

RESPONSIVE VOLUNTEERISM -- VINIMAY EXPERIENCE*

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Abstract

Vinimay Trust is an organization of voluntary social workers working for children in child welfare institutions and the youths emerging out of these institutions. Vinimay has been in the field for the last two decades and has been continuously growing. This presentation analyses the techniques and principles, which has enabled Vinimay to carry out such large-scale activities entirely through voluntary work-force for such a long period.

1. About Vinimay

Vinimay is an organization of voluntary social workers. In 1982, when we were invited to help children in a child welfare institution (cwi) in their school studies, we very quickly realized that volunteers can work synergistically with large established institutions and play a complementary role. Since 1982, we have been running many programs in cwis with the aim of holistic development of the child. This work led us naturally to the care of youths – especially destitute youths – who leave cwis at the statutory age of 18. This gave rise to Youth Program of Vinimay, which helps the youth to enhance their capabilities and merge smoothly into the society. Vinimay was registered as a Charitable Trust in 1989 and has been running a hostel for destitute youth since 1999.

When introduced to the cwi, Vinimay saw certain needs of the institutions as well as of the children and shaped itself to respond to these needs. In this responsive volunteerism, Vinimay seems to be an unique experiment in that an organization entirely constituted of volunteers has been able to sustain for two decades, not only just sustain but also grow. From five volunteers in 1982, we are now 30 volunteers who are involved in day-to-day activities, and about 100 volunteers can be mobilized in case of demand for a short period of time.

In this workshop, we have been asked to discuss certain specific aspects of Vinimay which may help one to understand how Vinimay has been able to achieve this.

It should not however be understood that we started our work with clear understanding of the principles and methods of work presented below. Our activities and methods of work evolved slowly. Action was followed by analysis and analysis in turn modified action. What is being presented is the result of this evolution.

In this presentation we shall discuss how Vinimay (1) Enlists volunteers, (2) Equips them for the work and (3) Sustains their motivation.

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2. Enlisting volunteers

There are four routes for the enlisting of volunteers:

- (a) By word of mouth: This has been the most successful route, since the prospective volunteer is introduced by persons who know Vinimay well. The prospective volunteer himself has many chances to see Vinimay in action before he takes a decision to join. Thus a selection and elimination process is already in-built in this route and therefore survival rate is very high.
- (b) Advertisement in Newspapers: Some newspapers offer free advertisement space for social causes. This too has been an effective way of enlisting volunteers. However, details of type of volunteers needed cannot be fully specified because the advertisements have to be short. Hence, the chance is very slender that what the volunteer can offer will match what the organization (Vinimay) can absorb. Considering this, a success rate of 1 per 25 hits seems quite good. Many volunteers have joined us through this route.
- (c) Recommendation by cwis: Sometimes individual volunteers approach the child welfare institutions and the institutions in turn refer them to Vinimay. This, however, is not very frequent.
- (d) Volact program: This program of SOSVA (Society for Service to Voluntary Agencies) aims at referring volunteers to agencies needing them. The interaction between Vinimay and Volact has been very recent and it is too early to talk of statistics. We have one fully dedicated volunteer through Volact and we expect the number to grow.

We feel that one person joining the organization for every twenty-five who offer their services is a good enough ratio. Since a properly matched volunteer is very precious, it is worth going through this exercise and we never feel frustrated or discouraged by a large number of non-fruitful contacts.

Over the last twenty years, we have developed a base of about 30 volunteers who are active on a continuous basis. In addition, about 100 can be mobilized for specific programs for short periods. This is an achievement indeed, especially when we consider that we have never embarked on a membership drive. Also, Vinimay is looking for volunteers with specific qualities: It is not looking for people with special talents who will work like experts, but rather for volunteers who can work at grass root levels, who can absorb the daily ups and downs and who should be able to relate directly, fully and healthily with the target group. Stress is on patience, sincerity and commitment to work at ground level rather than on talents.

3. Equipping the volunteer for the work

Once, the volunteer is explained what Vinimay expects of them, we should also be able to help him / her to adjust not only to the actual field conditions but also to the group dynamics and work culture of Vinimay itself.

