

## Why Voluntary Organisations Often Fail to Deliver on Expectations

By Craig Tamlin

Many of us are involved with organisations run by a team of volunteers, be it a sporting club, school parent organisation, or social group. Why is it that some of these organisations struggle, yet others manage to succeed? Is it down to the capability of individuals elected (sometimes co-opted) onto the committee? Sometimes. Individuals with the right skills, interests and available time to work on a committee of any organisation will definitely make an improvement to the way it operates. Have you ever noticed what happens when these people move on? Things revert to how they were before. Many times, there is no institutional knowledge or process that is retained. Execution effectiveness immediately drops.



Not just volunteer organisations, but all organisations often suffer from varying degrees of dysfunction. Without any equivocation, this dysfunction can be pinned on poor managerial leadership. However, **most organisations will not be able to identify the root causes of these symptoms, and muddle on, year after year, in angst.**

### Symptoms of a voluntary organisation in dysfunction

Does your organisation experience some or all of these?

- There never seems to be progress made toward the big picture goals to take the organisation to the next level
- All communication, activity, and decisions are usually through one or two key individuals
- Committee meetings are talk-fests, and contain more people than is conducive for getting things done
- Decisions and progress on major initiatives take forever
- Committee members get frustrated and resign their post
- Every year, the same problems require solutions that are reinvented from scratch for tasks that should just be standard
- Someone leaves, and there is a tragic loss of organisational knowledge

You might find that the experience in your workplace, or that of someone you know, mirrors exactly these symptoms...and, these issues might just be the tip of the iceberg.

Voluntary organisations suffer, just as does government departments and businesses, in that dysfunction is rarely addressed. Often, there is a group of fresh-faced, eager individuals who seek to make a difference, yet their input is ignored, or worse yet, is seen as interfering in an environment that struggles through lack of clearly defined roles, accountabilities, processes and poor structure.



Structure? How could that be important? This is the first and foremost aspect that helps to achieve results in *any* organisation. Most commercial organisations implement a hierarchical structure designed to handle the tasks of work by different

levels of capability. The CEO will decide on a strategy and business vision, that gets handed down to the General Managers to execute. The GMs will organise divisions that enact their piece of the strategy, by passing work down to their subordinate managers for their teams to execute on.

This same structure should apply in voluntary organisations. The **structure is a key enabler to easy success**, but there are many aspects in determining the right structure for the organisation. More on structure in a minute.

Here are some of the likely causes of the symptoms described in the earlier list, and what can commonly be done to address these.

### **There never seems to be progress made toward the big picture goals to take the organisation to the next level**

Strategic thinking is at the hands of the most senior person within the organisation. They are accountable for driving the organisation forward, not just administering its daily operation. It is fair to say that if your organisation struggles with the types of symptoms of dysfunction referenced in this article, little time (or interest) is available for the necessary big picture thinking. As such, there is no overall *development* in an organisational sense.



Depending on the type of organisation you are, or strategic shortcomings you have perceived; then immediate work is required to get your house in order ready to make progress on strategy.

Defining and revising strategy is an important systematised process in an organisation's operational plan. It is determined by a process of review, benchmarking, and analysis in order to set direction then put into action those granular tasks that will see the strategy come to fruition.

Key to this is to ensure that the purpose of the organisation and its values are clearly articulated first. This is contained in a constitution or charter. This is the governing document that provides the authority to act, but just as importantly guides every officer of the organisation in their decision making. In voluntary organisations this is why people join the organisation and why they may sign up to help the organisation meet its purpose.

