Using Design Thinking to innovate and problem solve

A practical guide for leaders of volunteers

In my experience as a volunteer manager, it can sometimes be challenging to get buy-in across my organisation, when it comes to involving volunteers in new and innovative ways. When planning for the future or for an upcoming project, including volunteers to maximise impact often isn't at the forefront of my colleague's minds.

This was perfectly highlighted when a couple of weeks ago, our corporate team carried out a needs analysis: they asked each team to come up with ways that our corporate partners could support them, be it pro-bono work, or gifts in kind. Teams came up with a long list of skills they were looking for and projects that would benefit from expertise. I had carried out a similar exercise for volunteering a few months previously, with little success, and yet looking down the list, a large proportion of the opportunities could have easily been filled by volunteers.

This is not to dismiss the valuable contribution that corporate partners might bring to The Charity, but it seems there is something about the word 'volunteer' that stops people coming up with new, potentially valuable ways for people to donate their time and skills. So how can we get people thinking differently?

This was exactly the conversation I was having with a colleague a few weeks ago, who suggest I look into Design Thinking. While in no way a new idea, it was new to me – so I went away and did my research (there's some useful content in this podcast, if you're interested).

So what is Design Thinking?
Design Thinking is a process for creative problem solving. At its core, it's a human-centred. It focuses on and seeks to understand the people who are involved, redefining problems and identifying new solutions – that might not have been initially obvious. The idea is that using a Design Thinking approach will lead to better products, services or processes.

I decided to try this approach with The Charity's regional fundraising team, to identify new opportunities for volunteers, to maximise the teams' impact, while also providing a great experience for those donating their time. Community volunteers have always played a vital role for The Charity, raising awareness, attending fundraising events, giving talks and managing collection tins. But as this team has developed over time, so too has developed lots of untapped potential for volunteering.

Before running the session, I felt uncertain about how it would be received. But what I quickly found was that Design Thinking allowed team members to feel heard, their concerns understood. By taking a collaborative approach to problem solving, participants were bought into the process and were excited about the potential solutions. We came away with three distinct ideas about how volunteers might support the regional team in future, and with an action plan to begin making this a reality. The next step? To test these ideas with volunteers.

Below I've put together a quick guide to running a Design Thinking workshop. There are plenty of different activities you could do to achieve the same outcome – but I hope it's a helpful starting point.

If I could give one piece of advice to anyone thinking of facilitating a session, it would be this: let go of what you think are great ideas. Although with your volunteer manager's hat on, you might see lots of opportunities, bringing these to the table goes against the principles of Design Thinking. Ideas should come from within the room, as a result of going through the problem solving process. As a facilitator it can be hard to begin a session not knowing the direction it might take – but I promise it's worth it for the outcome.

I'd love to hear how you get on!

Running a mini Design Thinking workshop: a how-to guide

A quick note of reassurance. This session was put together with leaders of volunteers in mind. While in an ideal world you might have a day to run a workshop like this, in reality, getting all the people you need in one room for several hours can be challenging enough, never mind the other 45 things on your to-do list. I'd suggest giving yourself three hours if you can.

If you've got more time, perhaps take a deeper dive, journey mapping and testing your ideas.

1. Set the tone

Start the session by making it clear that the room is a safe space, without judgement, for people to say what they think. Encourage honesty and for people to share their opinions openly. If participants are open about their concerns and worries, it make it easier to come up with solutions.

2. Break the ice

Start the session with a quick constellation exercise. Standing in the middle of the room, read aloud some statements relevant to the problem you'll be working on (i.e. 'my experience supporting community volunteers has been extremely positive' or 'I am open to the idea of changing how we think about community volunteers'). Ask people to position themselves according to how they feel, standing close to you if they agree, and far away if they disagree.

Next, stand beside a few people and ask them why they have positioned themselves where they have. Standing next to people is important here – you're meeting them where they are at. This will help you to gather the feeling in the room and might generate useful discussion.

3. Understand your users

The next part of the session is about empathy - getting into the mind-set of the users in your scenario. This could be staff members, volunteers or the organisation as a whole. To do this, you can use what's known as the 'third entity triangle'.

