

A Zen Approach to Volunteer Management

Michael L. Barnett

Gloria Cahill

Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine.

Shunryu Suzuki

A community service volunteer's efforts are performed on a part-time basis "out of the goodness of one's heart." When faced with the vast needs of the population they have chosen to serve, some volunteers can quickly burn out unless they are able to find the intrinsic value in the contributions they make. Managers in a community service setting must help volunteers obtain a sense of meaning and hope in order to fuel a rich and sustainable commitment. How can they do this? We examine New York University's Office of Community Service to show how this public service arm of a private university has used a Zen approach to volunteer management, and in doing so, built a sustainable volunteer base that effectively serves the ongoing needs of the community, as well as those of the volunteers themselves.

REEXAMINING SERVICE AT NYU'S OFFICE OF COMMUNITY SERVICE

New York University (NYU), the largest private university in the United States, describes itself as "A private university in the public service." According to NYU's president, L. Jay Oliva, "Community service is an integral part of our concept of a well-balanced education, and service is fundamental to our mission of educating the whole person." In furtherance of its goals, NYU established its Office of Community Service in

September 1996. Programs such as Community Service Funding, which provides grants and guidance for new service initiatives and service learning courses, ServiceNet, an online volunteer database designed to match volunteers with service opportunities, and the President's C-Team, which directly places students in local volunteer agencies, were placed under the Office of Community Service umbrella.

The director of the Office of Community Service was provided broad latitude and generous funding to pursue NYU's community service mission. With this mandate in place, programs proliferated over the next several years. Though the number of programs was increasing, it was unclear if the impact of the Office of Community Service was also increasing. Therefore, in the spring of 2000, the director began to reexamine how best to carry out NYU's mission of public service.

At the broadest level, the director of the Office of Community Service is responsible for protecting the university's investment in its service agenda. The university provides funding and personnel, and as the custodian of the students' tuition dollars and a large endowment, rightly expects a measurable outcome. The director has to determine which measures to use to frame the university's community service mission and to convincingly measure its effectiveness. One of the simplest

Michael Barnett is a doctoral candidate in Management at New York University's Stern School of Business. Mike has extensive volunteer experience with a wide variety of agencies including the United Way, Mentoring USA, and New York University's President's C-Team.

Gloria Cahill is the Director of Community Service at New York University and a member of the Association for Volunteer Administrators, and the Points of Light Foundation. She has extensive experience in volunteer program development, placement, training, and retention efforts and serves as Editor-in-Chief of New York University's Service Matters semi-annual community service magazine.

yardsticks is the sheer number of volunteers actively involved in community service initiatives. At NYU, over 4,000 students are currently involved in some form of university-sponsored community service. There are numerous categories of service, each with its own unique measure of effectiveness. For example, university volunteers serving the homeless at local soup kitchens can measure that 400 meals were served on a given Saturday afternoon and, by using that count, be satisfied that a positive and measurable outcome was reached. The total number of hours of service provided by the student volunteers can also be counted. The Office of Community Service can calculate the number of hours worked and then multiply that total by the relevant wage rate to determine the dollar value of the unpaid labor force represented by the volunteers.

While these figures are compelling, they alone are inadequate to determine the effectiveness of the Office of Community Service as a whole. Success in, for example, mentoring relationships between NYU volunteers and local at-risk school children is much more amorphous. A mentoring program, like a soup kitchen, can convincingly employ some quantitative measures to illustrate its scale of operations. It can report on the number of children served, the number of volunteers utilized, the number of hours invested in the individual mentoring dyads and the number of volunteer hours invested in the organization as a whole. But these measures often do little to convince the mentors that their time and effort is making a difference. As a result, it can be quite difficult to sustain volunteer momentum over the time necessary to plant the seeds that will later produce meaningful and noticeable long-term results. The mentoring relationship, according to Matilda Raffa Cuomo (1999: xix), founder and chair of Mentoring USA, is one that bears fruit only over time: "Children who are matched with mentors demonstrate a greater interest in school,

increased discipline in performing tasks, and a more positive attitude, which lowers their chances of becoming drug users, teenage parents, or high school dropouts." Short-term measures, while useful in many ways, are simply limited in what they are able to convey about the overall meaning and value of the service efforts.

