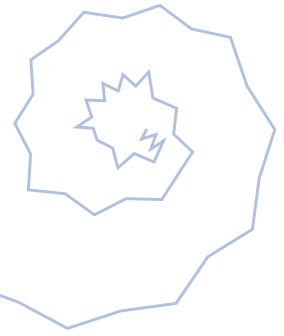


A Journey into the Unknown



Many NGOs provide training for their members in order to increase their skills and competencies for leadership tasks within the organisation. Often, training courses are organised rather spontaneously for a particular target group, in response to needs or interests expressed by members or clients. Some organisations have developed a more global training strategy, to envision and plan ahead according to needs and interests and the organisation's aims and mission. Here, Peter Draper tells the story of how his organisation, the Alliance, came to build its own training strategy, a policy on training for trainers.

This is the story of how the Alliance of European Voluntary Service Organisations (Alliance) came to start its own Training Policy with the experience gained through a journey into the unknown territory of Training for Trainers. This journey was undertaken with the co-operation and assistance provided by the European Youth Centres (EYC) and the European Youth Foundation (EYF).

The Alliance

As a broad introduction to the Alliance, it is an International Non-Governmental Youth Organisation that represents national organisations running international voluntary service projects. Each national organisation promotes community development, intercultural education, understanding and peace through voluntary service. Much of this is done via international workcamps. These involve 10 to 20 volunteers from different countries participating in 2 to 3 week projects doing local community work, including environmental, social, cultural and archaeological work. Got the picture?

Each national organisation within the Alliance relies on short-term Leader Training seminars to create a pool of workcamp leaders who can be responsible for the day to day running of an international workcamp. The potential leaders are trained in topics like Intercultural Learning, Group Dynamics, Communication skills, and Conflict Resolution as well as the more mundane but equally important Health and Safety, Security, Cooking Rotas etc. As you will appreciate this is quite a lot of work and information to pack into a 2 or 3 day training weekend!

Step One

Anyway, the story begins when the Polish partner of the Alliance, the Federation for Youth Exchange (FIYE), decided that it would invite two 'Trainers' from other Alliance organisations to help with their Leader Training weekend just outside of Warsaw (this was aimed at training 40 / 50 volunteers from all over Eastern Europe).

FIYE invited trainers from two other organisations, Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke (MS) Denmark and the

Welsh organisation United Nations Association Exchange (UNA Exchange), as they had a reputation within the Alliance for running good Leader Training courses. However, due to some logistical problems caused by travel arrangements and getting time off from work, the three trainers (Liz Slowinska – FIYE, Maiken Lassen – MS Denmark and Peter Draper – UNA Exchange) ended up meeting each other for the first time on the morning of the training! With a matter of a few hours to prepare before the participants arrived a sketch outline of the training was agreed. During the event after really late nights, lots of work and a couple of mishaps the weekend thankfully turned out to be a success. The very tired trainers surmised that there must be better ways of working which they could have used and, rather than using the 'tried and tested methods' they knew, there must be other more inventive and effective techniques available which were just waiting to be discovered. Over a glass of Guinness the three red-eyed 'trainers' decided that they needed some training themselves!

Step Two

After discussion within the Alliance network and some investigation it was discovered that training seminars could be held at the EYCs in Strasbourg and Budapest. With a great deal of hope an application was made to the EYF for a grant to run a seminar for those volunteers within the Alliance partners who organised and ran the Leader's Training. With the memories of Warsaw still fresh in our minds we called it a 'Training for Trainers' seminar.

UNA Exchange applied for the funding on behalf of the Alliance and when the good news of the successful bid came through the now very real seminar required someone to organise and plan it. Having been two of the 'red-eyed' trainers to suggest the idea in the first place, Peter Draper and Liz Slowinska along with the team at UNA Exchange searched for other people within the Alliance who were keen to come onto the Prep Team. Eventually we were pleased to have Joanne Chenal (UNAREC – France), Xenia Koutenaki (Conservation Volunteers Greece - CVG) and Sam Hall (UNA Exchange) on the team.

by Peter Draper



This team then went out to EYC Budapest for a Prep Team meeting with our nominated course tutor, but unfortunately due to illness we were unable to meet him. This proved to be an unavoidable source of tension later, as the direct and personal lines of communication didn't really open with him until we met at the start of the seminar.

