

# “Give us a shift”

It sounds like the title of an industrial relations best- seller.

It isn't, but it could be a clarion call to the voluntary sector across Cambridgeshire to engage with business.

Let me explain...

I read the Support Cambridgeshire State of the Sector Survey for 2017 with some interest. For the first time, it asked the voluntary sector about the support they received from business, and what the nature of such support looked like. The voluntary sector includes charities, community organisations and *Friends of Groups*, of which there are many.

## **There's life out there:**

We all know that local business lives and works in local communities. My own personal view is that it's in businesses best interests to work with the voluntary sector and its communities, not out of pure altruism, or because their Corporate and Social Responsibility Policy requires them to do so, but because it opens that business to new perspectives and new markets. It personally develops staff, and enables business to share their learning experiences.

I was heartened to see that 36% of those community organisations surveyed said that had received some support from local business, and that most of that support had been given *face to face* by the business concerned. *So no shortage of direct interaction there then..!!*

I was more concerned about the following statistic: Of those community organisations that had received support from local business, 42% (almost half) felt they needed no further assistance.

## **The one shot deal:**

I have been contacted by numerous large companies over the past 12 months seeking a team building day, dredging ponds or clearing shrub. Whilst these days are undoubtedly useful for the voluntary sector, they can be limiting (not every community organisation has a pond to dredge after all) and can require a great deal of planning and resource on behalf of the community organisation concerned. Could this be a reason for that statistic?

Or could it simply be that the voluntary sector has yet to grasp the nettle in understanding the importance of on-going support from local business, and that we still fail to talk each other's language.

So my first resolution on the back of these survey results is to find out.

## **I need some help:**

Of those organisations that had never received any support from business, 79% said they wanted some. Top of their hit list was assistance in marketing and fundraising. Not surprising really.

The voluntary sector is becoming increasingly more competitive, and funding ever harder to achieve and sustain. Funders want more *bang for their buck*, with more demonstrable evidence of impact for the money given. Finding other forms of income, above and beyond achieving grant funding is

becoming essential for the sector, and good quality marketing can give organisations an edge over their competitors. I guess a marketer would call that a USP (the Unique Selling Proposition).

Raising income through fundraising activities is an ever useful weapon in the armoury of community organisations: Time-banking is a great example of that, with successful local events and crowd-funders seen as integral to the way they operate.

#### **To broker or not to broker:**

I have read a lot over the past 12 months about how to engage with business. Every commentator believes that business working with communities has to be the way forward, yet most of the schemes I have seen which try to broker a relationship between business and communities appears to be struggling. Evidence suggests that community groups face considerable barriers when approaching business for help and support, and brokerage is seen as key to overcoming these. I am not convinced. Having struggled to broker relationships with business across Cambridgeshire over the past 12 months, there could be another, more simpler way of bringing two or more parties together.

Perhaps we should take a different view. Maybe community groups should simply be trained to make *the ask* of business, and so called brokers should monitor the results. This is what infrastructure organisations do really well. We train, support and advise, and monitor the impact.

It seems to me that some of our community organisations have got on with *the business* of engaging with business without any brokerage whatsoever, so perhaps we can learn from them.

I feel a second resolution coming on: I will talk to these groups and get them together in a best practice masterclass on how they did what they did. Others can then learn from the experience, and training needs can be identified. Once again, this is what Infrastructure organisations do really well, bringing people together to talk and share learning, skills and challenges.

Give us a shift:

I guess that's the clarion call really. Confident and passionate community organisations, trained and capable of asking support from business when they need it.

We all know that relationships are crucial in any walk of life, and this is no different. One small thing can lead to larger others: The call to *Give us a shift* could lead to donations, good-will gifts, the transfer of knowledge and skill and ultimately, better relations (beyond the world of Corporate and Social Responsibility Policy documents) – and who doesn't want that.

**A personal viewpoint from Russell Rolph, Development Manager of Support Cambridgeshire, commenting on the results of the Annual State of the Sector Survey 2017.**

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