1. The new entrant is asked to attend programs which provide him opportunity to witness Vinimay volunteers and the target group of children / youth in action: e.g. birthday program of children, play center, monthly meeting of youth etc.
2. He is invited to attend the monthly meetings of volunteers where activities and principles are discussed threadbare.
3. The new entrant is briefed about the work ethics of Vinimay.
4. He is encouraged to join already established programs which are run by experienced volunteers. The new volunteer is not loaded with responsibility and can slip-in and slip-out; the only condition being he follows the rules and regulations of Vinimay as well as the cwi, if the activity is in a cwi. The senior volunteer will act as a friend and guide and also will solve any problems faced by the new entrant.
5. He gains a lot of in-sight through one-to-one discussion with senior volunteers.
6. No pressure is put on the new volunteer; he is not expected to show results.
7. The new volunteer always gets support and cheer from seniors. The new volunteer learns to take heart in small achievements which is an essential quality of a volunteer.
8. Through this process, he gets used to the 'work culture' which is difficult to be explained in words. Then, finally, the new volunteer finds his own slot in the programs of Vinimay depending upon the time-slots he can spare, his capabilities and personal qualities.
9. A question may be asked about formal class-room education in the field of social work. Here we face some problems: All the volunteers being part-timers it becomes difficult to find time slots suitable for a sizeable group for formal theoretical learning. Many would rather prefer to do additional field-work than sit in class rooms. Many do not personally feel the need for theoretical inputs. Any attempts in this direction, therefore, has been sporadic, such as invited lectures by people in the field and a solitary four day course especially tailored for Vinimay by the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

4. Retaining the volunteers

There has been hardly a case where a volunteer has left Vinimay due to difference of opinion or dissatisfaction. Volunteers have left active work only due to reasons such as transfer to places outside Mumbai, illness in the family etc. We can identify four factors which have enabled Vinimay to retain volunteers for long periods of time.

- (A) The Work Culture of Vinimay: In Vinimay it is understood that the out-puts may vary widely from member to member but it is appreciated that each one putting in his best efforts and talents. Vinimay demands commitment and sincerity – rather than knowledge and power – from its members. There is no glitter or glamour to be obtained; there are no external rewards or public ovations. This work culture itself perhaps acts a filter and those who join Vinimay are only those who are motivated from within.

- (B) **The Induction Process:** The method by which a new comer is absorbed into Vinimay makes the volunteer feel comfortable in the group and each volunteer feels they make worthy contribution to the common cause.
- (C) **Power Structure:** To bring out the best in each volunteer, a non-hierarchical structure has been chosen for Vinimay. The power structure is not pyramidal but horizontal. For each activity there is a leader. There is no leader-worker divide because the leader in one activity is a follower in another. Everyone is a field worker and everyone takes part in the decision making process. All points are discussed in the volunteers' meeting. [However, confidential matters pertaining to the individual youths we work for, are not made public and only the few who handle the case will know the details.] All understand that any criticism during the discussions is in the interest of the cause. More power automatically goes to those who put in more work. These facts make the volunteers feel fully involved in all the activities of Vinimay.
- (D) **Work Atmosphere:** Volunteers work in co-operation and not competition. The atmosphere is relaxed and supportive. Though a set of work ethics is to be adhered to, a volunteer has freedom within his work area. In case a volunteer has some difficulties, others will support him. A volunteer can change his field and even take long periods off to attend to personal problems. In the meanwhile, others keep in touch with him and he can re-join without ever feeling that he has lost track of events. There are no hassles like membership fees and types of memberships. Most of the volunteers dislike administrative work and they are duly shielded from it. The members are in contact with each others families and more often than not, members of the volunteers' families also join Vinimay's work.

5. Summary

Vinimay has been able to carry out a lot of work purely through voluntary work because of the following:

1. Vinimay has clearly and closely defined its field of work: It has opted for grass-root work, complementing work done by cwis. The target group is children and ex-students of cwis. We have resisted temptations of straying out of this frame of work.
2. The method of working is democratic and non-hierarchical. Everyone is respected for whatever contribution he makes. There is no leader-worker divide and hence there are absolutely no ego conflicts.
3. The process of inducting new members is supportive and friendly.
4. There is no glamour in working with Vinimay. Therefore, only those who really enjoy working at ground level join Vinimay.
5. The motivation of the volunteers is from inside and they are self-actualized.