

The Role of Nonviolent Communication in Teambuilding in Youth Volunteer Groups

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ABSTRACT

In the backdrop of increasing individualism in our society, youth volunteer groups face challenges of working as a team. In such a scenario nonviolent communication if practiced by youth groups can go a long way in promoting teambuilding and enhance their effectiveness. This chapter explores through perspectives of youth leaders who are working on different social issues tries to highlight the efficacy of integrating nonviolent communication in the working of youth volunteer groups.

Keywords: Nonviolent communication, youth volunteerism

Volunteering is a distinct human characteristic. It is a socio-psychological bridge connecting the self and the individual consciousness to the collective consciousness of the community. On the one hand, it is an expression of free will of an individual, while on the other it is an expression of a certain set of values imbibed from society values that enable an individual to locate her or himself in relation to others. (Kundu, 2005 & 2010)

The socio-psychological need of every human being for a sense of belonging in relation to the other forms the basis of volunteering. The need for a sense of belonging also arises from the need for emotional well-being and for a socio-cultural identity. The need also propels human beings to go beyond the self to reach out to people and nature. (Kundu, 2005 & 2010)

While the socio-psychological need of human being for a sense of belonging is a propelling factor for people to go and volunteer in their communities, contemporary social trends challenges this as

individuals race for personal self-gratification rather than that of the society. Post-modern trends like the new hyper technological environment, an increasing consumerist society, neo-liberalism, materialism and affluent culture and the race to acquire status in society are challenges to the space for volunteering in an individual's life. In this context, Hustinx & Lammertyn (2003) talks about how 'individualization is considered the most dangerous threat to volunteering eliminating the remaining solidarity among citizens'. Also, Jardim and Da Silva (2018) talking on the contemporary debate on volunteering argue that 'there is a widespread belief that the nature of volunteering is undergoing an intergenerational transformation mainly due the structural processes such as individualization.'

Hustinx & Lammertyn (2004) notes that volunteering is becoming less collective and more reflexive or individualistic. They point out that in an individualized society, volunteers, whether adults or young people, tend to become more self-centred

in their volunteering work. They stress, “new volunteers strive for both solidarity and personal development, selecting activities that maximise the personal benefits: self-realisation, social contacts, work experience and personal autonomy”

Notwithstanding the contention that the passion of putting self-interest and individual gain are in direct conflict with the philosophy of volunteerism (Thomas & Kundu, 2012), there are large number of volunteer initiatives especially by young people across the world which are becoming catalysts of positive change. In the context of India, Harris (2007) argues that in the post liberalization era there ‘certainly appears to be a period of associational activism, especially with the development of networks, for a and coordinating agencies.’ Talking about the trends in volunteering amongst young people, Jardim and Da Silva (2018) notes, “Young people seem to prefer more informal or unconventional forms of civic and political participation that best suit their interests and needs.”

So, while young people move towards more informal and unconventional forms of civic participation, they also prefer to engage themselves in episodic volunteering whereby they want to volunteer with events rather than commit to long term volunteering. In this backdrop Hustinx and Lammertyn describes on how volunteering is become ‘less collective and more individualistic’, the challenge before youth volunteer groups is how they function cohesively. This is especially true in the context of Hustinx and Lammertyn’s contention that new volunteers try to select activities to maximize personal benefits.

Jardim and Da Silva (2018) elaborates on this concern, “Young people live in an individualised society which has erected the individual as the focus of all investments, which has led to the weakening of the social ties and commitments between an “I” and another “We”. It is a society marked by an individualistic culture that calls individuals to be autonomous, encouraging people to maximize their personal benefits.... the considerations of the common good are less relevant and the mandatory exhortations to live for each other or to devote to

an end more than themselves no longer have social resonance.”

Notwithstanding the challenges of individualism, the need and responsibility of young people to volunteer towards a peaceful and just society is more than ever before in the backdrop of various contradictions societies across the world face. Jose Saramago, the Nobel-laureate novelist, playwright & journalist has rightly said, “As citizens, we all have an obligation to intervene and become involved – it’s the citizen who changes things.” Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel (2015) talks about how to build a society in which peace is the foundation of life ‘we much reach out our hands, fraternally, without hatred and rancour, for reconciliation and peace, with unfaltering determination in the defence of truth and justice. We know we cannot plant seeds with closed fists. To sow we must open our hands.” This articulates the essence of youth volunteerism for peace.

The importance of young people’s contribution is aptly explained by Ikeda (2015), “To young people in particular I wish to say: the world is yours to change. Your dreams, your hopes and aspirations- these will create the future. They are the future. The future already exists – in the hearts and minds of the young.”

