



# VOLUNTEER SUPPORT

**The community centre**

**Offering support**

**Know your limits**

**Appraisal and supervision**

**Induction**

**Mentoring**



# VOLUNTEER SUPPORT

**A community radio station will attract volunteers and visitors like bees to honey. Very quickly your premises will turn into some kind of cross between a radio station, a day care centre, a school common room, a karaoke competition, a café and a sitcom.**

## The radio station as community centre

The people hanging around will be spectacularly diverse, of all ages, races, classes, creeds, lifestyles and abilities. Trying to get them to bond together as a team, to reflect the type of common purpose, improvement and co-operation you want to see in your community at large is another essential task of the management and staff team. If you can generate that sense of common purpose you will find it easier to maintain volunteer interest and to create a culture of care and support where everyone is charged with helping everyone else out.

### VOXBOX 10.01

***“When we set up ALL FM and Wythenshawe FM, we’d done four RSLs in the run up, and some of us had a lot more previous experience at the BBC or wherever. So we thought yes, we know radio. We also knew that RSLs were bloody hard work but that you recover from them. We thought we knew what we were in for.***

***The killer change was that the volunteers didn’t go away. We had set up a community. And it wasn’t only a community of people who wanted to hang around and make radio; it was just a community of people who wanted to hang around. Somewhere safe, warm and dry to have a brew, where there are people to chat to.”***

*Phil Korbel, Director, Radio Regen*

A station’s function as a community centre can be a healthy and necessary one. But it must operate within strict limitations if you are to avoid conflict and to not lose sight of your prime function – making radio to serve the wider community. Here are some general dos and don’ts:

- Do provide a welcoming and friendly environment for volunteers and visitors;
- Don’t allow volunteers to hang around constantly. They will soon start to irritate staff and other volunteers, and they will keep other volunteers away from resources. A top limit of 15 hours a week attendance at the station fits nicely into the DSS benefit rules and is a suitable benchmark. Be prepared to send volunteers home when necessary;
- Do give them something to do while they’re there. It will make them feel useful and help you too;
- Don’t allow a small number of volunteers with serious needs to dominate all your time and attention (see p134);
- Do let some volunteers turn up once a week, do their show and go away again, if you are sure they are not being neglected or neglecting their obligations;
- Do remember that your volunteers will sometimes have other issues and needs – when this detracts from their ability to make radio it becomes your problem;
- Do be aware of your own limitations when dealing with complex problems;
- Don’t only accept volunteers who are capable, reliable and safe. Not only would you be failing to fulfil your role as a community station, you might also be cutting yourself off from some brilliantly talented broadcasters who have the most to gain from your existence;
- Do be completely clear with your volunteers about what the rules are and why they exist.

**CRIB SHEET****The community radio station:**

- Is also a community centre
- Shouldn't become such a successful community centre that it interferes with making radio
- Will attract some people with extensive social and personal problems
- Should welcome some people with extensive social and personal problems

**The volunteer dynamic**

As we've said before, volunteers are central to any successful radio station, but don't for a moment think that the volunteers, individually or as a body, stay the same as the months go by. They are engaged in an activity they feel passionately about, one that in many cases changes them, and in achieving this we have observed a 'group dynamic' at play.

When you start, spring is in the air as the euphoria of the station getting on air envelopes one and all in the sweet smell of adrenaline. As time goes by, some of the novelty and excitement fades and volunteers, if they didn't have one before, find a voice. That's the problem with empowerment.

**The role of staff**

It should not be the role of staff to make radio; it is their role to create the right circumstances for members of the community to make radio. This is easier said than done however, and sometimes you might find yourself making radio as a means of supporting volunteers.

