

What We Heard at the
"Calibration - Tuning into Volunteer
Alberta's Strategic Compass"
Community Conversation



LAND AFFIRMATION

As Volunteer Alberta continues our ongoing (un)learning journey, we see the increasing importance of reflecting on our ties to each other and the land. Our main office is situated on Treaty 6 Territory, in an area that holds many Indigenous names but is referred to by the Nehiyaw people as amiskwaciwâskahikan (ᐱᑦᓄᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦᑦ) and colonially as Edmonton. Our staff, board, and work extend into Treaty 4, 6, 7, 8 and 10 Territories, and we affirm the importance of honouring these historic agreements as well as all future treaties. The land we call Alberta is the ancestral territory and present-day home of many Indigenous peoples, including the Nehiyaw, Dene, Iyârhe Nakoda, Anishinaabe, Niitsitapi, Inuit, and Métis. They have cared for and advocated for the lands, waters, and animals for many generations despite historical and ongoing harmful actions against their communities. We are grateful for their stewardship of this land, and as an act of reconciliation and good will, it is our intention to ensure that our organization, along with the entire social impact/non-profit/voluntary sector, can become good partners in supporting the land and communities.

Inspired by Indigenous knowledge systems, we seek to become good organizational ancestors. In doing so we are committed to meaningful reflection and critiquing of our ways of knowing, being, and doing. To help communities thrive and illuminate good ways forward for the sector, we must recognize how colonial systems influence how Albertans perceive and participate in volunteerism and civic engagement. This includes considering the historical and ongoing barriers that exclude Indigenous people from meaningful engagement in our communities. In the spirit of reconciliation, we all have a responsibility to consider how our organizations can contribute to decolonized, inclusive, and equitable volunteer programming and take action to do no more harm. Volunteer Alberta is committed to meeting our responsibilities.

About This Document

In June 2024, VA held its 2024 AGM and hosted "Calibration: Tuning in to Volunteer Alberta's Strategic Compass," a virtual fireside chat and breakout session with Annand Ollivierre (J5 Design) and Miki Stricker-Talbot (Volunteer Alberta). The discussions we had explored possibilities and tensions highlighted in the Strategic Compass, and participants shared how these show up in their own contexts. The insights we heard are summarized in this document. This input will help us bring our [Strategic Compass](#) to life. We thank all participants for joining our Calibration Chat this June, and for helping us to illuminate promising paths forward for the sector.

Prior to the Calibration Chat, Volunteer Alberta (VA) embarked on a [Strategic Dreaming Journey](#) in 2023, engaging in hopeful conversations with the people and communities we serve about the future of volunteerism and civic engagement in Alberta. Together we dreamt of futures that were sustainable, inclusive, and hopeful. VA staff and board members convened in Fall 2023 to reflect on the wisdom that surfaced from our community dialogues and to create our Strategic Dreaming Compass. The Strategic Compass document turned the aspirations voiced in our community conversations into guiding principles for VA, serving as a North Star to navigate the future with intention and care.

What We Asked

In each breakout room, a VA facilitator provided participants with three guiding questions for the group discussions.

Question 1:

Are any of these tensions resonating with you?

- Long-term systems change and short-term responses to crisis and current needs.
- Optimism and cynicism about what the future holds.
- Working simultaneously in the "here and now" and "emerging and next."
- A provincial scope and hyper-local context of engagement in communities.
- Supporting movements and causes that are important to our members and team while remaining true to our organizational focus on civic engagement and volunteerism.

Question 2:

If you were to think about embracing one (or all) of these shifts in your own context, what would it mean for your organization? What would be different? (Capacity Building to Capability Nourishing, Acts of Charity to Acts of Belonging, Working Systematically to Working Systemically, From Hierarchical Decision-Making to Collective Decision-Making)

Question 3:

Are there new ways of working you have been thinking about and/or experimenting with?

What We Heard

Key Themes

Affecting the Long-term Through the Short-term

Participants recognized that balancing present operational demands with future planning is essential but can sometimes be challenging to achieve. A participant suggested shifting thinking from reactionary to revolutionary can help to reframe everyday crisis responses as catalysts for long-term systemic change. Another participant mentioned defining systems today to navigate them more effectively in the future is crucial. Attendees agreed there is a need for greater connection amongst nonprofits in the sector, and perhaps by working together both locally and provincially in the present, we can find a way forward, together, for the future.

Holistic Understanding of Volunteer Engagement

Some organizations expressed that recruiting and retaining volunteers is not as simple as putting out a call for help; there are internal and external factors that affect how much impact an organization can realistically achieve. For example, creating a volunteer schedule isn't just about having enough volunteers; it's also about understanding the time and skill that each volunteer can offer. The more volunteer managers understand their volunteers and get to know them, the more it can help to create a volunteer roster that is well-rounded. When engaging volunteers, organizations should consider the volunteer as a whole person - not only what skills and experience they offer but how their lives outside of volunteering affect their ability to participate. Some communities are thriving because they have a deeply engrained culture of care that allows for engagement to occur, without barriers. By understanding volunteers and their individual needs, organizations can better support their volunteers to enhance involvement and contributions.

