

Engaging volunteers in community organisations

4-D framework for building engagement in community organisations

Aim: What works and does not work to attract and retain more volunteers, increase community engagement, and build more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organisations.

Method: Research was done in the context of Parents and Citizens organisations (P&Cs) in Western Australia (WA). Opportunistic (state-wide P&C contact list) and snowball sampling from across WA enabled data saturation. Qualitative data was collected from in-depth surveys (238) and 30–60 minute discovery interviews (14). Data analysis and theory development was inductive and abductive.

Participant characteristics

Gender	206 female; 28 male
Age range	18 to 65+
School years of children	46 kindy; 224 primary school; 78 high school; no school-age children 10
Location	metropolitan 158; regional 69
On committee	yes 207; no 31
Identify as diverse	yes 78; no 160

Emerging finding: Groups with healthy volunteer pools also saw themselves as functioning well, and it was not feasible nor meaningful to treat these separately. The interconnection between volunteer numbers and the overall health of the organisation supported a complexity approach. While this makes the questions of how to attract volunteers less simple, it enables more agency in choosing strategies, and results in more positive flow-on effects.

Framework development: From participant stories, we identified four features of flourishing community organisations. These form a four-dimensional framework that can be applied in community organisations to catalyze positive change including attracting volunteers and building diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Dimension 1: Build 7 foundations of nonprofit organizing

Organisations that identified as successful and enjoyable to be a part of shared seven fundamental characteristics—a volunteering mindset, connecting people, knowing why they are there, achieving shared goals, being welcoming and fun, being organised and communicating well, and realising their potential. Operating using these organising principles correlated with attracting and retaining volunteers.

Dimension 2: Enter the action cycle

All participants shared stories of taking action. Steps in the action cycle to achieve positive change were observing, sensemaking, creating options, making decisions and acting, and reflecting and learning. Action cycles were both concurrent and sequential. The action cycle was entered at various stages, depending on context: opportunities, constraints, and individual strengths.

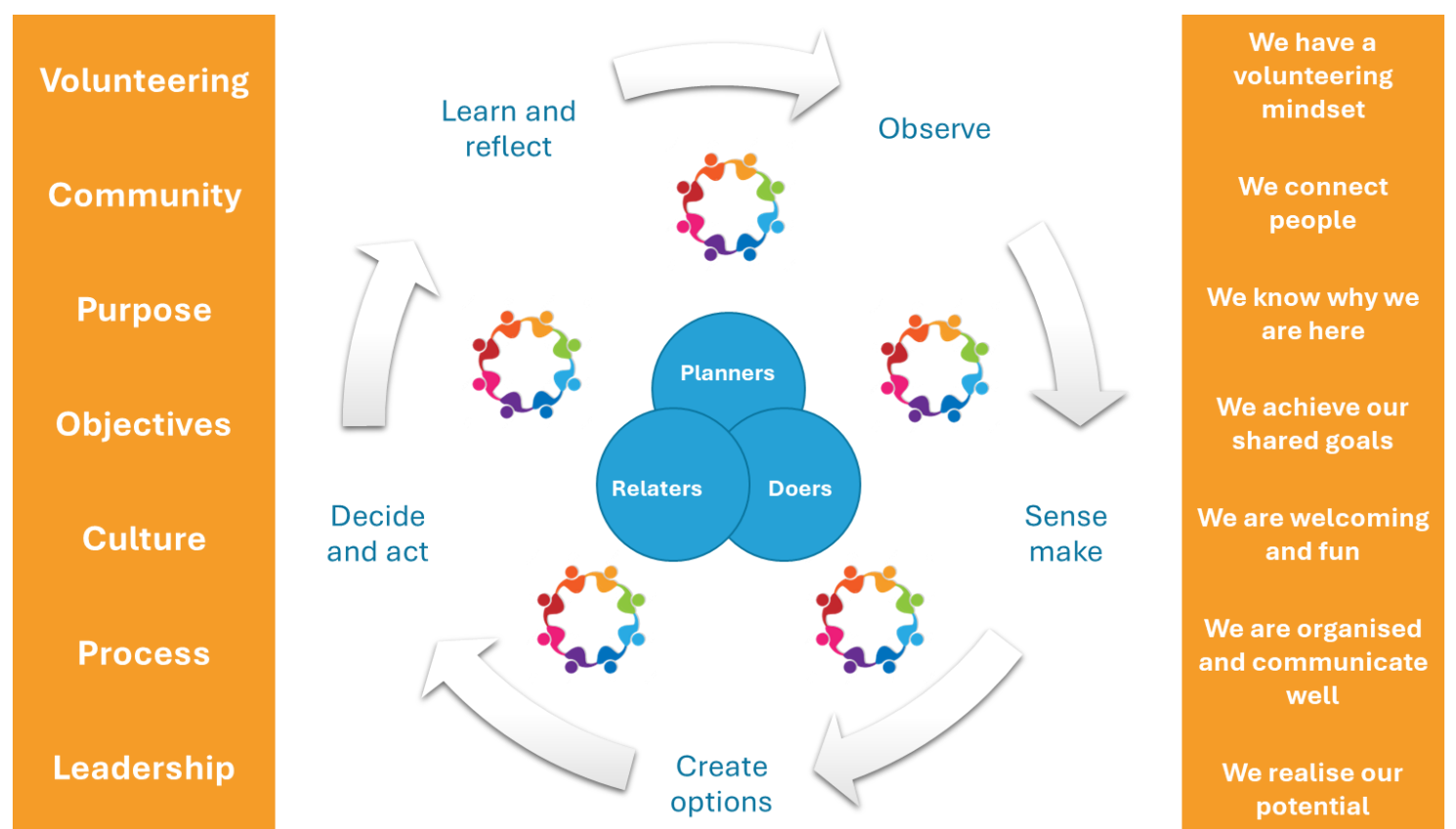
Dimension 3: Embrace your own style

Initiatives by planners, doers, and relaters were all reported as successful, as was teamwork combining different styles. By embracing their own style of doing things, people were able to achieve objectives and create a relaxed atmosphere where other volunteers felt welcome and that their contribution was valued and valuable.

Dimension 4: Remember: belonging, purpose, and enjoyment

Participants enjoyed connecting with other people to achieve something they valued, and when this dynamic was present, so were volunteers. That is, people were drawn to and engaged in communities and organisations where they felt belonging, purpose, and enjoyment. Volunteers were also less susceptible to burnout when these motivators were tangible for them.

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Belonging Purpose Enjoyment Belonging Purpose Enjoyment Belonging Purpose Enjoyment



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Research by Dr Katherine Sugars and Dr Megan Paull, Murdoch University, in partnership with Western Australian Council of State School Organisations (WACSSO), enabled by a grant from Volunteering WA.

Sugars, K. & Paull, M. (2024). *Volunteer engagement: Building parent participation in P&Cs across Western Australia*. Murdoch University.

https://researchportal.murdoch.edu.au/esploro/outputs/report/Volunteer-engagement-and-diversity-Building-parent/991005779317107891?institution=61MUN_INST