



## **WORKSHOP 2: Volunteer management.**

**Managing values, developing skills. Eduard Sala Paixau.** Director of Obra Social Santa Lluïsa de Marillac. Companyia de les Filles de la Caritat de Sant Vicenç de Paül.

**Often, we are not what we say we are.** In addition, we don't always act in accordance with our beliefs or with what we say our beliefs are. Perhaps, sometimes, we don't even believe what we say we believe in.

This happens to us as individuals, and can also repeat itself at the entity or collective organization level.

Entities and organizations are made up of teams of people that do not function as watertight compartments: the "knowledge" and the "know how" are strongly linked to the "being" and to individual and collective values.

**Knowing the values is not enough. It is necessary to live by them.**

**The corporate identity of entities only comes true when the whole team – professional and/or volunteer– shares common values that are daily made explicit through most of the individual and collective actions.**

The key elements are: *what, why, for what purpose, for whom and how...* But the one in charge of putting things into practice is *WHO*.

Do we often ask ourselves what our identity is? What is the difference between our own identity and that of anyone else? What are the values reflected by our individual and collective actions? Do they coincide with the values we have attributed in writing to our project or that we make explicit in our speech when we talk about the entity and the work that we are developing?

A project is defined by its identity, which is given by several elements: some of them are substantial (they cannot change without changing the identity), while others are accidental (they can change without modifying what we are).

What is substantial and what is accidental in our entities and actions?

How do we manage our entities so that the set of substantial elements which define our identities will endure?

**The values made explicit in the project should be substantial elements of the entity's collective identity,** and this is not always the case. For this reason, if we understand that our collective identity is shaped from a specific willingness or project that is shared by several people, it is essential to learn how to manage values.

What defines us as an entity does not depend on a single person, but on the whole group. Identity *"can only be defined from the interaction of a community*



*of agents who share the same purpose, the same goal and some values that are inherent to the way in which they behave and act*<sup>1</sup>. (P. RICOEUR<sup>1</sup>).

**Managing shared values involves being committed to developing common skills that will ensure a shared HOW.**

This is why it is so important to keep a close eye on the processes to manage volunteer work: the welcoming, initial information sessions, backup, continuing education, participation mechanisms, shared assessment, end of the collaboration...

Even nowadays, too many entities limit volunteer work to the task of putting into practice the *what...* What our societies need instead is people who are willing to go beyond the action.

Volunteers are not (should not be) neutral implementers, but **transformation agents** instead... however, this is not always the case.

As a matter of fact, I don't believe we can talk about "*volunteer work*"; we must speak in plural: "*volunteer works*". This will help us be more accurate when we refer to an often complex and capitalized on scenario: plurality of motivations, expressions, world views... in an environment characterized by some individualization in the participation strategies.

We often hear speeches and voluntary work policies focused on the **humanitarian action individual dimension**, in a context of progressive expenditure reduction on social policies and certain generalization of "decorative" forms of participation, where the involvement is limited to a personal collaboration which, in its turn, is reduced to just providing services.

The **collective dimension of volunteer work is often** consigned to the background: it is more difficult to manage and entails the risk of becoming an **annoying agent of transformation, interpellation, creativity and social mobilization**.

The same way as everyone should have a clear idea about *from where* the voluntary action is being carried out, I believe the **organizations should be vigilant in order to guarantee a shared *from where* and *how*, not only in speeches but also on the field**.

Thus, the management of the entity's volunteers is not neutral either: it can be a reflection of the dominant social values that tend to promote a certain degree of

<sup>1</sup> P. RICOEUR (1993): *Amor i justícia*. Caparrós Editores. Madrid.



autism on the citizen/individual/consumer's part when passively receiving offers and closed assignments... or it can integrate the transformational potential that defines it.

**Solidarity is a global and collective project;** it is never an individual one. And in this project everybody adds up, no one can be spared... but not everything is permissible.

I personally believe in solidarity as an expression of the individual and collective being and as an element to transform and build up society (not as an element to perpetuate what already exists).

Solidarity should not limit itself to the temporary and physical framework directly related to volunteer work initiatives. It should be present in all dimensions of our lives (politics, family, relationships, associations, consumption...), which seem to be often ruled by other ways of thinking.

**Volunteer work is a way of life,** a commitment that holds us responsible and binds us to a long term project, and not to a specific assignment.

In spite of the diversity of personal motivations to "become a volunteer", I believe we should keep in mind that **the ultimate goal of the commitment is beyond oneself** (beyond personal satisfaction, self interest...), since another party is at stake: the Other / the Others (the person, the people and the groups that we get involved with by means of the voluntary action).

For years I have believed that one of the greatest failures in our systems of services to people has been our **inability to really become core agents at creating inclusive bonds** to promote links outside of the entities networks. We often have limited our activity to generating artificial relationships that were not chosen by us and to manage what already existed.

We need to conceive volunteer work as **relationship-based**, where **values, proximity** and **presence** are important. That is the key to its potential. None of the existing systems of services to people will be able to cover this function. Organizations need to know how to manage values and develop abilities because not everything is permissible. From the perspective we are suggesting, managing identity values involves a paradoxal commitment: **a personal option becomes a collective action.**

This raises a challenge for entities: to back up the feeling of belonging to something that does not depend on points of reference with an expiration date,

## II Congrés Europeu del Voluntariat

Barcelona  
9, 10 i 11 de novembre de 2011



and to know what are the abilities that need to be worked on in order to specify the values entailed in individual and collective actions.

Voluntary work is not an end in itself. Its final purpose, I believe, is to transform a system that nowadays generates orphans when it comes to human relationships.