Hello

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Be More parkrun

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I work as a Consultant, Researcher and Coach focussed on people and organisational development. I have a particular interest and specialism in organisational change and particularly change involving volunteers. Before moving to work independently I worked and volunteered in large volunteer-involving organisations: most recently I was Director of People and Organisational Development at Samaritans and before that Director of Volunteering at the National Trust. As a volunteer I have been on the Board of Girlguiding UK and the Association of Volunteer Managers and I am currently a member of the HR Sub Committee of the Board of Amnesty International UK.

I am also one of the founding Event Directors of my local parkrun, which had it's first event in December 2018. I've been invited to run this workshop today because at the 2018 AVM conference, when giving one of the keynote speeches, I argued there was much volunteer-involving organisations could learn from parkrun and their approach to volunteer involvement. AVM have asked me here today to say more about what I meant!

By way of introduction to the content I'll talk through today I should say there is likely to be little "new news" in this: there is no silver bullet or golden ticket to great volunteer involvement. What parkrun do isn't all that revolutionary. What they do well is consistently deliver on many, if not all, of the key areas of good practice in volunteer management and the cumulative effect of that consistency is very powerful.   Getting involved as a parkrun volunteer has prompted me to think differently about some of my own work in volunteering and I hope this session will encourage you to do the same.

I should also be clear that I am not an expert on parkrun generally – there are many people here today who will have more experience in parkrun than me, and I am also not a representative of parkrun: this session is my personal perspective on what we can learn from their approach. It's based on my experience as a manager and leader of volunteering and as a parkrun Event Director.

My parkrun experience

I first got involved with parkrun in Summer 2018 when I registered an interest in setting up a new parkrun in the small town where I live. This was just after I moved to work independently and was part of my plan to organise my "work" time into thirds: a third on consultancy and coaching work, a third in research and a third actively volunteering.

Over the course of the next few months I pulled together a core team of volunteers and worked with them to do all we needed to in order to get Fire Service College parkrun up and running for early December 2018.

I am currently co-Event Director, a volunteer role I share with another member of the core team, and I am also the Volunteer Coordinator, taking the lead on making sure we have a full volunteer roster every week.

The insights and thoughts I'll share today are not about the process of setting up a parkrun, rather they are about their approach to volunteer involvement on a week in week out basis.

Accessible information

ht

transparency

https://wiki.parkrun.com/index.php/Main_Page

My first insight is about the degree of transparency with which parkrun operate: at this link anyone can access a whole range of information about parkrun policies, position statements and procedures. This is available to all volunteers and indeed anyone who wants to access it.

Update March 2020: Much of this information has now been moved to the new parkrun Volunteer Hub https://volunteer.parkrun.com/

It's interesting to reflect on how many organisations do this i.e. make this kind of information visible and accessible to everyone, and not have it sitting behind some form of organisational barrier.

I think this is important practically (in terms of giving easy access to information and not needing VPN access or an organisational email address or password) but also symbolically in indicating that this is an organisation for whom transparency matters and an organisation which has trust and confidence in volunteers and wider communities. It indicates a commitment to partnership and sharing of power that is key to how parkrun operate.
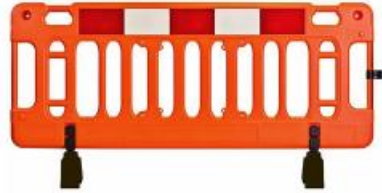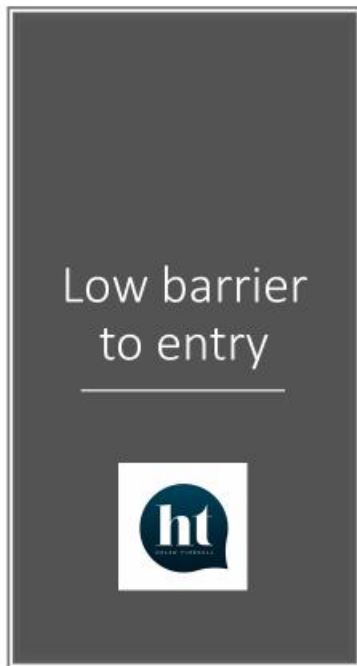
On a practical level there are very low barriers to entry for anyone looking to become a parkrun volunteer. The above link shows you the "role profiles" for each volunteer role: there are no more than a couple of sentences each. There are not lots of bullet points or lists of every task, there is no "person specification" or lengthy list of required previous experience.