Enabling members of the community to make radio not only covers all the managerial, fund-raising, business management and radio production duties covered elsewhere in this book, it also means addressing the personal needs of the volunteers. To some extent this task falls to all staff at a station, whatever their nominal role might be, but most stations will specify a staff position with responsibility for volunteer support. At the Radio

Regen stations the staff have had to become involved in issues as diverse as:

- Personal accommodation. (At the extreme, our staff have accompanied a volunteer to court to overturn an eviction notice that would have left her homeless);
- Physical health and welfare;
- Mental health issues;
- Personal hygiene. (This is a very common problem when you have large numbers of people using a small, stuffy studio, and it is obviously difficult to address. A written policy within the volunteer agreement does help);
- Benefits problems and financial crises;
- Child care problems;
- Immigration and residency problems;
- Domestic violence;
- Literacy, numeracy and language problems;
- Criminal charges;
- Addiction problems.

Of course interventions in many of these areas require professional expertise beyond the capabilities of community radio staff. But knowing where to find and how to access the right services is an important skill in its own right (see below). At a less significant level, there will be an endless stream of arguments between volunteers, and minor problems with relationships, employment, family life and other relatively mundane issues which can nevertheless impact severely upon a volunteer's ability to make good radio. A supportive shoulder and some ready helpful words in such situations are essential tools for anyone working at a community radio station.

It is important to remember that some volunteers may have profound problems but believe that they are none of your business. The radio station may be the one place they can come to forget about their problems. You have no right to barge in where you are not welcome or needed. On the other hand, there may come times when the volunteer's personal issues intrude so severely into their behaviour at the station or ability to make radio that you have to say 'OK, either you let us help you sort this out, or we will have to ask you to stay away from the station until you have sorted it out yourself.'

It's worth bearing in mind that some volunteers, for cultural or just personal reasons, will only feel able to discuss their problems with someone of their own sex, or in some circumstances even from their own religious or cultural background. It is therefore useful to have more than one member of staff with at least partial responsibility for volunteer support.

Station staff must learn when it is appropriate to get involved, when it is appropriate to refer people to other services, and when it is appropriate to politely tell the volunteer to go away and stop bothering you (quite often, it must be said).

**CRIB SHEET**

*The staff at a community radio station:*

- *Have a duty to support and care for their volunteers*
- *Must recognise that problems of any kind can affect a volunteer's behaviour or capabilities*
- *Shouldn't barge in to people's lives when they are not welcome*
- *Need to learn when to get involved and when not to*

**Drawing the line**

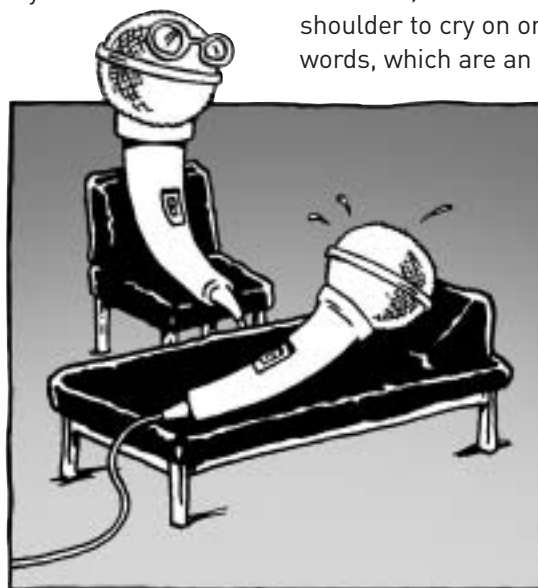
When volunteers have problems you need to know:

- When to start intervening;
- When to stop intervening.

The first point may be obvious – when he comes to you and asks for help or she explains that she can't do her show this week because the bailiffs are camped outside her door. Often though the situation will be much less clear. A volunteer's behaviour may be becoming erratic or anti-social. You may spot warning signs of substance

abuse, depression or anxiety (see p137), or simply that the volunteer seems unhappy and troubled. Generally with new volunteers you are reliant on them to tell you about any issues they have, but as you get to know your volunteers better you will notice any changes in their attitude, behaviour, appearance etc.

