

Volunteers – help or a hindrance?

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This week Barry is talking about the concept of ‘getting the right people on the bus’. When you’re early in your conservation career you might wonder if this is really relevant. Let’s face it, you’re more likely to be the one being recruited, than vice versa; but I think that if you start to consider these issues early in your career it will stand you in very good stead.

I’ve now been working professionally in nature conservation for 15 years, and I can honestly say that the most challenging issues I have faced over this time have always been to do with people. One of the things about conservation is that the chances are that you will be managing people in the very early stages of your career: even if you do not have staff to line manage, you will almost certainly be working with volunteers. Every year thousands of volunteers dedicate literally millions of hours to the nature conservation movement in the UK. From helping with habitat management, to greeting visitors to nature reserves, they get involved in just about every aspect. When I meet colleagues from other countries, they are always amazed at the amount of time people in the UK are willing to volunteer. It is a real asset, of course, but it also comes with its challenges. I’ve worked with volunteers since I got my first job at Rutland Water. It’s often extremely rewarding, but I think it’s fair to say that it can also be very frustrating. There are many occasions when I’ve felt it would be far easier to do a job myself than to have volunteers trying to ‘help’. And that’s one of the reasons why I think that this week’s topic is so relevant even when you’re just starting out on your own conservation journey. How do you make sure volunteers are an asset rather than a drain on your time and energy?

One of the things that Barry discusses this week is the capability and attitude matrix. The vertical axis represents how effective a person is in their current role, while the horizontal axis is about their behaviours and attitude. As Barry explains on page 100 of *Lead Like Mary*, “each axis is numbered from 0-10. A person delivering steady, if unspectacular results, but who has a great attitude which has a positive impact on the rest of the team, might score 6 on the vertical axis and 8 on the horizontal axis. Conversely someone who delivers good results consistently but has a poor attitude which can spread negative energy might be an 8 and a 2.” This matrix really resonates with me because the longer I work in conservation and with volunteers, the more I think that finding people with the right attitude is equally, if not more important, than anything else. The fact is that if you have a volunteer or member of staff with a good attitude then the rest will follow. They are likely to positively embrace any training or advice you offer them, and strive to improve. In my experience it is far more difficult to work with people with the wrong attitude. Even if they are performing well, someone with a poor or negative attitude can really drag other people down; and in the long run it starts to have a negative effect. It’s very easy to slip into the trap of excusing someone with a poor attitude simply because it’s ‘what they’ve always been like’ (I’ve done it myself) but that does no one any favours.

I think there is a misconception in conservation that any volunteer is a good volunteer: that any help is good help. But I really don’t think that’s the case. I would much rather have a small team of really engaged volunteers with the right attitude, than a larger team of people with the wrong attitude. A common problem myself and people I have worked with over the years have come up against, is that of the volunteer who thinks he knows best. A large proportion of volunteers working in conservation are retired, and many have had very senior roles in their professional careers. This is often a real asset, but there is no doubt that some men of that generation find it hard to take instructions from someone much younger than them, particularly if – dare I say it – that person happens to be a young woman. This can be really hard to deal with when you’re in the early stages of your career and I can

think of numerous examples when members of my team have been upset by this kind of attitude. This is a classic example of someone who might perform well in their volunteer tasks, but who has a poor attitude. If their behaviour continues unchecked then they can start to have a very negative impact.

What this all means is that I think it's important to treat the recruitment of volunteers as you would the recruitment of staff. Don't just accept help from anyone; by all means think about the specific skills required in the role, but also consider the personal qualities you think are important, and try and tailor your recruitment of volunteers around that. The more difficult issue, is how you deal with existing volunteers with a negative attitude. Some of them may have been helping for years and be very set in their ways. Whatever the case, it is vital to face up to any issues relating to bad attitude and to make the person aware of how their behaviour is having a negative impact. You should not have to tolerate a bad attitude or to make excuses for it: make it clear that it is not acceptable. If having this conversation has no effect, then getting these people 'off the bus' will be best for everyone. It's also vital to make sure you invest time in the volunteers who do have the right attitude. If you make them feel valued, and give them opportunities to progress and learn new skills then you'll be amazed at the results. If you have the right team behind you then your day-to-day work will get a whole lot easier.

I'm not saying any of this is easy, but if you get into the right habits early in your conservation career it will stand you in very good stead for the challenges that lie ahead.