

Volunteer organisations need systems too

This year, I have been reflecting on something interesting in my volunteer work. I am a Rotarian, and it is probably one of the best decisions I have ever made. I love everything about it, especially the learning. Every day, in one way or another, Rotary teaches me something new.

Like many professionals, I spend most of my days working in structured environments. Roles are clear. Expectations are set. There are deadlines, systems, follow-ups, and accountability. You understand what you are responsible for and what success looks like.

Earlier this year, I took on a role, along with many others, supporting Rotary clubs. You might describe it as providing technical assistance. The role involves helping clubs grow, guiding them as they work towards their vision, and sometimes simply being a sounding board for the President and their leadership team. The exposure alone has been well worth the time invested. Interestingly, the work actually felt easier than I expected. Not because the work itself was simple, but because the leadership had put in place some structure. Roles were clear, responsibilities were defined, onboarding and training occurred early, and there were systems guiding how things move forward.

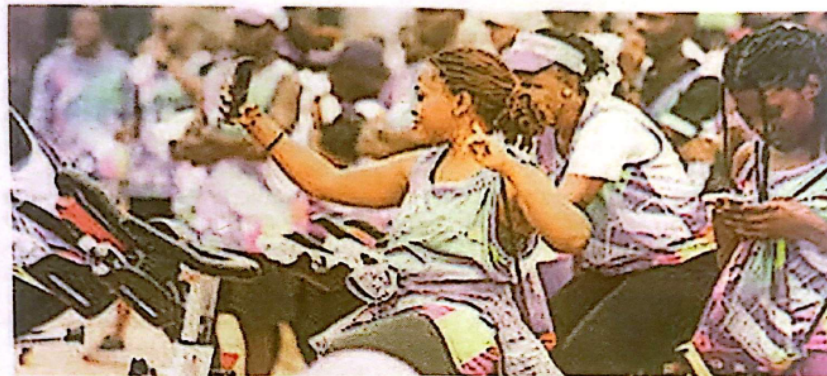
For someone accustomed to working in structured environments, that made engagement much simpler. I quickly recognised where I fit and was then able to concentrate on the work. But something else caught my attention.



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As my colleagues and I began engaging with clubs within our scope to offer support and guidance, I noticed that the way clubs operate varies quite considerably. In some cases, systems and processes were still being developed or were functioning in a more informal manner. This is typical in volunteer organisations, where structures often evolve gradually depending on leadership, history, and the circumstances each club has experienced over time. Yet it raised an interesting question.

How is it that organisations filled with capable professionals, people who operate every day within structured workplaces, sometimes find themselves working in volunteer spaces where those same systems are absent? The contrast can be quite striking.



During the day, many of us work in environments where processes are established, accountability is expected, and systems guide how tasks are carried out. However, when we engage in volunteer work, those same structures often become lighter or sometimes vanish altogether. What remains is goodwill, enthusiasm, and personal relationships. All of these are important. Yet, they are not always sufficient on their own to maintain organised work.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that it is not necessarily about ability. Many volunteer organisations are filled with highly capable people. The problem often lies in the environment where the work happens. Volunteer organisations tend to evolve gradually, with systems changing slowly.

Traditions become firmly established and can sometimes be difficult to challenge. In some cases, there may also be reluctance to impose stronger accountability because people are volunteering their time. All of this is understandable.

Nevertheless, the environment in which volunteer organisations function is also evolving. Nowadays, even volunteer groups are expected to uphold stronger governance and accountability. Compliance with laws like the Companies Act, financial oversight, audits, and transparent governance structures are becoming standard expectations.

In other words, the world around volunteer organisations has become more organised. That reality is gradual-

ly encouraging volunteer organisations to become more structured as well.

From my own experience, I have learned that structure does not weaken volunteerism. If anything, it strengthens it. The real challenge is often in making the shift towards a more organised way of working. Like in any organisation, change can be uncomfortable.

Clear roles help people understand how they can contribute. Simple systems make it easier for volunteers to participate without confusion. Accountability ensures that responsibilities are shared rather than falling on a few committed individuals. In many ways, structure actually makes volunteer work easier. It allows passionate people to focus on impact instead of navigating uncertainty.

Volunteer work remains one of the most powerful ways to serve and build community. But like many organisations, it must evolve as its environment changes. Today, the leadership challenge may not simply be attracting volunteers; it is helping volunteer organisations develop simple systems that enable committed people to contribute effectively. Because while passion may ignite many initiatives, it is often structure that ensures their longevity. So, if we rely on systems to perform well in our professional lives, we should not be surprised when volunteer organisations also need them to succeed.