As a community radio professional you have to be clear about where your expertise lies. You are (presumably) not a trained counsellor, lawyer, doctor or social worker, and should not dabble in those areas. Counselling and psychiatric services in particular are a massive unmet need in deprived communities and often among community radio volunteers. There can be a temptation for sensitively minded individuals to think that counselling is 'something I'd be good at' and start digging around in a volunteer's traumatic childhood. This is incredibly dangerous for both parties and must be avoided – and it can also be spectacularly time-consuming. Even offering apparently common sense advice to volunteers with psychological problems can be fraught with danger. When stations take on volunteers with diagnosed mental health problems, it is often worth the support officer inviting them to bring in a caseworker from their psychiatric care team (for example a community psychiatric nurse) to discuss their proposed commitment to the station or just to make contact. Of course, counselling is different to offering a shoulder to cry on or some friendly supportive words, which are an important part of your job.



Be wary of making commitments or promises that you cannot deliver. It's crucial that volunteers understand how much you are able to do for them and you avoid any dependency developing. There is a fine line between a constructive working friendship and an intrusive dependency. Staff should keep the supportive relationship at work but not be tempted to give

volunteers their personal phone number or meet away from the station. They also need to be able to forget about it when they leave work.

Station managers should also have a clear policy regarding close personal friendships or physical relationships between staff and volunteers. While in practice it is usually impossible to ban these (birds, bees and even educated fleas do it) it is worth insisting that any such relationships are reported up to a line manager or the board. There are rare circumstances where staff-volunteer relationships can be considered an abuse of position, and management are entitled to be kept informed as part of their duty of protection to the volunteer. More commonly such relationships may cause a (perceived or real) conflict of interest when shows or other opportunities are allocated or disputes arise between volunteers.

In most cases you will hopefully help volunteers solve their own problems or help them access agencies who can. Very occasionally there will come times when you have to admit defeat. If a volunteer's behaviour causes genuine threat to the safety and sense of security of your staff and other volunteers, to your property or your broadcasting licence, you may eventually (or even swiftly) have to bar them from the station. Whatever sympathy you have for their background problems, your first priority is always the safety of your colleagues and the future of your station.

### CRIB SHEET

**The support you give your volunteers:**

- Is potentially limitless, so you have to learn where to draw the line
- Should be limited to your knowledge and training. You are not a social worker, lawyer or counsellor
- Should not continue away from the station
- Should not extend to endangering the safety of other people or property



### Identifying and accessing other support agencies

When you help a volunteer access support or advice from other agencies, your role will often be as advocate. Many vulnerable people struggle with the bureaucracy and complexity involved in finding an emergency NHS dentist or getting the benefits they are entitled to. Often all they need is someone to help them obtain the correct forms and help fill them in. In other cases it is more complex. Accessing expensive and extremely limited drug rehabilitation treatment, for example, is going to take spectacular powers of persuasion. Even then you are unlikely to make much of a dent on the queue. However in many cities and some towns there are agencies that specialise in advocacy work for such cases. If you can't access the service needed yourself, identify other agencies that possibly can. In urgent cases, friendly local councillors or your MP's office can be extremely helpful and may make a phone call on your behalf.

Community radio stations are in an unusually fortunate position when it comes to accessing external support. You may well already have working partnerships with many of the agencies you will need, and that usually means personal connections. Don't be afraid to use them. When you are seeking help for a volunteer you want to be able to bypass the switchboard and ring up your contact, tell them the nature of your problem, and ask who the best person to talk to is. Politely remind them of the value of community radio to their own function, and stress the value of the volunteer to the station. It can take time to build up such relationships, but in most cases it will be worth persevering. Ideally you want to be on first name and direct line terms with someone at:

- Local health providers;
- Social services;
- Housing authorities;
- Housing associations;
- Education providers;

- Youth services;
- Legal aid solicitors;
- Service users groups;
- Benefits and welfare advice centres;
- Debt advice centres;
- Immigration advice centres;
- Housing and homelessness advice centres;
- Citizens Advice Bureaux;
- Drug and alcohol agencies;
- Community psychiatric services.