To be effective volunteers, Seth (2012) talks about some important elements, “To be an effective volunteer requires a strong degree of commitment in which the volunteer extends to be service to a wider cause. The spirit of selfless service runs high in volunteers since their motivation is not primarily for money.”

Seth talks about how in the midst of materialistic world, ‘acts of selfless service helps a volunteer to find inner peace- an essential attribute to be in harmony with oneself and society’. Acts of volunteering helps an individual in the construction of positive identity, he adds.

If youth volunteer groups have to work beyond the realm of individualism and genuinely contribute to social cohesion for peace and development, different approach to team work amongst members of youth groups need to be adopted so that they become

resilient and effective. Efficient communication amongst the group members, openness to dialogue and trustworthiness are important components to be integrated in the functioning of youth volunteer groups.

A significant approach to team building as young people grapple with plethora of challenges in sewing together an effective team could be use of Gandhian nonviolent communication approach. As the world is set to celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of the apostle of peace next year, it would be worthwhile to examine how Gandhian nonviolent communication methods helps young volunteer groups to be more efficient, are able to handle intra group conflicts, provide ethical leadership and overall contribute towards a culture of peace and nonviolence.

This chapter through in-depth interviews of selected young leaders who are specifically volunteering for peace and nonviolence will aim to explore how the Gandhian approach to nonviolent communication can be an important aspect of the functioning of youth volunteer groups. It will aim to explore through the voices of the young leaders how nurturing nonviolent communication helps them to be more compassionate, engage with other youth and overall make them feel more responsible for a peaceful society.

Mahatma Gandhi's Nonviolent Communication

Bode (1995) lists out the dimensions of Gandhi's nonviolent communication, "The nonviolent communication theory consists of four theoretical units: (1) nonviolent speech and action; (2) maintenance of relationships and enrichment of personhood; (3) openness; and (4) flexibility. To carry these units further: Gandhi predicted that from violent communications harm would result, and that nonviolent communication contributes to the maintenance of peaceful relationships and to the enrichment of personhood. The theory of nonviolent communication recommends means (flexibility and openness) of achieving the end. For Gandhi, the goal of communication was to build

and maintain human relationships and thus enhance personhood."

Another peace scholar who has been greatly influenced by Gandhi, Daisaku Ikeda (2007) in his speech on 'Interaction of Civilizations Leads to a Flourishing Culture of Humanity' suggested three principles and guidelines for communication: (1) exchange among civilizations as a source of value creation; (2) a spirit of open dialogue; and (3) the creation of a culture of peace through education. These guidelines offer significant foundation for practising nonviolent communication.

Senior Gandhian Natwar Thakkar (2017) articulates his ideas of nonviolent communication using the Gandhian praxis. He says: To me nonviolent communication literacy would mean how our communication efforts should be nonviolent; how our ability and capacity to communicate not only with ourselves but with our family and society be nonviolent in all aspects and overall how the entire process of communication whether between individuals, groups, communities and the world at large should be nonviolent in nature. This would entail deep understanding of the art and science of nonviolence and its centrality in all our daily actions. Its not just verbal and nonverbal communication, nonviolent communication literacy would also include whether our thoughts and ideas are nonviolent or not. This would also mean how we can communicate and stop evaluating them to suit our own ideas. More than often we are attuned to think in terms of moralistic judgements which may be our own constructions. By developing deep understanding of the art and science of nonviolence and integrating it in our communication practices we could get over with biased and moralistic judgements; this in turn could contribute to emotional bridge building."

Natwar Thakkar further notes, "By being nonviolent communication literate, an individual/group/community will be able to self-introspect whether the message they want to share has elements of violence and whether such a message will hurt others. Nonviolent communication literacy would automatically help in strengthening and deepening

relationships. When we are able to emotionally build bridges with others we will be able to empathize with their views." He argues that nonviolent communication can open new spaces for dialogues and engagement, mutual respect and tolerance.

Perspectives of young people on how nonviolent communication contributes to teambuilding and ethical leadership

While all elements of nonviolent communication as discussed above are important for effective teambuilding, S Saba, a law student of Aligarh Muslim University and the Peace Gong Aligarh Coordinator encapsulates the importance of nonviolent communication in the functioning of youth volunteer groups: "By practicing tools of nonviolent communication, we students are able to engage in dialogues more efficiently. Whether within the group or while reaching out to other students and the community the ability to engage in efficient dialogues are critical. Nonviolent communication teaches us to imbibe values of compassion, empathy, mutual respect, tolerance and the spirit of forgiveness. So even if some conflict arises in our group, engaging in dialogues using nonviolent communication techniques helps us resolve these. These also help us to develop better relationship with the communities in which we work."