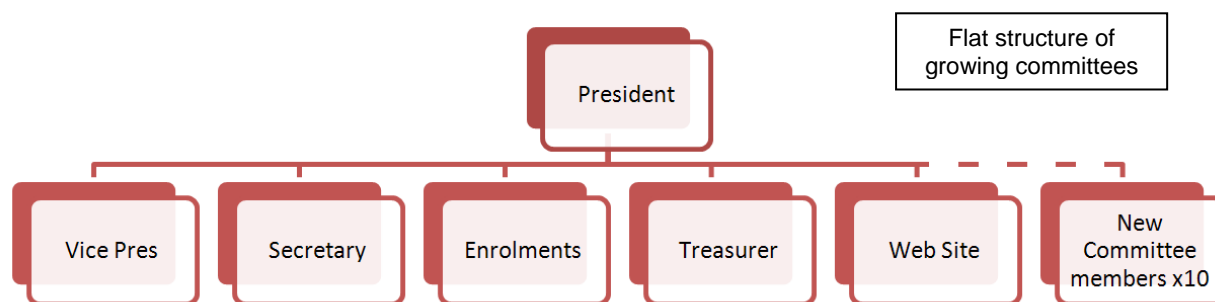
The criteria for committee member selection, parent, player and coach codes of conduct, team selection, coach selection, team manager selection, conflict resolution must be clearly set out, and a process of escalation articulated before trying to structure the organisation. This gets included in the constitution and the club agrees to it. Generally parents join committees to support their children and improve the delivery of the service, so they need to be fully aligned with the purpose and therefore strategic objectives.

*An example from a hockey club in Sydney. Initially the club was confused about what they stood for and therefore what membership they would attract and satisfy. They had some recurring difficulties around arguments on team selection, coaching*

*objectives etc. They needed to clearly state the purpose was about community involvement, building skills for juniors, and building teamwork. It meant that they would accept all players – weak or strong – and try to fit them into teams appropriate for their skill level. If a parent or player wanted to drive for winning the game and become a state level player, then this would not be the club for them. This purpose then guided all decisions from quality and type of coach through to size of team, amount of on-field time allowed etc. The club became known for promoting equal time for players up to a certain age, encouraging players to develop leadership skills by becoming referees and coaches in the club, then offering a 'buddy' system for less experienced coaches, and the angst between competing ideals, originally between the committee and some parents was diffused.*

**All communication, activity, and decisions are usually through one or two key individuals**

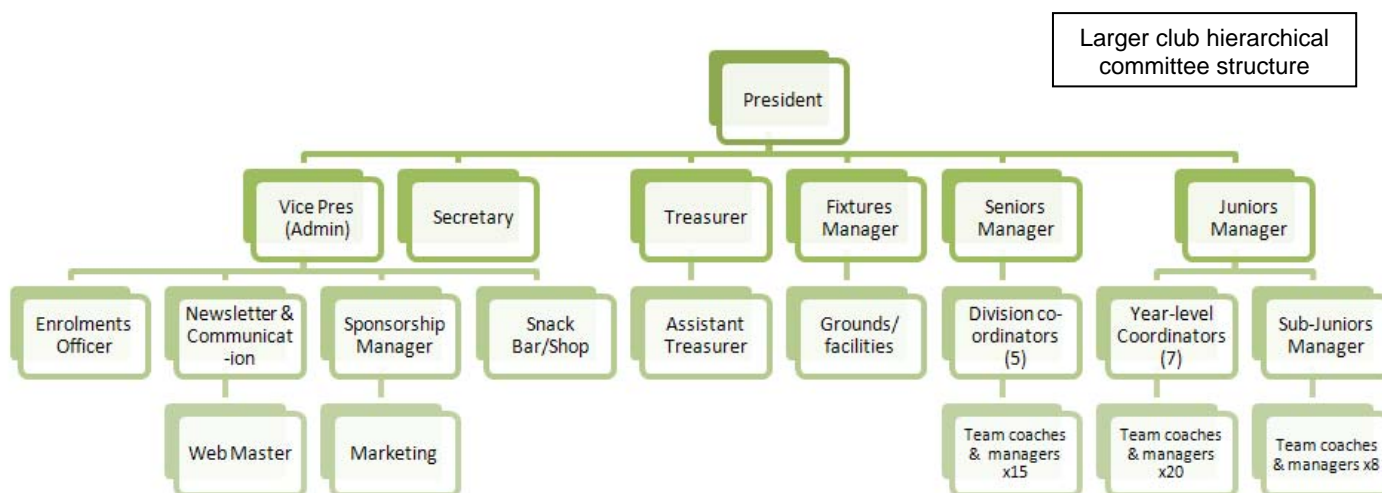
Many voluntary organisations have a single leader and a designated number of committee positions. These are, in effect, like a manager with a large number of direct subordinates, a structure with depth of two levels. If small, then this structure may adequately support the general aims of the organisation. As member numbers double, this structure will severely limit the ability to scale up to support the growth of the organisation. What often happens is that extra work is addressed by adding new committee members to the fold at the same level as the existing committee positions.