Many of the most important aims of volunteer efforts are much more intangible than can easily be measured, even in the long-term. One of the chief long-range goals of NYU's volunteer efforts is to enrich the minds of the students by placing them in settings that facilitate the development of compassion, such as the desire to help a child reach his or her potential, the wish to alleviate the loneliness of a homebound senior citizen, or the motivation to provide companionship and assistance to a terminally ill AIDS patient. If the experiences and resulting mindsets of volunteers are the assets the office seeks to create, then clearly objective measures such as number of hours served are inadequate indicators of success. Additionally, these measures may do nothing to enrich or further these efforts. In fact, relying solely on these factors to measure the outcomes of the service initiatives can be counterproductive. At the Office of Community Service, it drained the staff of energy that could better be invested in improving the service experience for the volunteers. Yet what alternatives are there? We suggest that Zen teachings can offer a more holistic system of measurement.

APPLYING ZEN PRINCIPLES TO VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

Zen is a rich and complex spiritual system that we would not presume to fully define in a few short pages. For the purposes of this paper, we use the following general description: *Zen is a belief system that encourages its practitioners to seek enlightenment through mindfulness, meditation, compassion, and full engagement in the present moment.* According to Rabinowitz (1999: 1), "To be mindful or

fully present as each moment of our lives unfolds is the foundation of the meditative mind." We believe that such mindfulness is also the foundation of meaningful community service and professional well-being.

"The point of Zen practice is to let go of ideas about boundaries and to feel our limitless true nature" (Kaye, 1996: 108). By placing our focus on the results of our efforts, we are, in fact, limiting those results by placing finite measurements on infinite possibilities. Phil Jackson, former coach of the wildly successful Chicago Bulls basketball team, found this to be true: "I discovered that I was far more effective when I became completely immersed in the action, rather than trying to control it and fill my mind with unrealistic expectations" (Jackson & Delehanty, 1995: 51).

Balance is a state of mind that allows an individual to become fully engaged in the present moment without undue concern for measurement. An effective and sustainable community service organization is one that facilitates balance by freeing employees and volunteers to engage in both measurable and unmeasurable activities. When employees and volunteers are balanced, they are able to focus on the task at hand and perform to the best of their abilities without the undue stress caused by focus on goals and measures. It is this full engagement in the task at hand that produces success.

Community service, like Zen practice, also requires a level of awareness and acceptance of the way things are. At first, this would seem to undermine the very purpose of community service, which is aimed at changing the way things are. However, as the Zen approach teaches us, it is only by experiencing the reality of the situation that one can hope to have a positive impact on it.

"When we let go of wanting something else to happen in this moment, we are taking a profound step toward being able to encounter what is here now. If we hope to go anywhere or develop ourselves in any

way, we can only step from where we are standing. If we don't really know where we are standing—a knowing that comes directly from the cultivation of mindfulness—we may only go in circles, for all our efforts and expectations" (Kabat-Zinn, 1999: 82).

Like meditation, reflection is a vital component of being fully present, and it is an important step toward achieving the emotional balance that will enable the volunteer to effectively improve those conditions. By definition, community service volunteers enter into situations that they hope to ameliorate. They are often so focused on doing their part to fix the problem that they do not take the time to consciously reflect on the true nature of the problem.

In order to incorporate mindfulness into one's community service practice, it is helpful to consider the teachings of Japanese Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki, whose 1958 book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* was a landmark in the introduction of Zen to American audiences. Suzuki encouraged his students to seek the purity and openness of what he referred to as "the beginner's mind." According to Suzuki, "In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few" (Suzuki, 1999: 16). It is important for volunteers to rid themselves of all preconceived notions before entering a community service agency. Beginner's mind requires a rejection of all self-centeredness. It may be difficult for volunteers to recognize that their genuinely good intentions are self-centered, but if they become caught up in the notion of what they can do to solve the problem, then there is, in fact, a level of ego that must be abandoned in order to achieve a true understanding of the situation. "When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something. My beginner's mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate it is boundless" (Suzuki, 1999:16).