Saba links the need of young volunteer leaders to be able to engage in meaningful dialogues to their initiative to contribute to social cohesion. Talking about how nonviolent communication shapes meaningful dialogues, she laments at the unwillingness of large number of people to enter into dialogues for resolution of conflicts which results in violence and hatred. Her perspectives on nonviolent communication emanates from what Martin Luther King had said, "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him." Nonviolent communication enables us to desist from using words of hatred and intolerance, Saba points out.

The importance of dialogue which Saba argues is pivotal in the working of youth volunteer groups has been articulated by Ikeda (2007), "Through dialogue, we can arrive at a deeper mutual understanding. Dialogue starts by clearly recognizing the positions and interests of the respective parties and then clearly identifying the obstacles to progress, patiently working to remove and resolve each of these." As Saba notes nonviolent communication helps each party to empathize with each other and facilitates enrichment of relationship.

Saba further articulates the need to nurture nonviolent communication not just with other fellow human beings but all living beings and nature. The Peace Gong Aligarh team has initiated an effort to put up sparrow boxes in different places in the Aligarh Muslim University campus. She opines, "We young volunteers who are committed to contribute towards a peaceful society must understand the deep interconnectedness that exists between human-nature-and all other living beings. By trying to find spaces for sparrows which are hardly seen in our cities or saving a tree from being felled we are using nonviolent communication at a higher plane. Here our communication is that of love, care and compassion for birds like sparrows. So, our communication ecosystem should respect the interconnectedness between all living forms and nature, only then we can contribute towards sustainable peace."

The perspective of Saba stressing on the importance of interconnectedness in our communication ecosystem emanates from the Indian tradition of respect for all beings and nature. The Gandhian notion of nonviolent communication stems from this perspective. Parekh (2014) explains Gandhi's idea of interconnectedness or interdependence of human beings. He notes, "Gandhi followed the Indian tradition in taking a cosmocentric view of human beings. The cosmos was a well-coordinated whole whose various parts were all linked in a system of yajna, or interdependence and mutual service. It consisted of different orders of being ranging from the material to the human, each governed by its own laws and standing in a complex relationship with the rest. Human beings were an integral part of the

cosmos and were tied to it by the deepest bonds.” Gandhian ecologist, Vandana Shiva aptly describes the philosophy of interconnectedness, “We are all members of the earth family, interconnected through the planet’s fragile web of life. We all have duty to live a manner that protects the earth’s ecological processes, and the rights and welfare of all species and all people. No humans have the right to encroach on the ecological space of other species and other people, or to treat them with cruelty and violence.”

“It is through nurturing of nonviolent communication that young volunteers can develop deep understanding of the philosophy of interconnectedness and volunteer accordingly,” Saba points out. “With deep realization on the significance of interconnectedness, young people will evolve as more responsible persons will to volunteer for a greater cause. Also teambuilding and the ability to work as a team becomes easier when we start understanding the importance of interconnectedness,” she adds.

Another important element of nonviolent communication which strengthens teambuilding is the power of gratitude. Albert Schweitzer has rightly said, “At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.”

Neelakshi Malik, a team member of Saba and the social media coordinator of The Peace Gong explains the power of gratitude in youth volunteer groups, “I firmly believe that acts of gratitude are contagious in a positive way and we all should seriously make it an integral part of our life. By expressing gratitude, volunteers not only contribute to their own well-being and happiness but also of the group with which they are working. It helps in strengthening of relationship and trust amongst our team members.”

In the context of youth volunteer groups, Neelakshi feels it is the responsibility of young people to ensure that gratitude should start with them. “If our team members and others feel that our gratitude is genuine, they will be more open and gracious

to us,” she explains, “We can use our power of gratitude to inspire and motivate others.”

“Gratitude reduces feelings of envy, makes our memories happier, let us experience good feelings, and helps us intervene in issues with greater concern. It is an expression of celebrating the good in the world,” Neelakshi points out, “Overall it makes us better human beings and help us develop the capacities of seeing the humanness in all.”

She stresses on the importance of individual improvement. It is crucial if young volunteers are to become what Gandhi had said, *‘be the change you wish to see in the world’*, she adds. In this context, Marie Curie had rightly said, “You cannot hope to build a better world without improving the individuals. To that end, each of us must work for his own improvement and, at the same time, share a general responsibility for all humanity, our particular duty being to aid those to whom we think we can be most useful.”

According to Ankita Poudel, the Coordinator of The Peace Gong Nepal it is useful for young volunteer leaders to ‘nurture the art and science of nonviolent communication’. “When we start practicing, it brings revolutionary changes in the way of our thinking, speaking, feeling and shaping of our perspectives. Differences within groups tend to disappear and we all are at ease with each other. We feel more responsible,” she argues.