Our main idea behind the seminar was to get 'Trainers' of leaders together and examine:

- What training currently exists within the Alliance;
- What could be improved;
- What was good enough to share.
- And, of course, for us all to meet with other 'trainers'; and to look with them at new ideas and potential future plans.

The Prep Team and tutor had much to work to do, we had not worked together before, neither had we had time to put all the detail on the plan. This process was hindered further by the fact that we had not really attracted the target group we had hoped for. This had been due to the dates given to us as these were not the most appropriate to our needs (short time for invitations to go out, busy times for staff in the offices of the different organisations etc.) Many of the participants were new to training and didn't know their training programme as well as we had hoped for. Nevertheless everyone who came was enthusiastic and full of energy.

After a shaky start within the team we started to really work together. The programme also came to life, it changed almost everyday due to our evaluation and review process. Our meetings were fun and lasted much of the night, just for a change! The programme also reflected a typical Leader's Training - lots of games, lots of energy, lots of fun.

The seminar was very well received by the participants and everyone went away full of energy and enthusiasm. Phew!! Thanks to the huge amount of enthusiasm generated the Prep Team decided that an additional training was not beyond its capabilities and brought the idea to the meetings of Alliance partners. One of the major issues raised in the participants' evaluations was that they thought that they required further training in the Methods and Methodologies of Training. Together these two positives helped to form the basis of the next Alliance 'Training for Trainers' event. Another successful application was made and we started again.

Step Three

The Prep Team met in Cardiff, but this was before we had been allocated a tutor – possibly getting a little bit over-confident you see! We had a successful meeting, even naively preparing a programme, you would have thought that we would have known better by now! The team decided that it could not afford the costs of sending everyone across to Strasbourg for the next meeting with our newly appointed tutor, and so Joanne and Peter were duly delegated as ambassadors. The meeting was very reassuring to them, though we are not so sure that it was for him!

As a Prep Team we had learnt so much from Budapest, (pos-

sibly more than the participants), we understood our roles much better, we knew each other and the way each one worked, we had learnt some hard lessons and we had gained mutual trust. Information was sent out in plenty of time and was much more concise and focused on the aims and objectives of the training. In addition, we had done a lot of formal and informal communication within the Alliance, so the member organisations were really supportive in helping to recruit participants. We were ready.

We worked differently in Strasbourg. We split our responsibilities up into teams of two or three for each day, with the tutor acting as the anchor point for continuity, this meant that it freed up some of the mental and practical skills of the Prep Team to sort out other issues. As a small example, when preparing the Open Space Technology (OST - see Coyote No.2) day, two members planned the detail whilst the rest of the team painted butterflies and bees in a glorious attempt to decorate the plenary room. Another important innovation for us was using daily evaluations within groups, which helped us plan the following days accordingly.

The final programme for the week took the participants through their own journey. Firstly they needed to look at their own communication skills and that of the group in order to build up the necessary trust and co-operation within this newly formed team. We then explored ideas on how to adapt methods that they already knew and to gain some deeper understanding of why they worked. The next step was to start to think creatively in making new methods and then giving them the supportive atmosphere in order to experiment and learn. The OST day then gave a concrete example of a new technique for the Alliance that worked really well. At the end we started to explore the future of where this journey could take us before our final farewells.

Again we were very encouraged with the results of the seminar. The participants were pleased and enthused (and months later many of them reported how they had used ideas from the course in their own training events), the Prep Team members were remarkably healthy (though at one point we realised that we hadn't been out of the EYC building for almost three days!) and the tutor still had hair left. The Alliance Treasurer visited us on the last two days and was also impressed, so much so the Alliance is now building its own policy on Training for Trainers. Guess who's volunteered to help! Another journey into the unknown.

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