To volunteer at parkrun you need only to be registered as a parkrunner, which you do via their website: it's the same process you use to register to take part as a runner or to jog or walk. It's quick, easy and free. You do it once and you can volunteer anywhere there is a parkrun.

As Volunteer Coordinator I regularly add people to the roster that I have never met or spoken to or even heard of: I have no idea, before they show up on the day, whether they have any relevant previous skills or experience.

And most of the time nothing goes wrong as a result.

We've had a couple of examples of a volunteer being placed into a role they struggled with (for example a volunteer who turned out to have severe dyslexia and who therefore struggled with being the person who manually writes down the barcode numbers of those who finish the run but find their barcode won't scan, and another who struggled numerically and was unable to reorder the finish tokens correctly after the event) but these are not serious issues. We find work arounds.

And part of what helps us feel relaxed about doing this as core team is the approach parkrun shared with us when we were setting up: remember it's only parkrun. Yes, it's great if people get an accurately timed result and finish position, but the most important thing is they got a run, then that they got a place and then they got a time. That sense of perspective is empowering to our core volunteer team. It doesn't make us slapdash or not care or cut corners – we always strive to run the best event we can, but we also feel secure that no-one is going to get mad with us if it goes a bit wrong one week. And we pass that relaxed approach on to the individual volunteers.

What can we learn from this "less is more" approach to role profiles? To recruitment?

And what can we learn from this healthy sense of perspective about meeting agreed standards? I'll say more on this slightly later.

The gap between signing up as a volunteer and getting started is also short: you can start almost immediately as there is no delay due to references being taken up or internal or external checks being carried out or corporate inductions being completed. You sign up and you get going.

At our parkrun (and this will be similar in most places) we ask volunteers to arrive half an hour before the run starts and we brief them on the event overall and their role and responsibilities for the day. These images are from lanyards we provide for our Marshals which act as their more detailed "role profile" as well as providing key health and safety information.

Induction to your first time volunteering doesn't include anything on organisational mission or history, nothing on organisational values and behaviours, nothing on strategy. Induction is the minimum amount of information needed to get you safely on duty. It's done in less than half an hour. Probably more like ten minutes.

What can we learn from this? To what extent are our good intentions around induction getting in the way of active volunteering taking place in a timely way? Are we making induction and initial training way more complicated than it needs be? And if so, why? Have we been unhelpfully seduced into thinking volunteer induction needs to be the same as staff induction?

Of course, this will be organisation and role dependent, but I can think back to roles I have overseen in organisations and see that the approach to induction and initial training might have actually created barriers to volunteering rather than encouraging it. For example, this parkrun approach could work perfectly well for a second-hand bookshop volunteer at a National Trust property, and yet we used to adopt a largely "one size fits all" approach to volunteer onboarding that was perhaps overly complex.

It's interesting here to reflect on some of the findings from the NCVO Time Well Spent research into volunteering too, which found that many volunteers felt their volunteering experience was overly bureaucratic and complex: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/policy-and-research/volunteering-policy/research/time-well-spent

Culture of welcome

Linked to the previous point is a slightly wider one about the overall culture of welcome and inclusion that parkrun has, whether for runners, walkers or volunteers.   One manifestation of this is the encouragement that all parkruns offer a specific first timer or "tourist" welcome briefing before each run. "Tourists" are parkrunners who have taken part in events before, but who are visiting that run site for the first time. This is my friend Melissa, who lives in Sydney (hence the kangaroo…) showing up the for the first timer welcome briefing at our parkrun.