In fact, Ankita delves on the inherent link between the sense of responsibilities of young volunteer leaders and nonviolent communication. She feels that it is the moral responsibility of young people today more than ever before to take the leadership for a global culture of peace. She articulates her ideas using the Kantian idea of moral responsibility which is based on principles of dignity and the highest value of humankind. She strongly believes that by practicing the art and science of nonviolent communication, young people can maintain a ‘steadfast commitment to moral principles’ which are essential to be effective volunteers. This, she opines, was a tool to learn to take personal responsibility which should not be seen as a burden but a source of great personal power. As

how a society evolves and behaves depends on the personal responsibility of each individual, Ankita Poudel underscores the importance of nurturing nonviolent communication.

Ankita also links her ideas of Kantian moral responsibility to development of good character amongst young volunteers. Building good character is critical for not only acceptance within the team but in the community at large, she argues. Roosevelt had aptly said, "Character, in the long run, is the decisive factor in the life of an individual and of nations alike." Similarly, Gandhi had stated, "All your scholarship, all your study of Shakespeare and Wordsworth would be vain if at the same time you do not build your character and attain mastery over your thoughts and your actions."

By learning to be a nonviolent communicator, Ankita stresses, "We can aim to develop the foundation of a good character. We young people must realize that character is the foundation of success, happiness and meaning in our lives, hence the need to work from the inside out."

An important dimension of youth volunteer leadership is the practice to promote inclusivity. Mahatma Gandhi had aptly said, "We must widen the circle of our love till it embraces the whole village; the village in its turn must take into its fold the district, the district the province, and so on till the scope our love becomes co-terminus with the world." (The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi).

As young people are expected to work with diverse communities, respecting the idea of inclusiveness will help them in developing meaningful relationship. Also for youth volunteer groups to emerge as initiatives which try to engage with diverse people, it is imperative to promote inclusivity within the group itself.

Bourke and Dillon (2016) talks about the elements of inclusive leadership:

- ⊙ Treating people and groups fairly—that is, based on their unique characteristics, rather than on stereotypes.
- ⊙ Personalizing individuals—that is, understanding and valuing the uniqueness

of diverse others while also accepting them as members of the group.

- ⊙ Leveraging the thinking of diverse groups for smarter ideation and decision making that reduces the risk of being blindsided.

According to Shazaf Masood Sidhu, the Coordinator of The Peace Gong Pakistan, we cannot nurture ethical volunteer leadership if young people continue with moralistic judgements and rely on stereotypes. Shazaf explores her ideas of inclusive leadership using Martin Luther King's perspectives, "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

Deep understanding and respect are crucial ingredients of nonviolent communication and we can value the unique qualities of each member of our team through mutual respect, she points out. She opines on how nonviolent communications can help in developing relationships despite differences and diversity.

For effective functioning of youth volunteering groups and their contribution to community building initiatives, Shazaf argues how nonviolent communication can help in enhancing cultural intelligence amongst young leaders. "By understanding other's culture, we need to be self-aware of our own culture. It is only then we can engage with people empathetically will we be able to articulate their concerns," she underscores.

CONCLUSION

This chapter through in-depth interviews of young volunteer leaders in India, Nepal and Pakistan tries to argue on the centrality of practicing nonviolent communication for effective volunteering. It tries to grasp on how practice of nonviolent communication as a habit helps volunteer leaders to work for emotional bridge building not only with their team members but with the community they work. It also tries to link on how young volunteers becomes more responsible when they start practicing nonviolent communication.

While S Saba talks on the idea of interconnectedness and how it helps young volunteer leaders become

more responsible towards the constituency in which they are trying to work, Neelakshi Malik stresses on the importance of gratitude and humility. She argues that by practicing nonviolent communication, volunteers will become compassionate in how they deal with their peers and others. For her, young people who show qualities of compassion would be lead from within and develop the ability to motivate others.

Ankita Poudel brings to the fore the intrinsic link between sense of responsibility amongst young people and the nurturing of nonviolent communication. She further links this to evolution of good character which is essential for establishing credibility of volunteers.

Shazaf Masood Sidhu brings an important dimension to ethical volunteer leadership, the importance of inclusion. Only when we practice inclusion, we will become more compassionate, she argues.

To conclude these beautiful lines of Buddha are an apt reminder for all young volunteer on the need to encompass the spirit of love and compassion to be able to become better human beings:

*The thought manifests as the word;
The word manifests as the deed;
The deed develops into habit;
And habit hardens into character;
So watch the thought and its ways with care,
And let it spring from love
Born out of concern for all beings...
As the shadow follows the body,
As we think, so we become.*

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