### CRIB SHEET

When accessing external support:

- It may take as little as a phone call or it may drag out over months
- You should use any personal connections you have through your work
- If you don't know how to access the services you need, look for someone else who does

### Appraisal and supervision

The most common way you will identify problems developing for a volunteer is in the supervision you give. 'Supervision' in this context does not mean constantly leaning over their shoulders and watching their every move. Instead it means offering regular face-to-face contact to identify any problems the volunteer may be having or any additional help or support he may need. Supervision and appraisal are of course vital for training in broadcasting skills (see Chapter 13), but they serve a valuable function in personal support too. They should be designed around process (i.e. what is being done) rather than outcome (what has been achieved on paper). It's worth having a formal appraisal system where every volunteer has a meeting with a staff member at regular intervals (monthly, or quarterly at the outside) but in addition it is good practice to try to spend a few minutes chatting informally with every volunteer whenever you get the chance.

There should be records kept of formal appraisals, and these should include information regarding 'soft outcomes' – those changes in an individual that are hard to quantify with statistics and training records:

- Appearance, grooming, personal hygiene etc (significant as a measure of self-esteem);
- Self-confidence;
- Judgement and decision-making;
- Communication skills;
- Social and inter-personal skills;
- Organisational skills;
- Ability to get up in the morning and other attendance issues;
- Standards of behaviour.

Making a note of such soft outcomes should give you a valuable insight into the progress a volunteer is making, and if there is no progress or the volunteer appears to be going backwards, some efforts should be made to establish why. It may be something simple and easily resolved – perhaps their alarm clock or washing machine is broken – but there may be deeper underlying problems in play. Measurement of soft outcomes is also often useful – or even essential – for your own (and your funders') monitoring and evaluation systems (see p84-87). In asking such questions it is vital that you explain why you are collecting such information and that a high degree of confidentiality comes into effect when it is stored. If it is likely that soft outcomes need measuring for a funder, do let the volunteer know why and that any data passed to the funder will be made anonymous.

Involving volunteers in the design of this data collection – suggesting areas of behaviour that might change in the course of volunteering – will increase their sense of ownership of the process.

### CRIB SHEET

Your appraisal and supervision systems:

- Are key to identifying problems early
- Should be more concerned with process than outcome
- Should pay attention to soft outcomes
- Should be a mixture of informal chats and formal sessions

## Recognising unmet needs

Many different agencies are willing to train voluntary sector workers in identifying possible problems and spotting needs. If they can't offer face-to-face training there should certainly be a ready supply of hand outs and other information. Any volunteer support worker should seek out training in the following areas:

- **Literacy and numeracy.** Adult learning centres, including your partner college, should have basic skills assessment courses.
- **Mental health problems.** Your primary mental health care team, your local MIND office, and other voluntary sector groups should all be helpful.
- **Drug and alcohol abuse.** Again both the statutory drug and alcohol teams and voluntary sector agencies should have help and advice to hand.

In other areas, for example problems with money or housing, you would normally be reliant on the volunteer bringing it to your attention spontaneously or in answer to questioning (see p138). You must build a relationship of trust with your volunteers that will allow them to discuss embarrassing personal issues with you. It's a difficult but necessary task.

### CRIB SHEET

#### Recognising needs:

- Is a skill in itself that needs training
- Will often require a trusting relationship

## The role of volunteers

When a community radio station is running well, volunteers should not be passive recipients of training, support, management and services but actively involved in all of them. This can include a role in supporting their fellow volunteers, which should be encouraged at every level, from making each other cups of tea to assisting with radio production, from offering help with IT and other technical problems to sharing any other relevant skills they may have.

This type of low-level co-operation should spring naturally from a good working environment. When people are happy and inspired in their own activities they invariably feel more inclined to help others with theirs. If an atmosphere develops where

volunteers don't feel like they are sharing resources (whether that's broadcasting time, staff support, IT access or teabags) but instead feel like they are competing for them, co-operation is likely to go out the window. So fostering a good team spirit is crucial. Things that can help include:

- Social events and parties;
- Regular volunteer meetings – although this won't help if meetings are negative, stressful or boring;
- Making sure everyone is introduced when they cross paths at the station;
- News and information about your volunteers in newsletters and other internal communications;
- Systems that make it easy for them to contact each other – e.g. pigeonhole system, message book or internal email.

