

EFFECTIVE VOLUNTEER PLACEMENTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH HOST-COUNTRY COUNTERPARTS

Dr Anthony Fee, UTS Business School

This briefing summarises an ongoing research project examining the conditions that contribute to effective working relationship between international development volunteers and local (host-country) counterparts with whom they work.

Research like this is important because end-of-assignment surveys show that host-country managers (and volunteers) see the interpersonal elements of international development work as being critical to the success of volunteer placements. Yet they also acknowledge that relationships between volunteers and host-country nationals are complex; made challenging by barriers that range from language and cultural differences to perceptions of status, gender and the value attributed to different forms of knowledge.

“The interpersonal elements of international development work are critical ... but complex”

To understand these cross-cultural relationships, we interviewed a sample of international volunteers and host-country counterparts about their experiences collaborating on international development projects. Combined, the respondents had more than 95 years of experience working in cross-cultural development partnerships. The interviews canvassed the main outcomes of, and contributors to, effective and ineffective relationships. This summary reports the experiences of Australian volunteers and Vietnamese counterparts who worked together on international development projects in various parts of Vietnam between 2010 and 2015.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Shared trust between volunteers and their counterparts was identified as the most crucial enabler of effective working partnerships. It was also the key element missing from relationships that were classified as ineffective.

Establishing trust was central to the how respondents viewed effective relationships, and was a focus of much energy and effort in the early stages of a placement, the time when both sides were uncertain and the volunteer was adjusting to the new role, organisation and culture (see ‘Trust building techniques’ on page 3 for more details). The primary benefit attributed to trust was its ability to ‘open the door’ to giving and receiving information, a process that was critical to the success of the project.

The analysis identified five conditions which, according to respondents, distinguished effective working relationships from ineffective ones. In other words, it was the presence (or absence) of these five conditions that contributed most strongly to the trust which respondents saw as critical in making the placement successful. The five conditions are summarised in the figure on the following page.

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Dr Anthony Fee

UTS Business School

Anthony.fee@uts.edu.au

+61 2 9514 3395

“It is the presence (or absence) of these five conditions that contributes most strongly to successful volunteer placements”

1. MENTOR-PROTÉGÉ RELATIONSHIPS

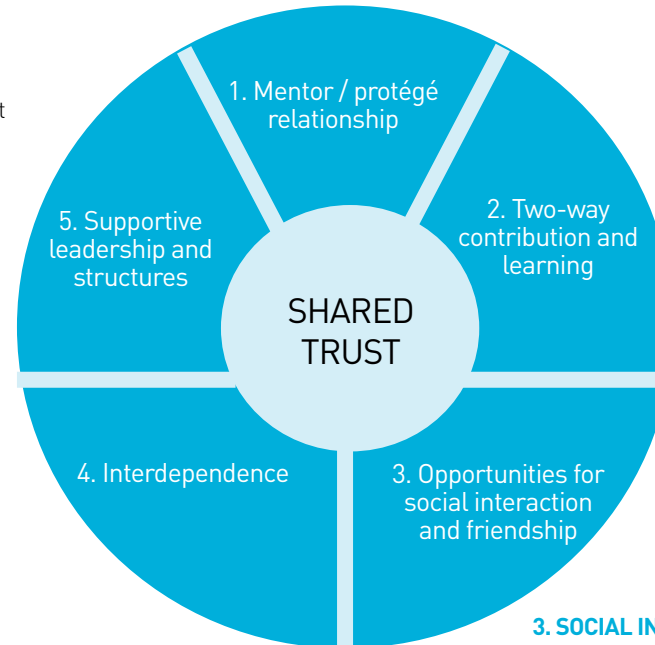
- > Relationships were most effective when volunteers & counterparts saw each other as compatible & when the two shared common ground (e.g. similar age, common past experiences).
- > Volunteers tended to believe that developing a ‘peer-to-peer’ relationship with counterparts worked best. They took efforts to minimise status differences & highlight commonalities where possible (see ‘Trust building techniques’ on the next page).
- > Counterparts appreciated this effort by volunteers, but tended to be more comfortable with volunteers who were ‘expert but different.’ They preferred the relationship to be that of a mentor & protégé. In their eyes, the most effective partnerships were with volunteers who were specialists that could be consulted, observed & learned from, but without formal power ... an ‘inside mentor’ rather than ‘external peer’ or ‘formal supervisor’.

5. SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP

- > Effective working relationships thrived when the host organisation used formal processes to establish & guide the volunteer-counterpart partnership. This included an orientation that helped to clarify the relationship (and in some cases reinforced the preceding four conditions).
- > While volunteers were happy for managers to be hands-off, counterparts preferred slightly more involvement from leaders in providing direction, resolving issues, championing contributions & monitoring the progress of the relationship (not just the task at hand).