Third entity triangle activity
From your group, select a couple of people to participate in this activity. Ask both individuals to move from point to point around an invisible triangle on the floor. When standing at the first two points of the triangle, ask your participants to embody specific users. They will speak and act as if they are that person. Ask a series of prompt questions at each point, to understand how they think, what they feel. Then ask them to physically shake off that persona, before moving onto the next.
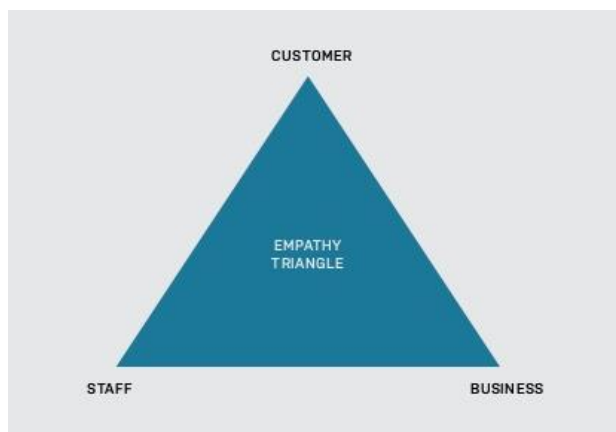
In the third and last position, ask your participants to play the role of an impartial observer. Other people from the group can also contribute their thoughts at this point.

<div style="border:1px solid #000; padding:10px;">

Example questions:

Position 1 – a staff member/ yourself
- How would you describe your experience of supporting volunteers?
- How effective do you feel the current model of volunteering is?
- Where does volunteering fit in with other aspects of your role?
- What do you feel could be better about community volunteering?

Position 2 – a volunteer
- How does volunteering make you feel?
- What do you want to get out of being a volunteer?
- What is your life outside of volunteering?
- What would you say to others thinking of becoming a volunteer?

Position 3 – the charity/ neutral observer
- What would the charity say/ what would the charity want to happen?
- What would the charity's supporters want to happen?
- What have you learnt from watching/ embodying position 1 and 2?

</div>

As a group, reflect on the activity. Get people to share what they've learnt, and come up with a series of 'point of view' statements. Each statement should focus around a user, their need, and an insight. The users can be fictional. For example;

'*Joan, a volunteer for The Charity in the midlands, wants to do more to support The Charity outside of the two events she currently attends per year. Joan works as an office manager and is only available in the evenings and on weekends.*'

'*Tina, fundraising manager in the north, finds it difficult to manage the increase in workload during the charity's big fundraising campaigns, when she needs to make phone calls and follow up emails to all supporters taking part in this new fundraising activity.*'

4. Come up with solutions

At this stage, you have a better understanding the problem you are trying to solve, and of the different audiences involved. Now it's time to generate some ideas.

It's tempting here to just throw lots of post it notes out and ask people to come up with solutions, but adding a bit more structure to the process will enable you to work through new ideas, taking you from blue-sky thinking, to practical next steps. To do this, you can use an activity which is based around Edward De Bono's 'six thinking hats'.

Six thinking hats activity
Most people have a preferred way of approaching a problem. Within your group you may have a natural optimist, someone who tends to go by their gut feeling, and someone who will start by looking for practical solutions. Using the six thinking hats activity forces people to step outside of their natural thought process, which produces a more rounded solution.

Under each coloured 'hat' is a series of questions that you can use to guide the group - take a look at the examples below.

White Hat	Green Hat	Black Hat
• What current information do we have about this? • What do I know about this? What is relevant? • What information would we like to have, how are we going to get this?	• What if we could start from scratch, what new ideas are possible? • What are the solutions/ alternatives? • What are some 'out-of-the-box' ideas? information?	• What do we need to be careful of, what are the problems with this? • Are there obstacles? • What might go wrong? • What might be the negative consequences?
Yellow Hat	**Red Hat**	**Blue Hat**
• What are the positives? • What might we gain from this? • What is the best case scenario? • What might be some benefits?	• How do I feel about these ideas? • What is my impression of this? • Does this give me a heavy or light feeling? • Do I like/ dislike this idea?	• How might this be organised? • How can we move forward? • What practical things do we need to think about?

Starting with the white hat, think about any data and information available about the problem that hasn't already been brought to the table.

Once you've done this, use the green hat to get people thinking creatively (cue the post it notes). Encourage people to think about all solutions, regardless of limits on resource or time. Once you've done this, collate the ideas and refine the list into a manageable number of ideas.

Next, split into small groups and, using the black and yellow hats, give each group the chance to think about the negatives and positives of one of the ideas. By starting with the potential obstacles and what could go wrong, participants will be in a better to position to see solutions and benefits. Afterwards, bring people back together to share their thoughts.

The red hat will now give you a chance to check back in and see how people are feeling– which ideas do they like? Do they feel that some of the obstacles are insurmountable?

And lastly, use the blue hat to start action planning. If you are to take these ideas forward, what would the next steps need to be? Come up with some key actions as a group, and use this space to think about possible timescales or to delegate actions.

5. Debrief

Round off your workshop with a quick debrief. If needed, dedicate some time for reflection and discussion, ask participants if they enjoyed the workshops and what they learned. Ensure the group is happy with the agreed action points and next steps.