The potential support role of volunteers can go even further – very often situations arise where the volunteers will end up supporting the staff. This may be as simple as reversing the role of

supportive shoulder. Many's the time a stressed out staff member will be helped through a difficult day by a sympathetic volunteer who is available to accompany him for a break or go somewhere for a sandwich and a chat at lunch-time.

At a more practical level, every community radio station should seek to involve at least some volunteers in management and administration tasks. This will ease the workload on paid staff and free up their time to expand and extend the activities of the station. There is always a temptation for staff to think that they don't have time to train volunteers in administrative tasks. It is always quicker to do something yourself than it is to teach someone else how to do it. But in the long term it is time well invested. While it's unlikely there will be many volunteers begging to do the accounts, you can never





be sure what hidden talents they may have unless you give them the chance.

If some of the volunteers are at least aware of the basics of your management systems, they will have a fighting chance of stepping in if the doomsday scenario arises and the station suddenly loses much of its funding or several staff members simultaneously leave the station or fall ill.

**CRIB SHEET**

The role of the volunteers includes:

- Supporting and helping each other
- Supporting and helping the staff
- Involvement in the management of the station
- Being ready to take over from staff if a worst-case scenario occurs

**Volunteer induction**

As we saw in Chapter 5, good induction is essential if you are to have a healthy working relationship with your volunteers. It should be the opportunity for the volunteer to learn everything she needs to know about the station, with particular regard to the rules, and the rights and responsibilities she will have. At the same time, it is vital that the station staff learns everything they might need to know about the volunteer. This will include:

- What skills and experiences can they offer?
- What skills and experiences (beyond broadcasting) might they want to develop?
- What issues in their private life might intrude on their involvement?
- What health problems or attendant issues might the station need to know about?
- What learning or support needs do they have?

The induction needs to stress that the answers given to these questions are confidential, that they are only being asked so that appropriate support can be offered, and that the answers they give will not count against them in any way. Obviously such questions should be asked tactfully in a one-to-one situation, not in a group.

As before, the data collected at the induction can be retained for use in any 'soft outcomes' monitoring that you conduct.

**CRIB SHEET**

Induction is vital:

- For the volunteers to get to know the station
- For the station to get to know the volunteer

**Mentoring**

Mentoring is a highly effective one-to-one support system that can be valuable for volunteers and staff alike. It involves a senior, more experienced partner accepting responsibility for supervising the progress of a more junior one. Primary roles of a mentor are:

- Setting development goals and monitoring progress towards them;
- Listening to problems and concerns about radio work or other life issues;
- Offering advice and ideas for change;
- Assisting with skill development (coaching, tutoring etc.);
- Acting as a role model and inspiration.

A good mentor will need:

- Good listening skills;
- Self-confidence;
- Patience;
- Reliability, dependability and trustworthiness;
- A friendly attitude;
- Empathy;
- Neutrality (i.e. have no personal vested interest in the progress of the partner);
- The ability to step back when necessary;
- Confidentiality;
- A sense of humour.



A good mentee (no really, that's what they're called) will need:

- Commitment to progress;
- Clear sense of direction and personal goals;
- Trust in the mentor;
- Openness and honesty.

### CRIB SHEET

#### Mentoring:

- Is a formal, long-term, one-to-one support system which can take a while to establish but repays that time investment many times
- Can be useful for staff and volunteers
- Requires commitment, honesty and friendliness

### Establishing a mentoring system

The most effective and enthusiastic mentors are usually those who have been/are being mentored themselves. If you can establish a system at the earliest possible opportunity, then it will quickly become self-sustaining. In practice, the early days of community radio stations tend to be highly chaotic and finding mentors when all the volunteers may be new and nervous won't be easy. Nevertheless the sooner you can start the better.

