattern of thinking and the possibility that things could go horribly wrong, whilst present in peoples' minds, was not the overriding and overwhelming thought it clearly is today.

(iv) The success and the problems

Several thousand young offenders were found volunteering placements over the many years of the programme, and some ended up going into caring professions, whilst others claimed to have been diverted from their offending lifestyles and felt better equipped to take on adult life.

In the thousands of placements, there were in fact very few problems and most of those that did arise were born out of naivety rather than harmful intent. However, these situations represent fascinating examples of how we have since developed a paralysis of fear of risk. For example, some youngsters with learning disabilities were intrigued by the 'L-O-V-E' tattoos on the fingers of a young offender volunteer, and in response to their requests, this naïve young offender volunteer was found to have helpfully started tattooing the fingers of two of his learning disabled young charges...

Another situation involved a young offender volunteer getting up at 5.30am and discovering all ten of the residents in the old people's home where he was working, wide awake, but still in their beds. When the manager arrived in duty at 7.30am he was somewhat surprised to find all the old people dressed and sitting quietly outside in the sun on the veranda, waiting for their breakfast...

Both situations involved the placements being terminated.

Whilst these situations legitimately cause management palpitations, it is worth noting that they came about due to some unresponsive management practices together, with a naïve willingness to help on the part of the young offender volunteers.

So what does this mean for us today?

Since these earlier days, many organisations have arguably developed an attitude that engaging with ex-offenders is a risk too far in volunteer engagement. Current research highlights that volunteer-involving organisations avoid this engagement due to lack of resources, limited skills and experience and fear of negative public perception.

...and to engage ex-offenders in helping vulnerable clients would appear nowadays to be akin to risk-taking madness.

But in the pursuit of avoiding risk and the reliance of CRB vetting as a key management tool, it is arguable that volunteering has lost some of its potential in our communities. The belief that helping others is central to personal development, and that young offenders in particular need to sense an affinity to their community, suggest that we are failing to fully realise the transformational relationships that volunteering has the potential to bring to people and to our communities.

So can today's ex-offenders have the opportunity to help others and have the 'experience of giving' to vulnerable people?

This would require a number of things to be in place.

- (i) There would need to be a determined and inspirational lead from government
- (ii) There would need to be 'visionary' people with insight and highly developed 'person' skills within volunteer brokerage organisations
- (iii) There would need to be people within volunteer-involving organisations with that same vision and determination to make it happen
- (iv) Developing creative management practices that celebrate a 'risk managing' rather than 'risk avoiding' climate, where freedom and discipline can work in harmony

These things are not impossible. They just require people who can risk more than others think is safe, care more than others think is wise, dream more than others think is practical, and expect more than others think is possible.

These people could create an environment where young and ex-offenders could discover they could be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.