4. INTERDEPENDENCE

- > Effective working relationships allowed scope for information exchange & learning via consultation, role modelling & observation. Proximal workspaces, intensive one-to-one collaborations & joint problem solving were common features of these.
- > The best capacity development outcomes were achieved when participants possessed particular knowledge, skills & abilities such that both sides needed to apply these for projects to succeed. Most frequently, this involved combining technical expertise (volunteer) with understanding of the local culture & context (counterpart).



2. TWO-WAY CONTRIBUTION & LEARNING

- > Relationships worked best when both sides were open & enthusiastic contributors (e.g. absence of external ‘pressure’ to collaborate) & when two-way learning opportunities existed. Critical here is that the relationship is sufficiently motivating & novel for volunteers to be learning from counterparts (not just vice versa). Partnerships were strengthened when volunteers took the effort to acknowledge their own learning so that counterparts and others were aware of this.
- > As well as contributing to volunteers’ learning, counterparts were keen to play a role – and be seen to play a role – in shaping projects. Thus, two-way (rather than one-way) influence on the project was an important feature of the best relationships.

3. SOCIAL INTERACTION & FRIENDSHIP

- > Relationships were strengthened during informal interactions outside work. As well as providing opportunities for personal disclosure that contributed to shared trust, this helped both sides develop confidence & comfort exchanging information. This social contact was especially important when counterparts were not experienced working with foreigners.
- > To enable this, participants must be confident communicators in a common language. For this sample, English was the language of knowledge sharing most often used, so the burden of second-language communication fell on counterparts.

TRUST BUILDING TECHNIQUES

While both volunteers and counterparts agreed on the importance of trust, they had subtly different conceptions of what this involved. For the Australian volunteers, establishing trust was primarily about reducing the gap in power or 'status' that they felt impeded their counterparts' comfort and openness. Volunteers responded by using a range of quite sophisticated communication techniques to consciously re-negotiate power expectations of their counterparts. These included verbally reinforcing their position at the same or a lower status level, explicitly referring to counterparts as peers, using more tentative language when sharing knowledge, practising self-deprecating humour, withholding some advice to avoid being seen as overly directive, and posing provocative questions or subtle suggestions for their counterparts to explore and build upon, rather than giving direct advice.

The Vietnamese counterparts, on the other hand, saw establishing trust as being about making volunteers feel part of the 'in-group'. Thus, they conceptualised trust-building as a process of helping volunteers feel and be part of the team, organisation and/or community [the term 'minimise the line' was used by several Vietnamese respondents and captures the essence of this well]. Counterparts and their employers used a range of practices to achieve this. For instance, several managers re-organised offices prior to the volunteer's arrival so the volunteer was centrally located. One organisation custom-made a company uniform for a volunteer; several made counterparts and other staff responsible for the volunteer's induction program. Counterparts made efforts to help volunteers understand the local culture and fit in socially, including acting as 'translators' for volunteers at social activities, often outside regular office hours.

"The study's results suggest opportunities to improve the efficacy of international volunteer placements"

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The results reported here deal with the experiences of just one group of volunteers/counterparts (Australian development volunteers in Vietnam). We are cautious therefore about generalising these results too broadly to other contexts. Nonetheless, the results do suggest opportunities to improve the efficacy of volunteer placements.

- > **Volunteer selection:** One important implication relates to the way that international volunteers might be matched to placements. It appears that rather than focusing solely on individuals' attributes, volunteers might be selected based on their compatibility with counterparts in terms of shared experiences, outlook, or knowledge and abilities (conditions 1 and 4). While there are dangers in making selections based on similarities, involving counterparts in the decision to select volunteers may lead to better 'fit' and interdependence that can help trust be established more readily.
- > **Training and preparation:** The results suggest a range of possible training and preparation activities. These might include raising awareness of different conceptions of trust and techniques like suggestive dialogue or inclusive language (condition 1), and in identifying the mechanisms and triggers underpinning informal learning so that these can be recognised and appropriately acknowledged when they occur (condition 2). Involving both volunteers and counterparts in some pre-contact priming is likely to encourage mindsets of shared understanding conducive to capacity development.
- > **Managing volunteer placements:** The results also draw attention to the important role played by managers who oversee volunteer-counterpart relationships in terms of supporting the relationship (condition 5), structuring work roles (condition 4) and supporting opportunities for social interaction (condition 3). International NGOs which place volunteers in host organisations may also consider providing some targeted pre-arrival training and support for host-organisation leaders in activities like conducting effective inductions (condition 5), enacting explicit in-group behaviours towards volunteers, or understanding the conditions that support effective capacity development relationships.