

Lessons learnt from innovation: Red Cross volunteers

Georgia Hay, The University of Western Australia

Before Red Cross can foster disaster resilience in communities, its volunteers must be resilient.

In late 2016, as part of the AIDR Resilience Ambassadors Program, I began working on a project with the Capacity Development Coordinator of the Australian Red Cross in Western Australia to help emergency services volunteers become leaders within the organisation. The Red Cross Emergency Services Volunteer Leadership Group (ESVLG) comprises volunteers with leadership experience or potential who support and enhance emergency preparedness, response and recovery activities through collaborative projects. The ESVLG is a committed group of volunteers who have achieved strong and integrated knowledge-sharing and collaboration networks.

Over the time of the project there have also been many lessons learnt that may be useful for others building capability in volunteer organisations.

You don't need to be an expert to help

Even though individuals were invited to the ESVLG because of their demonstrated leadership skills and their enthusiasm for Red Cross and emergency services, most members of the ESVLG expressed that they were unsure what they could contribute to the group, and to Red Cross.

It is true that any offer of an 'extra pair of hands' is usually welcomed. However, the most valuable ESVLG members are those who are engaged in the challenges and projects that Red Cross tackles. Sometimes, this is because that individual has a wealth of experience in the area, or perhaps within Red Cross in another country. However, just as often, they are individuals with a passion for emergency service; who are curious about and driven to uncover ways to make it better and who are willing to put up their hand and learn. No volunteer starts off as an expert.

Honesty is crucial for collaboration

Psychological safety is when team members feel it is okay to speak up about issues, ideas or questions, knowing that there won't be negative repercussions. It

sounds simple, but is often hard to establish in practice. At the beginning of one of the ESVLG meetings, one of the members expressed concern that the group was not making progress. The comment broke the ice and allowed the group to have an honest discussion about what was working, what was not, and then to brainstorm about how we could make more progress as a group. Moments that produce tension and discomfort can be profound triggers of progress for the group.

Just. Get. Started.

The ESVLG sessions were mapped out with starting points, progression points, and plans for 'immersion sessions' with Red Cross staff across preparedness, response and recovery. Brainstorming sessions were to establish prioritised lists of projects and tasks and form a steering group and sub-committees that had detailed Terms of Reference.

There were two reasons why this detailed planning was not suitable:

- 1. The 'return on investment' would not match the skills and capacities of volunteers.** ESVLG members would have spent a lot of time learning about the historical and current areas of need in Red Cross emergency services, only to then focus on one specific area or project; rendering time that they spent on the other areas useless. This was unnecessary and inefficient.
- 2. Volunteers want to *do* something.** The volunteers were enthusiastic about being involved and making a difference to the organisation at a higher level. The volunteers committed time, energy and capabilities. However, I wanted them to wait months and months before the ESVLG started working on projects. From a motivational perspective, this was not the right approach to take.

The ESVLG is currently embarking on three projects: Map the Gap, review of Psychological First Aid training and developing storytelling for use in training.