Becoming a mentor is not an insignificant commitment. You can't order anyone to do it or insist upon it – the relationship is highly unlikely to be effective if you do. So all you can do is encourage (or plead with) your more experienced volunteers to consider it. Stress that the mentor also has much to gain from the relationship; it can be a highly educational, rewarding and inspirational role to take. More cynically, it looks great on their CV – but this probably shouldn't be their primary motivation. The key to successful mentoring is partnering the right people together. The chemistry of a great partnership is impossible to quantify or predict, but some factors to be considered are:

- Experience in relevant role (i.e. broadcasters should normally be mentored by broadcasters, managers by managers etc.);
- Gender, age, race, religion etc. – obviously these

may not be relevant in many cases, but beware of culture clashes or sensitivities over lifestyle;

- First impressions. Before formalising a mentoring relationship, send the potential mentor and mentee off for a cup of tea and a chat somewhere. They will soon tell you if there's a personality clash.

### CRIB SHEET

#### Establishing a mentoring system:

- Should be done as early as possible
- Involves pairing the right mentor with the right mentee

### What does mentoring involve?

The two partners should work out between themselves the best way to make the relationship work, but typical practice would be:

- Regular meetings (maybe monthly or thereabouts), usually somewhere away from the radio station but ideally not at either partner's own home either;
- Occasional phone calls, e-mails etc.;
- Emergency support when a crisis develops – the mentor should be easily obtainable but the criteria for what constitutes an emergency should be clear.

The last function in particular can be fraught with danger. If the mentee begins to make excessive demands on the time or emotional strength of the mentor, the relationship can quickly become unhealthy. The formal mentoring agreement (see below) sets out procedures as to what should happen if the mentor feels unable to offer the amount of support needed.

### The mentoring agreement

Although the practice of mentoring should be informal and flexible, the relationship should be underpinned by a formal agreement negotiated between the mentor and the mentee, usually under the guidance of the station management. This will set out:

- How much commitment will be required from each partner;
- What expectations each should have of the other;

- What rights and responsibilities each has towards the other;
- What happens if either partner fails to keep their side of the deal;
- What happens if either partner feels the relationship is becoming unhelpful;
- How and when the mentoring period will end. It's not good to let mentoring relationships fizzle out, so set a date (maybe 12 months ahead) when both partners can review their progress and, if they wish, make a renewed agreement.

### CRIB SHEET

#### Mentoring requires:

- Regular meetings and other contact
- A non-dependant relationship
- A firm, clear mentoring agreement

### External mentors

With volunteer mentoring agreements, it would be normal for both partners to be volunteers at the same station. With staff, that can be very difficult, the staff team would usually be too small for any kind of mentoring to be practical. Finding an appropriate mentor for senior management in particular is especially difficult, as there are unlikely to be many experienced community radio managers in the area willing to take on the role. There are however, many people with vast experience in either community or radio, if not both. The mentor for a community radio station manager may not know much about broadcasting or Ofcom licences, but have extensive experience of volunteer management, fund-raising, finance, training etc. Alternatively she may not know the community sector but may have extensive experience in radio production and media management. This is where your relationships with other stations (see p73) become most valuable. At present we are hoping to involve BBC managers as mentors for our own senior staff. As the community radio sector grows, we hope it will become commonplace for experienced station staff and even volunteers to offer mentoring to other community radio projects in their area.

### CRIB SHEET

#### External mentors:

- Are extremely useful
- Need not be community radio specialists, but it would help if they were

### Further reading and links

#### Volunteer management guides

**Essential Volunteer Management (2nd edition).**

Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch (*Directory of Social Change, 1998*)

**Recruiting Volunteers (2nd edition).** Fraser Dyer and Ursula Jost (*Directory of Social Change, 2002*)

**Volunteers and the Law.** Mark Restall (*Volunteering England, 2005*)

#### On-line guides

[www.volunteering.org.uk](http://www.volunteering.org.uk)

[www.vde.org.uk](http://www.vde.org.uk)

[www.askncvo.org.uk](http://www.askncvo.org.uk)

[www.do-it.org.uk](http://www.do-it.org.uk)

#### Mentoring

**The Mentor's Guide: Facilitating effective learning relationships.** Lois J Zachary and Laurent A Daloz (*Jossey Bass Wiley, 2000*)

**Implementing Mentoring Schemes.** Nadine Klasen and David Clutterbuck (*Butterworth, 2001*)