Zen teaching is based on four central principles called "The Four Noble Truths," which are: (1) There is suffering; (2) The cause of suffering is attachment to desire; (3) Suffering ends by letting go of attachments to desire; and (4) The Noble Eight-Fold Path outlines how to let go of attachments to desire and so end suffering (Kabatznick, 1998: 4). The Noble Eight-Fold Path has three goals: Wisdom, Ethical Conduct, and Emotional Balance. Wisdom is comprised of (1) Right Understanding and (2) Right Aspiration. Ethical Conduct is comprised of (3) Right Speech, (4) Right Action, and (5) Right Way of Living. Emotional Balance is comprised of (6) Right Effort, (7) Right Mindfulness, and (8) Right Concentration (Kabatznick, 1998: 76).

These principles can be directly applied to volunteer management. The motivation for serving as a volunteer springs from the realization that there is, in fact, suffering. But very often, the suffering is so pervasive that the volunteer grows restless and frustrated because s/he has the desire to eradicate it yet is unable to do so. Thus the volunteer suffers and ultimately so does his/her performance. The attachment to the desire to eradicate suffering can have the adverse effect of creating a sense of uselessness if, in the desire to affect the whole, the volunteer is unable to see the impact s/he may be having upon the part. If the volunteer accepts the Third Noble Truth and lets go of the desired outcome, s/he can alleviate his/her own suffering, and consequently, focus upon the task at hand; i.e., alleviating the suffering of the individual or group s/he has chosen to serve.

There is a Zen saying, "Chop wood; carry water." This rather cryptic statement reminds us that it is the focused and careful execution of the task at hand that enables us to reach the necessary outcome. If the volunteer can get past the desired outcome and, instead, be fully engaged in the immediate work that needs to be done, the desired outcome will prevail by virtue of the volunteer's ability to

stay with the project for the long haul. The long haul is synonymous with The Noble Eight-Fold Path, which has as its goals wisdom, ethical conduct, and emotional balance. Achievement of these goals will ultimately enable the volunteer to attain the best possible outcome both personally and within the context of the service being provided.

The Emotional Balance sought by way of the Noble Eight-Fold Path is particularly relevant to the community service employee and volunteer. This sense of balance is crucial in order to make a meaningful contribution in the face of frequently overwhelming needs. By recognizing that there is suffering, that the cause of suffering is attachment to desire, and that suffering ends by letting go of attachments to desire — even if the desire is to alleviate the suffering at hand — the volunteer can serve in a truly balanced manner. Otherwise, the volunteer, when confronted with the vastness of the need, may feel that his/her personal contribution is so insignificant that it cannot make a difference. This viewpoint leads to a sense of frustration and failure that the Zen poet Shutaku counters by reminding readers that "A single hair's enough to stir the sea" (Schiller, 1994: 229).

Shutaku reminds the volunteer that every contribution has the potential to have a meaningful impact no matter how small it may seem. But it is only achievable by letting go of the personal desire to make a difference. This sounds paradoxical, but it is the essence of effective community service, which focuses on the volunteer's full engagement in the task at hand. Ideally, when all of the volunteers do their part to address the task, whether it be tutoring a child or delivering a meal to a homebound elderly neighbor, the sea does begin to stir and long-term change can begin to take place.

In order to instill these values in the volunteers, the staff of the Office of Community Service recognized that they would have to adopt and mirror these same principles. How could Zen teachings be applied in practice?

