



Landcare Professionals Forum 14-15 June, 2017
TreeTops Scout Camp, 140 Royal Parade, Riddells Creek

Six things that make for happy and productive Landcare staff

Participants at LVI's Landcare Professionals Forum used a Knowledge Harvest process to draw together what they know about *what makes for happy and productive Landcare staff*. They reviewed their experience and built a picture of good practice in this vital aspect of Landcare:

The Landcare committee learns about its responsibilities as an employer.

The Landcare committee puts in place policies and procedures to deal with problems promptly.

The Landcare staff member has a sounding board and an advocate.

The committee and the Landcare staff member put in place a professional development program.

The Landcare staff member has a mentor and/or time with their peers.

The Landcare committee respects and appreciates the Landcare staff member.

1. *The Landcare committee learns about its responsibilities as an employer.* Community members don't necessarily know their responsibilities as employers. They need to learn about:
 - different types of employment (casual, contractor, permanent position), the strengths and weakness of each, for the committee and for the staff member, and industry standards for remuneration for each employment model;
 - how to select the right candidate, and how to negotiate agreement on responsibilities of a position;
 - how to negotiate specific tasks as a person proceeds in their position, letting them apply their talents and initiative around the committee's priorities;
 - occupational health and safety, and how to work with an employee to keep them safe.

More could be added to this list, but the point is that it takes time to learn all this, and the learning happens gradually, not all at once before employment begins. The committee has to put the time in, and be prepared to keep improving its arrangements.

Because committees may not know where to start, there's a need for a service that provides information on employment and teaches committees how to meet their responsibilities. LVI is in a good position to provide this service, because it knows the Landcare employment situation. Again, it's worth saying that a single dose of information and training is not enough—committees need to be gradually taken through their responsibilities and given coaching as they turn theory into good practice.

The Landcare model is cost-efficient way to support community action, but this is one area where government needs to invest in the costs that do come with using volunteer organisations to employ people.



2. *The Landcare committee puts in place policies and procedures to deal with problems promptly.* There will inevitably be differences of view on tasks and performance, financial management, reporting, and so on. Committee and staff member need to agree how they will:

- give feedback to each other, in good times and bad;
- negotiate agreement on tasks and lines of communication;
- decide ahead of time how critical decisions like project bids, and predictable pressure points like reporting, will be handled between the committee and the staff member;
- bring in outside expertise and if necessary mediation, for issues that aren't easily resolved.

Most often, agreements and procedures aren't set up at the start, and have to be developed when things are not working well. This isn't ideal, but it's what often happens. In these situations, the committee needs to be able to talk with an experienced and non-judgemental third party to get informed support. That third party needs to know the law, have templates of policy and procedure that work for Landcare employment, and have the contacts to call in mediation if required. The aim here is to go from a small crisis to good policy and procedures, and avoid a big and damaging crisis.

3. *The Landcare staff member has a sounding board and an advocate.* Employees in Landcare often work alone, and often don't know their rights and responsibilities as employees. They can face situations where:

- the committee gives responsibility without also giving a person authority to take action, expecting them to bring back too many decisions for their sign-off, and effectively shackling them;
- one committee member takes over managing the staff member around their own agenda without reference to the committee;
- the committee is in conflict and the employee is caught in the middle;
- all members of the committee make demands on the employee, at any moment of the day or night, without appreciating the pressure this puts on a person;
- committee members criticise, abuse and threaten the staff member;
- the employing committee is enthusiastic for a while, then falls away, then rushes back onto the job and wants to know what's happened;
- local groups leave everything to the facilitator, walk away from their responsibilities as office bearers, and then are critical of the facilitator for not delivering;
- the employee only hears complaints, and gets little positive feedback.

Just like their committee, a Landcare staff member need access first to an experienced staff member and/or landcare committee member who can help them problem solve. This is what we mean by *a sounding board*.



If the situation does not improve, and in fact gets worse, they need access to an *advocate*—someone who knows the law, knows what works in Landcare employment, and who can support them in speaking out for what they need.

4. *The committee and the Landcare staff member put in place a professional development program.* This is not an optional extra—but if professional development isn't planned and put in place, the demands of the job will overwhelm even the most enthusiastic Landcare employee.

Landcare work requires many distinct areas of knowledge and skill, in agriculture, land management and conservation, in financial and project management, in documenting, evaluating, reporting and learning from projects, in working locally with individuals, groups and different types of landholder, in influencing regional bodies and government agencies, in communicating what Landcare does and what it offers to individuals and organisations.

No single employee starts competent in all these areas. Each needs to set their learning agenda and have access to time and expertise to gradually and continually develop their competence. Learning to meet the challenges in Landcare work is why people come and why they will stay, if they have good support for their learning.

5. *The Landcare staff member has a mentor and/or time with their peers.* A mentor helps a person find their way in a field with which the mentor is familiar. The mentor knows the opportunities and pitfalls, sees a person's strengths and limitations, and knows they will grow with good support and the right choices. They give a person their dedicated support.

Peers are in the midst of their own journey. Time with peers gives a person multiple perspectives, a chance to jointly problem solve and invent new solutions, and the good feeling of pursuing the challenge of landcare with others.

6. *The Landcare committee respects and appreciates the Landcare staff member.* Landcare needs clear agreements, policy and procedures, but it isn't a machine. It is a delicate web of relationships between people taking responsibility for looking after the land as a living system. Those relationships are sustained not in the first instance by money, but by respect for the integrity each brings to their effort, and appreciation of their contribution.

Respect means backing a person's judgement even when you disagree or you're not sure of the outcome. Appreciation means formal recognition of work well done and saying thanks, seeing the genius a person brings to their work and telling them what you see, acknowledging what it costs personally to do the job well, being open about what a person's effort means to you, and making sure they hear directly from people they have supported.

It's the responsibility and privilege of the employing committee to lead by example here.