This concept of specifically welcoming anyone new spills over into the tone and feel of volunteering too: the general culture of inclusion, acceptance and welcome runs through parkrun.

In volunteering terms it shows up in the way that new volunteers aren't distinguished from long serving volunteers, there's no hierarchy of volunteer roles (other than one person each week being Run Director) or hierarchy in behaviours or attitude.   While every parkrun will have one or two Event Directors these are largely behind the scenes roles, keeping a light touch oversight of the event overall.

Limited time commitment
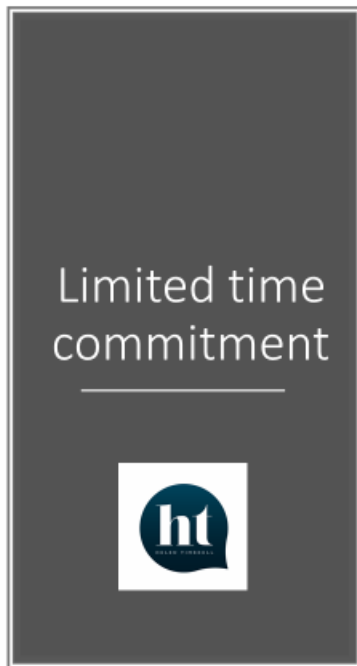
2 HOURS

One very obvious thing is the limited time volunteers need to give: at most it's two hours each time, typically 8.30am to 10.30am from start to finish.   It could be a bit longer if you were a volunteer involved in setting up the course that week, for the bulk of the volunteers on duty it is two hours.

There are no breaks to schedule in as Volunteer Coordinator and no half or full day commitments: in and out and probably home by 11am.

parkrun also does not pay travel expenses for volunteers.

No requirement for regular commitment

NO ROUTINE

https://www.parkrun.org.uk/fireservicecollege/futureroster/

Similarly, there is also no requirement for a routine or regular involvement: there is no request or obligation to volunteer regularly unless you want to.

Anyone can see the roster for future weeks – see the link above for an example – enabling potential volunteers to pick which week or weeks they want to volunteer and in which roles.

In the past there was some suggestion from parkrun that regular runners should be encouraged to think about volunteering once for every ten times they run, but more recently parkrun have distanced themselves from this, feeling it creates an unhelpful sense of pressure.

Our experience at my local parkrun is that we have many, many volunteers who gift time regularly, but we don't proactively encourage this or chase it down. Instead we often use the phrase "helping once makes a huge difference" and constantly reinforce the message that volunteering once does not mean you are locked in for good. We're also very clear about not appearing to favour or prefer regular volunteers and we certainly don't look to ditch any volunteers who can only offer time infrequently.

Again, I think it's interesting for us to reflect on the way in which many volunteer-involving organisations create, explicitly or implicitly, expectations of what minimum levels of commitment should be from a volunteer and to think about how effective they really are. And how many of those expectations come from staff and how many from other volunteers?

Is it possible that we have so many regular volunteers at parkrun precisely *because* we haven't made frequency of commitment a requirement and instead it's been entirely a personal choice?

Framily
opportunities

One of the joys of parkrun for me personally is that it is one of the very few real and genuine opportunities for "framily volunteering": that word comes from research I commissioned at the National Trust many years ago, to explore barriers to volunteering with us. At the time the research agency referred to the need for the National Trust to create more "framily" opportunities i.e. opportunities to volunteer with family members or existing friendship groups.   This has been something many organisations have been working on for a while and I'm not sure anyone has really cracked this yet.

This picture shows Arthur and Annabel on duty with their mum (who took the pic) as Marshals. Having her children with her on a Saturday morning doesn't stop Hannah volunteering at parkrun – they just do it together. We also have several examples of three generations of one family signing up to volunteer on the same day. And I have volunteered as a Marshal with good friends when they have been staying for the weekend: we get to chat and hang out and have fun together, at the same time as being on duty as a Marshal.