The first step on that path was to incorporate mindfulness practices into the day-to-day operations of the department. The most logical place to introduce this new approach was the weekly staff meeting. Prior to adopting a Zen approach, the departmental staff meetings were a useful but predictable weekly ritual. Each meeting followed an agenda set by the director whose role was to trouble-shoot, identify and solve problems, and make sure that all of the tasks discussed in the previous week's staff meeting were still on track. In addition, the staff meeting served as a forum at which any new business was introduced in a timely fashion to ensure that everyone was well informed of the department's priorities. While this may be a perfectly valid procedure, it offered little payoff and provided no reflective context for the work that was being done. Upon adopting a commitment to mindful management, the nature of the staff meetings was, in the words of the popular television chef Emeril LaGasse, "kicked up a notch."

Borrowing from the Zen practitioners who seek enlightenment through mindfulness and meditation, the Office of Community Service began the practice of starting each staff meeting with a five-minute meditation period. This rather dramatic shift in management style was introduced very gradually and is still a relatively new dynamic within the structure of the department, but its impact is already being felt. The staff meeting now is a tool for communication, motivation, and renewed commitment, in addition to its original function of providing an opportunity to exchange information. The new format of the weekly staff meeting still includes an agenda of current and upcoming priorities, but each meeting also brings the staff together as a team, centering themselves so as to focus on the whole rather than simply dissecting the parts. The meditation technique practiced is a simple breathing exercise performed in a quiet room with no distractions. This minor adjustment to the routine appears to have made a profound difference in the staff's level of con-

centration, participation, and creativity.

Building upon that five-minute exercise, each of the participants is asked to take a moment to share a particularly meaningful job-related experience that they have had since the previous week's staff meeting. In order to participate in this component of the staff meeting, the employee must spend some time reflecting upon the previous week's activities in preparation for the meeting. By adopting this practice in their own professional lives, they are better equipped to recommend reflection to the student volunteers they are placing at agencies, thus helping to enhance the educational component of the service experience.

While this practice may elicit impatient groans from more pragmatic managers who place greater emphasis on results than process, it actually has a very pragmatic outcome. Quite simply, *people find what they look for*. In the former staff meeting format, the focus was on trouble-shooting and problem solving. Hence, the trouble and problems were what the employees sought and found. The new model does not turn a blind eye to the problems, but couches them within a meaningful context, which stimulates problem solving. Furthermore, when the employees are able to recognize that what they do makes a difference, they are better able to impart their own sense of satisfaction and accomplishment to the volunteers, who are eager to make a difference through their own efforts. This attitude enriches the service experience for both the employees and the volunteers, and fosters a sense of purpose that will have a lasting impact on the performance and retention of volunteers and employees over time.

CONCLUSION

In practical terms, every volunteer organization needs to generate certain objective measurements in order to convince overseers that their work is effective and worthy of support, and to demonstrate to potential volun-

teers that the time they invest at the agency will have a meaningful impact. Paradoxically, however, we believe that it is the focus on outcomes that hampers them. By emphasizing the tangibles such as the number of volunteers who work at a given site, or the number of hours they contribute, the agency runs the risk of losing its own focus on the here and now. This mindset can often be counter-productive because it fails to recognize the volunteer's need for meaningful engagement that will inspire a long-term commitment and instill a well-balanced mindset. The Zen approach that we recommend provides a framework that will ensure a healthy relationship between the volunteer and the agency and will thereby help to enhance those measurable outcomes by enabling the volunteer to cultivate a deeper, more long-lasting relationship with the agency. By adopting mindfulness, selflessness, and full engagement in the task at hand, the volunteer is far more likely to find a level of satisfaction that will increase performance at the volunteer site.

Clearly, we have outlined only the first step in a long journey. We believe this first step is essential if one is to stir the sometimes-stagnant sea of volunteer management. However, many other steps are involved. We cannot offer a step-by-step guide, but we can provide some further guidance. Below, we offer several Zen sayings, along with ways that the principles implied in these sayings may be applied to volunteer management (all the Zen sayings are quoted from Schiller, 1994). As the first saying implies, the experiences we have outlined above may open the door toward more effective volunteer management, but it is up to each manager to advance beyond this first step.