More effective workplaces are structured **hierarchically**, so that work of appropriate complexity can be subordinated to the individual at the right level. The important aspect here is that the immediate manager **adds value** without micro-managing, in order to have the individual complete the tasks of the role with their own personal discretion and work methods to reach the output assigned.

In a voluntary organisation of a reasonable scale, instead of a flat two-level structure, committee teams should be constructed with perhaps three or sometimes even four levels. Intermediate managers would be chosen for their capability, but also experience in the matters covered by the sub-team they will lead. For example, reporting to the president would be the club administrator, potentially also filling the role as the vice president. Taking direction from the club administrator could be the enrolment officer, newsletter editor and sponsorship manager.

Then, depending on the purpose of the organisation, you should look to institute a hierarchy of related teams or committees. The important element is to have the teams working at different levels – not to slow down approvals and lines of communication, but to group them to levels of individuals where the appropriate direction and authority are available in order to swiftly move things along without always having to refer right the way up the line. Of course there going to be times when the immediate “manager” is not able to answer a specific question, or will not have the authority to conclusively resolve a situation, and then it will be escalated. The goal is to complete the work contain the majority of situations within the sub-team or sub-committee.



Not only will such a structure allow work to be done by more people, the work is handled at the right levels without one or two key individuals being the bottleneck, burdened by dealing with even the most trivial decisions.

It is important to note that the structure above is just one example. You need to make your own decisions about what structure is appropriate club. This will depend on the relative importance of the various functions being carried out.

As discussed before, the area that is to be addressed in fixing a structural problem is the Constitution. Constitutions often dictate the broad structure, and hence this may need addressing first and foremost, especially if it has not been reviewed as an organisation grows. A committee structure for a 50-member club will be vastly different than that required for a club of 1000 members.

**Committee meetings are talk-fests, and contain more people than is conducive for getting things done**

Getting the structure right and breaking the organisation management into sub-teams instantly means that only senior level committee members attend the monthly committee meetings. Dragging every elected individual into a monolithic meeting, especially where the individual in a lower-level role isn’t expected to contribute means that everyone who has an opinion could speak up, often with limited value, but notably extending the discussion time on every topic. Whilst it is recognised that capable individuals in lower level roles might add some value, this gets to the point of appropriate role selection, choosing subject matter experts where available.

The necessity of meeting basics such as a strong chairman, with an agenda and minutes issued in a timely fashion are a given; especially in line with the size and formality of the management committee.

Of course in a hierarchical structure, each sub-committee should meet regularly. This is where the day-to-day work of the organisation gets done.

Another element of meeting effectiveness is having tasks assigned to the appropriate individual for action. Meetings without agreed and assigned tasks are generally a waste of time. One of the best models for defining a task so that it is clear and uses the capabilities of the individual to whom it is assigned uses six headings, based on the acronym CPQQRT – Context, Purpose, Quantity, Quality, Resources and Time. Tasks should be assigned by the immediate manager covering these six areas. For more information on this task assignment model, read on at:

[http://www.peoplefit.com.au/page/managers\\_ga.html#Q2](http://www.peoplefit.com.au/page/managers_ga.html#Q2)

*Example from a Caravan Club in Melbourne. Consisting mostly of retirees, committee meetings had an attendance of about 20 people, all invited in the interests of keeping everyone involved. A discreet survey found that most abhorred attending the monolithic three-hour committee meetings each month because the agenda was issued only a couple of days prior to meetings with little time to take action, minutes were sent weeks after the meetings, and the chairman let people waffle on, letting about one hour of content fill three hours of meeting.*