Key in this is how easy it is: this framily volunteering isn't a separate programme or new or parallel set of roles or activities. It's the core volunteering roles being done by family or friendship groups together. It's not different or special or taking up lots of development time, it's "just" part of core operations.   The same roles can be done by individuals or by pairs or small groups.

So again, this makes we question whether we are making volunteering simply too complicated?   What would a stripped back approach look like in your organisation?   And particularly when thinking about group and family volunteering?

Instant impact

As a parkrun volunteer the impact you make is instantly felt: you literally see and hear and feel the difference you are making as hundreds of people run past you. This is one of our regular volunteers Tess, marshalling recently.

You sign up, you turn up, you're briefed for no more than 10 minutes and you're off.   I think there is some interesting research – again this may have been when I was at the National Trust – about the difference between volunteers feeling they had made a "contribution" and feeling they had made a "difference": the latter is much more powerful in creating a sense of satisfaction for volunteers and much more likely to make them want to come back. At parkrun, as a volunteer, you know right away that you have made a difference: the event literally won't run without you. And because of the overarching culture many, many runners will thank you as they go past. Whether by calling out "Thank you Marshal" (which still gives me goosebumps each time!) or through a high five or a message on the event Facebook page afterwards.

I'll also add one unrelated but interesting note about Tess: she only every volunteers as a Marshal. Tess doesn't want to do any of the other volunteer roles. After a few weeks of Marshalling I thought she might want some variety so started to put her on the roster in other roles, until she took me aside and said she just wants to Marshal. She explained she had a really busy, demanding job through the week and even thinking about being a Timekeeper or Barcode Scanner felt like too much responsibility for a Saturday morning. She just wanted to Marshal and clap and cheer and high five everyone.   This was a really interesting wake up call for me: my assumption was variety was good (because that's what I'd like!) but actually the routine and relative lack of responsibility was exactly right for Tess. A good reminder to take the time to understand volunteer motivations on a one to one basis!

This is a grand title for a simple thing. But that simple thing speaks to an important point about how volunteers are viewed within parkrun i.e. how much they are valued and respected. I have spent years in and around organisations that benefit from the support of visitors or members or donors as well as volunteers and often there is an implicit hierarchy about which forms of support are valued most: this isn't the case in parkrun. Getting involved as a runner, jogger, walker or volunteer is all equally valued and the approach to how that involvement is enabled, tracked and managed is very integrated.

You see it very literally in the way in which the form of recognition for volunteers (a milestone T-shirt) is the same as the form of recognition used for runners or walkers – also a milestone T-Shirt.

Crucially the recognition for volunteer contribution is not about length of service – it's not about how long you have been involved – it's specifically about how many shifts you have done i.e. you are eligible for a volunteer T-shirt once you have volunteered on 25 occasions. The first T-shirt you quality for as a runner is after 50 runs, 10 if you are a junior runner.   It's not about the length of your relationship with the organisation, it's about how much you have done.

And the recognition is very public: it's visible for others to see and I witness many volunteers who are enormously proud to wear their 25 T-shirt.

It's interesting to note though, that at the moment the 25 Tee is the only one available to volunteers – while running shirts are also available for 100, 250 and 500, the only volunteer recognition is at 25. This feels like a gap and I think something parkrun will soon look to fill.

The links above are also interesting in showing the integrated way in which parkrun thinks about participation: the first link is an example of the way in which it captures and shares data on the overall involvement in parkrun anyone has.   You can see all the occasions someone (in this case me – please don't judge my times!) has run or volunteered. It's an integrated record and celebration of overall involvement.

The second link is an example of a weekly results page and in this you can also see the public recognition given to participants: if they have a volunteer tee or a runner milestone tee you see that alongside their names, if you select to see the "detailed" rather than "compact" results (top right of the results table) . And the green leaf is a way of recognising when someone is a first timer at this particular event.

Crucially all of that info – my results and weekly event results, are available for anyone to see. The culture of openness and transparency is clear.

Another small but crucial point: the recognition offered is relevant. This is an event about running and the recognition is a sports T-shirt. Simple.