MANAGEMENT APPLICATIONS OF ZEN SAYINGS FOR THE VOLUNTEER MANAGER

Teachers open up the door, but you must enter by yourself (p. 102)

Training is important, but even the best

training is irrelevant unless and until the trainee has taken the initiative to act upon the information that has been provided. Success lies not in the training, but in the learning and the follow-through.

When hungry, eat your rice; when tired, close your eyes. Fools may laugh at me, but wise men will know what I mean.

Lin-Chi (p. 130)

A burnt-out individual has very little to offer the organization. Success cannot be measured in terms of the number of hours worked in a particular period, but rather in the employee/volunteer's ability to sustain his/her energy and concentration over time — none of which is possible if the fundamental needs for nourishment and rest are ignored.

Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine. Shunryu Suzuki (p. 301)

It is easy to become complacent in performing the daily tasks demanded by a job. Errors caused by complacency consume a great deal of effort to repair, or may cause irreconcilable harm. A Zen approach enables the employee or volunteer to practice mindfulness in all aspects of his/her work, thus providing meaning to even the most mundane of duties. This, in turn will improve the overall quality of the performance.

When you can do nothing, what can you do? Zen koan (p. 374)

A koan is a question posed by a Zen master to help lead the student to ultimate enlightenment. The enlightenment is not derived by figuring it out, but rather by full engagement in the process of deep contemplation over long periods of time. We offer this age-old question as a reminder that there is always something one can do — reflect, contemplate, meditate. Too often, we forget the power of this kind of “doing.”

The fundamental delusion of humanity is to suppose that I am here and you are

there. Yasutani Roshi (p. 40).

According to the 2nd Century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, "Things derive their being and nature by mutual dependence and are nothing in themselves." (Schiller, p. 232) The Zen-oriented manager understands that there can be no sense of "us vs. them" in a successful workplace because management and employees are interdependent. The manager has nothing to manage without the employees and the employees have no structure without the manager who provides context and direction for the work.

He who knows others is wise. He who knows himself is enlightened. Tao Te Ching (p. 265)

Employees and volunteers should be encouraged to reflect on their professional experiences both in terms of what they have accomplished for themselves and their organization, and also in terms of who they are as human beings. Reflection is an important way of getting to know oneself and of maintaining a sense of perspective. Through reflection, they are better able to analyze their goals, assets, limitations, and potential without feeling the need to live up to standards that may be unrealistically high, or unnecessarily low. By knowing oneself, the employee can live up to his/her full potential.

Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the men of old (translated elsewhere as "wise men"). **Seek what they sought.** Basho (p. 107)

It is fine to look to those in leadership positions as role models, but it is important to remember to be inspired not by their rewards, but rather by the commitment that brought about those rewards.

How refreshing, the whinny of a pack-horse unloaded of everything. Zen saying (p. 283)

Don't forget to stop and smell the roses!

REFERENCES

- Cuomo, M. R. 1999. *The person who changed my life: Prominent Americans recall their mentors.* New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group.
- Jackson, P. & Delehanty, H. 1995. *Sacred hoops: Spiritual lessons from a hardwood warrior.* New York: Hyperion.
- Kabat-Zin, J. 1999. This is it. In Rabinowitz, I. (ed.), *Mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers: Applying eastern teachings to everyday life.* New York: Hyperion; pg. 81-82.
- Kabatznick, R. 1998. *The Zen of eating.* New York: Penguin Putnam Inc.
- Kaye, L. 1999. True nature. In Rabinowitz, I. (ed.), *Mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers: Applying eastern teachings to everyday life.* New York: Hyperion; pg. 105-110.
- Rabinowitz, I. (ed.). 1999. *Mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers: Applying eastern teachings to everyday life.* New York: Hyperion.
- Schiller, D. 1994. *The Little Zen Companion.* New York: Workman Press.
- Suzuki, S. 1999. Prologue. In Rabinowitz, I. (ed.), *Mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers: Applying eastern teachings to everyday life.* New York: Hyperion; pg. 15-16.
- Sveiby, K. E. 1997. *The new organizational wealth: Managing & measuring knowledge-based assets.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.