Using volunteer partners

One of the aims of the engagement driven approach is to encourage staff to take ownership of change, to build confidence and develop skills which allow individuals or teams to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their own processes. To address this and to give wider exposure to the approach, volunteer partners can be valuable.

In this model, a volunteer partner is a staff member who expresses an interest in being part of the organisation’s process improvement agenda. In their day to day work, they may not touch the process under review, but they feel that they may have something to offer because they have the skills, experience or simply a willingness to be open-minded and ask obvious questions that may otherwise be overlooked. Using volunteer partners provides a vehicle for widening the resource pool for future work, encourages people to make process changes at a local level and can provide an opportunity for staff development.

The role itself can be varied depending on who, when and the type of project that the volunteer is working on. The role may include:

- sharing views and experiences on the process through emails, face to face conversations or by attending engagement events
- acting as an observer at engagement events, feeding back impressions on the approach, the nature and extent of engagement
- taking part in discussions and analysis as part of the core or the wider team
- supporting engagement events or helping to gather data from process players and users.

Hints and tips

- Invite staff from across the organisation to become volunteer partners. Set up a drop-in session so that those who are curious have the opportunity to discuss the role face to face.
- Explain that many people will have the skills and experience for this role, regardless of how long they have been in the organisation, the job that they do or their seniority. Illustrate the type of role and projects that they can be involved in and the impact that they can have.
- Keep volunteer partners updated on project progress, even if there is not an immediate role for them to take on. This could be through regular e-mails, informal face to face conversations or social media. Consider setting up a volunteer partners’ forum so that they are able to share their experiences.
- When volunteer partners are invited to be part of a project, make it clear that the role can be tailored to meet their individual interests and the time they have available. Be flexible with how they are used and recognise that this may change at different stages of the project.
- Keep the volunteer partner’s line manager informed and address concerns, if there are any, about the impact this may have on their ‘day job’. Ensure that there is an open and transparent route for sharing and resolving any issues that arise.
- Make sure that volunteer partners know that the ‘day job’ comes first at all times.