It's not a long service badge or a certificate or a framed watercolour or a book or a photograph – all of which I have seen used in organisations and which may have their place. At parkrun though it's something directly related to the task in hand. And it helps further promote parkrun.

Also, key to this is that every parkrun uses the same form of recognition – there is no local variation on the core recognition: it's always a tee. Wherever you are in the world.

And the recognition and "counting" of your 25 shifts is in total, not just at your local parkrun, so there is an integrated approach to recording and celebrating your involvement as a volunteer across the movement, not just locally.

This approach facilitates connections between events and reinforces the sense of being part of a global community: there is a very strong sense of being involved in something much bigger than your own event when you take part in parkrun as a volunteer.

One thing to note on the Tees though – which you may or may not agree with – once you have qualified to receive one you have to request it and cover the costs of postage and packing. Again, I think this is interesting for us to reflect on and compare with approaches in our own organisations or organisations we're familiar with. Are some organisations "over-servicing" in terms of volunteer recognition?

And/but, while I'm yet to come across anyone in parkrun who really objects to paying for postage does it contradict the otherwise inclusive approach at parkrun?

One final brief word on recognition: volunteers receive two Thank You emails every single time they volunteer. One from their local event and one from the UK parkrun team. Every single time.

Volunteers are also thanked publicly every week in the briefing to runners given by the Run Director, ahead of starting the run, and almost always this is followed by a short applause from the runners.

Every. Single. Time.

Your contribution as a volunteer is noted, publicly celebrated and thanked every time you are on duty.

I'm not sure many volunteer-involving organisations can say their thanks and recognition is that routine, that public or that integrated across local and national teams.

I've touched on this before but for me a key strength of parkrun, as a volunteer and a runner, is the way in which you feel simultaneously part of something very local and also global.

Individuals events have a very clear community focus *and* link neatly to the global movement.

This link is achieved through smart use of social media and communications but also through the universal approach to role design, volunteer recognition and systems and processes.

The consistency is key to that shared sense of local and global. It's one thing. One operating model.

And that adds to its accessibility and enables volunteers to "transfer" their support of the "cause" or "mission", including when they are on holiday or away from home.

A connected
community

As I have said a key part of this local and global experience comes through smart use of communications and especially social media.

When you become a parkrun the UK operation establishes your Facebook page and Twitter feed and links you into relevant existing Facebook groups, for example I am in a Facebook group for parkrun Event Directors and a Facebook group for core teams in Gloucestershire parkruns. You are also encouraged to use What's App as a core team.

Key in this is the way in which these things are set up for you and the way in which they support communications between volunteers: it's a very networked community, working horizontally much more than vertically.

Update March 2020: parkrun are increasingly moving away from Facebook for core volunteer groups and instead encouraging the use of Slack. It will be interesting to see the impact of this.

Space to shine
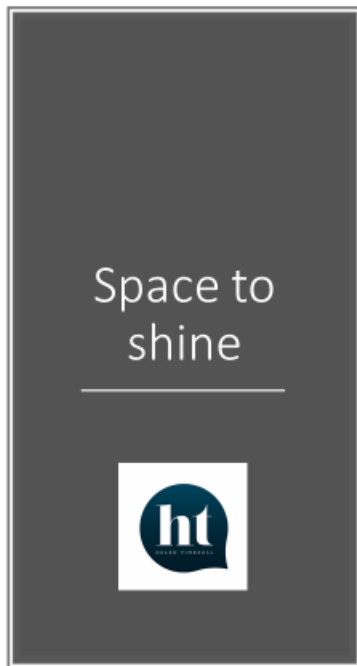
What's obvious in the use of social media and especially Facebook is the very "hands off" approach parkrun UK have to supporting local events. There is very little supervision or oversight – it's very light touch – and there is no sense of anyone breathing down your neck or checking you are doing things "right" or meeting required standards.

And that's very freeing and very empowering: my experience as a volunteer doesn't feel overly "managed", but I feel well supported. And a lot of that support is peer support, enabled and encouraged by parkrun, but not prescriptively managed by it.