Importance of Uplifting Volunteer Management

We heard about the long-standing need to uplift and raise the status of volunteer management, which is often undervalued. Volunteer managers often have difficulty gaining support from their organizations because, sometimes, they aren't seen as true "managers." There was a sentiment that the public perception of volunteer management results in team members having to work harder, forgoing certain workplace wellbeing benefits to not undermine their perceived work ethic. With some organizations cutting funding for these roles, there is greater pressure for Volunteer Managers to validate their work. However, volunteer management requires great capabilities to engage with people meaningfully to help achieve the organization's mission, even more so now that the competition for people's time means more buy-in is needed. The solution, the discussions concluded, is that volunteer management should not be treated as a secondary task but instead be completed with a dedicated team and support to elevate its impact and perception.



Funding Tensions:

Limited funding options and competition for resources remain prominent concerns, with some smaller communities highlighting this is exacerbated in their context due to a lack of meaningful pathways to build funding relationships. For some, tension between what funders want and what communities need makes it difficult to find suitable funding for programs. Further complicating this issue is the deepened polarization of multiple levels of government, which leads to funding trends that are not aligned with community priorities. While organizations are interested in exploring larger projects, the immediate focus remains on day-to-day operations to keep themselves afloat. Some organizations have tried new strategies such as innovating ways to partner with similar organizations and apply for larger funding opportunities that benefit multiple groups.

Balancing Optimism and Cynicism

Participants expressed that despite the general sentiment of bleakness in recent years, uplifting ideas and cultivating hope are crucial. After all, if organizations cannot seek and find a silver lining, how can they expect others to? One participant highlighted the importance of resilience, explaining that dedicating resources and making focused efforts were key to achieving their goals. Lastly, recognizing that our sector has dealt with many crises in our history – adversity is not a new concept to us. Some of these crises we are currently dealing with are not new but are now just becoming more apparent. Now, more than ever, it is important to elevate the diverse voices that have been active in the sector for years to gain a deeper understanding of long-standing issues and collaborate on making change.

Embracing Shifts

When groups discussed embracing the shifts outlined in the Strategic Compass—moving from Capacity Building to Capability Nourishing, from Acts of Charity to Acts of Belonging, from Working Systematically to Working Systemically, and from Hierarchical Decision-Making to Collective Decision-Making—these concepts appeared to resonate, sparking conversation. Participants felt that the language used in VA's Strategic Compass encouraged slowing down, allowing people to show up as their authentic selves and work together in harmony. For instance, the shift from Capacity Building to Capability Nourishing generated an overall positive response from participants because it places emphasis on using an asset-based approach rather than a deficit narrative and acknowledges “that people don't start from zero,” as one participant pointed out. Additionally, the conversations emphasized the need for ongoing conversations with funders to support changes such as these.



So What?

A few key takeaways emerged from the discussions that took place during the Community Conversation:

Support for Resources and Capability Building

More support for resources may alleviate some tensions and help with capabilities to further impact. The primary tensions we heard are about funding, balancing daily operations with long-term goals, and including wellbeing and capability nurturing initiatives while maintaining operational standards. While it was agreed that it is important to make time for strategic planning, support is still needed for organizations to gain the time and confidence to dream of alternate visions for the future. Leveraging networks at local, regional, and national levels may help with sharing knowledge, resources, and practices to address immediate needs and long-term goals.

Cultivating Curiosity

Organizations that adopt a curiosity mindset may be open to experimenting with new approaches. Some organizations are experimenting by utilizing their capabilities in new ways to further their causes and yield hopeful results. Innovative examples we heard include creating shorter-term strategic plans that allow for more nimbleness, providing microvolunteering opportunities, merging programs to ensure impact, and leveraging interagency relationships to better collaborate and share knowledge. Others have yet to reach this stage but are interested in seeing what pathways others may develop for success. Organizations can build resiliency to face current and future challenges through prototypes, shifts, and adaptations to current contexts. Organizations can lean on one another to learn from each other's experiments, collaborating through deep listening, feedback, and celebrating in each other's stories.

Opportunity for Better External Awareness of Sector Needs

There is an opportunity to help people outside the sector better understand the day-to-day nuances and contexts that impact the sector and its operations. Those outside the sector are often not fully aware of the contexts related to resource constraints compounded with increased service demand. One way to increase this understanding is to explore deeper and more meaningful collaborations between organizations and their supporters. Regular dialogues not only within organizations but also between organizations and their funders may help to align support with organizational needs.

Also, there is an opportunity to raise awareness and advocate for the recognition of volunteer management roles. With support from within and from funders, the strategic importance of these roles can be elevated, enhancing volunteer engagement. This support can help build a culture of appreciation and inclusion within a volunteer program, which can help advance an organization's mission.

Balanced Perspective

Organizations can create balanced and hopeful perspectives by learning from past experiences and resisting the urge to view issues in a binary way. Creating safe spaces to share challenges and successes might help to create a more realistic picture of the current landscape. In our networks, sharing practices and innovations that work can inspire our sector. Seeing concrete examples of success can generate a sense of hope and resilience. Some of the challenges mentioned were not necessarily new to the sector, but viewing challenges as opportunities for learning and growth can help to build a resilient mindset.

Now What?

VA will take the feedback and insights we heard during the Community Conversation and use them to help us bring the Strategic Compass to life over the next three years. Stay tuned for opportunities to become involved in sector research, training, and additional Community Conversations in the months and years ahead.

Thank you to everyone who could join our Calibration fireside chat and discussion. Your insights will help us better understand our call to service and help to bring our Strategic Compass to life. Your input is invaluable in helping us achieve our vision of thriving communities nurtured by caring humans across Alberta. Thank you!

If you have additional feedback or questions, please contact us at info@volunteeralberta.ab.ca

