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Volunteer Engagement 101- Best practices from the field!

“My communication skills and confidence have improved after assisting the learning camps. I never knew the gap in foundational learning outcomes of children in my village. This activity has infused a new energy and a sense of community ownership within me!” shares Kavita, a 13-year-old volunteer from Gompa village, East Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh. Volunteering has always been a win-win for both the volunteer and the organization! The State of the World Volunteering Report (SWVR) 2011 states that, “At no point in history has the potential been greater for people to be primary actors, rather than passive bystanders, in their communities, to affect the course of events that shape their destiny.”

At Pratham, most of the leadership team members started their journeys as volunteers and are now leading large scale programs across the country. Engaging in volunteering activities opens up multi-fold dimensions - understanding interests, choosing career pathways, building networks, learning life-skills and many more intangible things which we may not be able to define. Community engagement with volunteers is one of the core pillars of Pratham interventions. Members of all age-groups including women are given a platform to become a volunteer and drive change within their communities.

Based on our experience of working with 20,000+ communities and 1lakh+ volunteers across different states in India for more than a decade, following are some best practices that we recommend:

#1 Communicate the why, how and when effectively: This is perhaps the most important task in the entire value chain of volunteerism. Clear articulation of the program design, value add to the community and benefits to volunteers for joining the program is essential. Covering the following 3 elements during volunteer mobilization has been immensely useful in signing up volunteers.

a. Organization & program introduction: It is very vital to establish the credibility of the organization by explaining the vision, scale and impact achieved to date. This helps build trust in volunteers and helps them align with the organization ethos. Sharing details of the program design including implementation model and timeline is another pivotal element. ***Our mobilizers use brochures, video testimonials to help volunteers visualize the movement they will be part of.***

a. Benefits to the community: Giving a big-picture vision of how their participation now will help bring about a larger change in the near future is imperative. While immediate impact can be more tangible, a broader vision will inspire them to stay connected to the cause.

b. Benefits to volunteers: Sharing the **value proposition of joining the project as a volunteer gives an extra boost to their morale.** One of the largest benefits is that of gaining multiple life-skills- including problem-solving, communication, confidence, and leadership. Mentioning how these life-skills will help them in their career and life in general is very effective.

#2 Adopting the ARF (Activity, Reflection, Feedback) training methodology: Short duration training filled with activity oriented methodologies work best for volunteers. At Pratham, we follow the ARF- Activity, Reflection, Feedback methodology for most of our volunteer training. For example, if the volunteers are expected to conduct a village level survey, the activity would involve doing the survey with fellow volunteers and role-plays including interaction with dummy *Sarpanch* stakeholders. During the reflection part, each volunteer would be asked to share learnings, doubts and questions within pairs/groups. In the feedback section, in addition to trainers giving feedback, peers/fellow volunteers would also share their feedback. ***Making the training delivery as participatory is the key making it an immersive experience for the volunteers.***

#3 Bring novelty in tasks, roles & responsibilities: New tasks at regular intervals: Offering volunteers a variety of tasks at different intervals helps sustain their enthusiasm. Tasks could range from conducting a survey, recording a video testimonial of village beneficiaries, organizing an exhibition, conducting learning camps with community children, waste management drive, etc.

#4 Offer learning-based incentives: Giving monetary incentives could be out of the budget for most organizations. But surprisingly, non-monetary incentives go a long way in sustaining volunteer interest and making them feel they have gained something from this activity. Pratham offers short learning modules on

the fundamentals of 7 different industry trades to its volunteers. These are 7-day long self-paced courses with trainer interactions at the beginning and end. This offers a glimpse into career pathways in each of these sectors. Up-skilling sessions could be on digital tools, basic MS office skills or anything that the volunteers are eager to learn. Such initiatives instill a feeling of getting something in return for their volunteering effort, time and gesture. Certificates also serve as a great incentive for volunteers to be associated with various projects.

#5 Sharing collective progress: Holding regular meetings to share progress of the project and how volunteers have grown helps instill a sense of ownership and makes them feel an integral part of the project. At Pratham, every field leader shares the impact of the project with volunteers while also taking their inputs and suggestions for improvement.

Most of all, sharing personal stories of volunteering and how such an activity infuses a sense of 'Giving' in all aspects of life can highly inspire volunteers to continue and engage themselves in volunteer work throughout their life!

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