This speaks again to the trust parkrun has in people, and specifically in its volunteers, to exercise sound judgement in the goal of delivering great events.
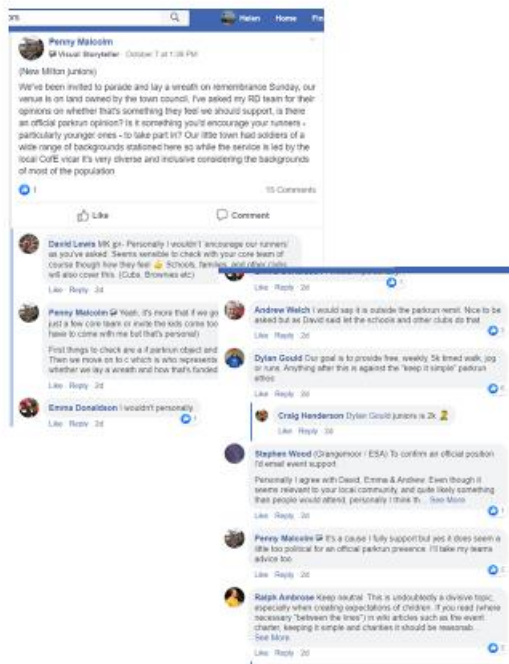
One example of this "hands off" approach is with regard to the extent to which parkrun get involved in online discussions or debates between core teams or Event Directors: they very, very rarely do. The space for self-regulation is significant and it largely works well.

If I compare this with approaches in other organisations I am familiar with I can recall losing hours and hours tying ourselves in knots trying to regulate online discussions or wade in with views and policy and organisation wide perspectives and information. To what end? What might have happened if we had left the space to be more self-regulating? If we had trusted more in the overall community of volunteers?

This self-regulating space also plays a powerful role in learning and development for volunteers, especially those in core teams and responsible for overseeing events: these online channels are where resources are shared, questions answered, ideas exchanged and technical issues solved – it's a sort of mass "phone a friend" facility and a great example of the way in which this networked community supports itself, without having to rely on the central organisation.

There is no significant "training" for core teams, other than shadowing at existing events to learn core roles: problems and issues are dealt with as they arise via the community.

So, when I reflect on all of this I am interested in what volunteer-involving organisations can steal with pride from parkrun:

- Simplified role design?
- Pared back role profiles/role descriptions?
- Removing organisational inductions and focussing instead on task and role training?
- A more integrated, relevant and consistent approach to volunteer recognition?
- Hands off support, focussed on empowering and enabling rather than managing?

And more generally what can we learn about the culture and spirit we create around volunteering? One of trust and respect, inclusivity and flexibility: how can we incorporate more of these approaches into our work?

When I reflect on all of this, I think there are five key themes that underpin what I have been talking about.

The first one is about that culture of trust and respect: respect volunteers as equal partners, trust that they will do good things.

This underpins everything: at parkrun it is crystal clear that volunteers are trusted and respected. Lots of organisations say "we couldn't do it without volunteers" but at parkrun it feels real, not just like a strapline. I can think of many organisations who say that sentence but would rather not have volunteers if they had a choice.

Is there are gap between what your organisation says and what it feels or does? To what extent does your organisation consistently demonstrate trust and respect for volunteers?

And if it doesn't do this consistently, get curious about why not.

Adult/adult relationships
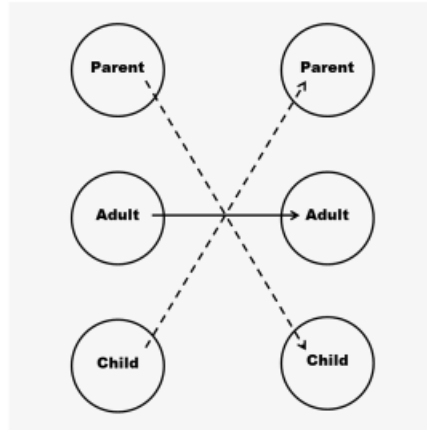
A key part of that trust and respect is the extent to which relations with volunteers can be characterised as "adult-adult".