*After an AGM, a new president and secretary were elected. Committee meetings completed generally within an hour, and certainly no longer than 90 minutes, as they consisted of just the core five roles in the club, and conversation was kept on track. Further, agendas were published well in advance so that the five stakeholders could consult their sub-committees with enough time to be sure that action was taken on agenda items. Minutes were promptly issued and passed down to sub-committees in separate meetings.*

### **Decisions and progress on major initiatives take forever**

A combined impact of a structure that is too flat is that the one senior individual becomes the only person authorised to make decisions on behalf of the organisation, thus slowing decision making on any important issue, and most non-important issues too! It is understood that such roles are voluntary and that individuals have lives (including work) outside of the organisation which will generally take precedence, thus limiting the time available for the work needed: approving decisions, making plans, and insisting that they play a part in every discussion.

Instead, leaders should delegate *appropriate* authority, including financial authority, down the hierarchy to manager/coordinator roles. This of course comes with accountability to use funds and resources according to documented and agreed rules to support the objectives of the organisation.

The appropriate selection of skilled individuals in manager/coordinator roles running their own sub-teams is vital for results to see the light of day.



*Example from a basketball club in Perth. The president of this club had been in basketball all of his life, beginning as a junior at age 10. In addition to playing for over 30 years, he had coached, managed teams, taken various roles in committees, and was even in an advisory capacity for the state basketball association. Consequently, his knowledge of the sport, rules, competitions, and the club were deep, and was highly regarded by all. Because he knew so much compared to other newcomers and volunteering non-playing parents, and he was so helpful when he had time, every decision no matter how trivial was deferred to him. This made him the linchpin in everything the club did, and consequently, things ground to a halt as his business workload increased then his health began to suffer under the pressure. No one was delegated the authority to work autonomously, and felt in trepidation of making the wrong decision without first getting his input.*

### **Committee members get frustrated and resign their post**

Resignations are a general symptom that is the likely result of some of the other items discussed in this paper. Certainly, there are many causes of departures. As is often said, people join companies, but they leave managers. If an individual is not treated with fairness and trust, and are not getting quality direction and support from their immediate manager they will get frustrated and may leave.

Once you have undertaken to build the hierarchy, being available and providing timely and relevant input to help subordinates solve problems and make progress on their assigned tasks is key, and hence why not only one individual should be given all the authority.

The other leading contributor to committee departures is overwork. A new and enthusiastic volunteer will put their name down for all sorts of tasks when in reality two or more people are needed to accomplish the required outcomes. This again is reminiscent of a poor structure, not estimating the work of various levels, and setting unreasonable expectations. A key observation to make in this regard is the **degree** of expectation placed on an individual. If a small club grows to a large club, the person initially elected as treasurer because they have some basic bookkeeping skills may struggle to cope with the increased complexity. The larger club more likely needs the skills of an accountant, and potentially some additional help from an assistant, perhaps a bookkeeper.



Of course the opposite is also true. Underutilised committee members will feel that their capabilities and contributions are not valued. This is most notable when a highly capable individual is in a low-level role, and could in fact be contributing much more than their role dictates.

*Example from a school parents group in Adelaide. A new volunteer joined this group when moving into the area with her three children. Having been on the parents group at the prior school for quite a few years, she was very experienced. The chairman of the group saw her capability and loaded her up with all of the projects that had been on the backburner for months, some for over a year. To make matters worse, he rarely added value to the work being done by the new recruit, letting her ferret around for any required background data, history or information on the*

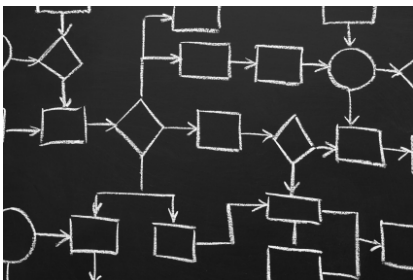
*projects. After months of little progress, in an overwhelmed and frustrated state, she left the group, citing lack of support as her key complaint.*

**Every year, the same problems require solutions that are reinvented from scratch for tasks that should just be standard**

While the circumstances around the way the organisation interacts with related bodies (i.e. national associations, government, industry, etc) may vary from year to year, essentially the **core elements** and **purpose** for the organisation being in existence will remain unchanged. In every organisation there is a high degree of repetition in practices across the board. Effort should be expended at every level to document those elements of each role, and present this documentation to management for critique with the aim for continuous improvement.