We don't need to get into detail about transactional analysis here but my observation would be that sometimes relations between staff and volunteers can become parent/child i.e. with staff talking to or treating volunteers as if they were children to be controlled, rather than as equal partners working together on a shared endeavour.

Volunteering works best when there are grown up expectations and interactions. What do you need to do in your organisation to ensure this is consistently the case?

"Good enough"

PERFECT
IS THE ENEMY
OF GOOD.

——— Voltaire
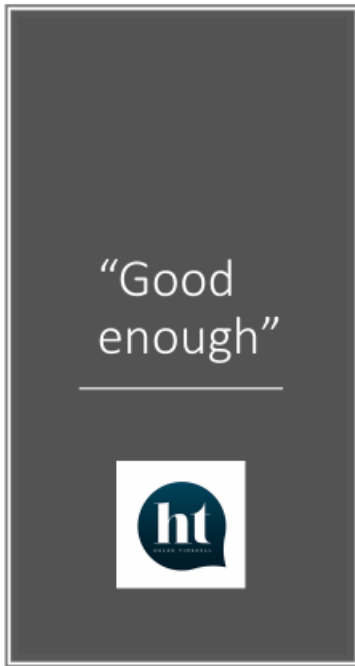
Linked to the previous two in some ways is a focus on "good enough": this isn't stated explicitly but is a very real felt sense when volunteering with parkrun.   Yes, things have to be done right to ensure a safe and fun event, but there is a healthy sense of perspective running through the whole thing and an absence of any unrealistic or unnecessary imposed "standards". The freedom that creates, the absence of a sense of pressure or obligation is a key factor in making parkrun volunteering so attractive, I think.

It's not precise, it's not a test, crucially it never feels that someone is waiting for you to fail so they can step in and correct you.

In our organisations do we create unnecessarily detailed and/or high standards for some of the activities volunteers are involved in?   Why do we do this?

Are we too risk averse? Do we lack trust in our volunteers? Do we not respect what they have to offer?

And some of you may be thinking that this is OK for parkrun because it's a low risk activity. To that I would say, think again: parkrun needs to be clear on issues of safeguarding, parkrun injuries are not uncommon, people have died taking part in parkrun.   This is not a volunteering activity without risk or responsibility and yet there is still space for trust and a healthy sense of perspective about being "good enough".

A culture of
kindness

The fourth theme for me is also implicit – I've never seen it stated – but it's very real: parkrun has a culture of kindness.

You see that in its inclusivity, the provision of welcome, the sense of "good enough". It's hard to pin this down and articulate and evidence clearly, but it is a very real feeling.

It comes in part from the clarity about not judging how fast or slow people are when they run, jog or walk. It comes in part from making sure no-one who takes part comes in "last" (through the provision of the volunteer role of Tail Walker – see above), it comes in part from the tone and content of national communications and the implicit encouragement to replicate that in local comms.

It comes from always running a first timers welcome briefing and always thanking and applauding volunteers in the full run briefing.

It comes from lots of small things that come together to create a space that is overwhelmingly kind.

Maybe it comes from the fact that people mostly are good and given the chance they want to do good and be good together.

And the final theme – which is made explicit – is about keeping it simple.

When you begin the process of setting up a new parkrun you are matched to a local regional ambassador (another volunteer) who supports you through the process. And this is the thing they tell you is most important about parkrun: Keep it simple.

This is helpful for thinking about all aspects of event logistics but it's also so helpful when thinking about our approach to volunteering:

The key question I think more of us could ask ourselves in our approach to planning for and supporting volunteer involvement is, "Have I made this as simple as I can?".

And if not, why not?

And if we follow that up with:

Am I demonstrating trust and respect for my volunteers?

and

Am I being kind?

I think we could all make good progress with creating the kinds of volunteering that people want to do.

Thank you

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