Such documentation doesn't need to be onerous. It can begin with checklists and timetables, and evolve into detailed descriptions or formal documents given available time and interest, and in line with the growth of the organisation.

Importantly, where there are many individuals who will follow the documentation, it ensures consistency and quality across the organisation. Such consistency and quality raises the boarder profile and capability, thus further contributing to achieve the aims of the organisation.



Systems, with clearly defined processes, are the only way to avoid ongoing fire-fighting – a mad scramble at each twist or turn to heroically rescue a situation. Participating in a voluntary organisation should be rewarding and fulfilling for the individuals and the need for systems helps volunteers attain this fulfilment.

When the circumstances change, having documented systems allows easy identification of those steps to be changed in an analytical way.

*Example from a zoo. The zoo relies on an army of volunteer helpers in capacities from office work and public education to watching of animals and feeding. While a core set volunteers return from year to year, over 70% turnover annually. Much of the first three months of each year new volunteers struggle to get on top of the work required, and because of the numbers, there isn't enough supervision and direction of the new volunteers. There is no good outline or documentation of the work required, and the helpers through trial and error work out what they need to do. Some leave in frustration in the first couple of months through a feeling of being rudderless. There is a measurable reduction in execution effectiveness of the organisation until all these new helpers find their own way. But every year, things turn out differently from the prior year because volunteers are making up their own work methods as they are going along.*

**Someone leaves, and there is a tragic loss of organisational knowledge**

Where volunteers rotate annually in roles, the documentation of systems is a fast-start for new appointees. If the methods are only retained in the head of a vital member who leaves, nothing is retained.



At the core to this issue, however, an organisation that is structured in a way with the right levels to support getting the results, good systems, and strong managerial leadership will ensure that individuals **do** stay involved from one year to the next. They are able to work effortlessly, with the support of those above and below them in the structure, and get the organisational results they are expecting when they volunteer their time.

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## Why This Works and How You Can Make a Difference

These concepts all stem from a body of knowledge called **Requisite Organization**, which has been scientifically developed and proven over a 60 year period, developed by Canadian researcher, Elliott Jaques\*. Every organisation that has deployed this approach, be it government or private, profit or non-profit, has derived significant breakthroughs in the outcomes they achieve, while improving in every metric under scrutiny: revenue, profit, morale, satisfaction, etc.

The difference of this approach in business is that there are generally personal consequences for non-performance. Managerial authority is enacted by performance management of individuals in the workplace.

In order to affect some degree of *consequences* in a voluntary organisation, the leader must recruit a team of volunteers who agree to work on assigned tasks, and carry them out in a timely fashion to meet the needs of the organisation. At the start, when dysfunction is ripe, the leader might be pleased to have all roles filled, and not be willing to let anyone go. However, with development of the principles discussed here, there will be competition for all places. With a developed culture of achievement and progress, and low levels of dysfunction, your organisation will attract eager and enthusiastic helpers who will carry out assigned tasks according to the aims of their immediate manager.

This is the point when you can adjust the organisation structure to build a hierarchy **based on individual capability of volunteers**. This topic is quite in-depth, and out of scope of this paper. However, you might consider getting assistance in enacting this approach in your organisation. More information can be found by following this link: [http://www.peoplefit.com.au/files/pfa\\_level\\_of\\_work\\_and\\_role\\_complexity.pdf](http://www.peoplefit.com.au/files/pfa_level_of_work_and_role_complexity.pdf)

One of the best ways to keep a voluntary organisation viable on ongoing is to have someone work on replacement of returning committee positions before the AGM. This is almost vital. If at an AGM nobody is volunteering, the organisation appears dead in the water. It is a good tactic to have the incoming president more or less select his team before the AGM by one-to-one conversations with prospective committee members.

### Conclusion

For the benefit of the organisations they support, well-meaning volunteers can have their energies and efforts rewarded by designing the right organisational structures, instituting effective managerial leadership, and building systems to make the work of all much easier. This will achieve the aims and goals of the organisation and take it to a new level.