

PASSIONATE VOLUNTEERISM

The importance of
volunteerism today
and how government,
nonprofits and
volunteers can make it
a more powerful force

Jeanne H. Bradner

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“JUST” A VOLUNTEER

“What is your job here?” I asked the woman at the daycare center.

“Oh, I’m just a volunteer,” she responded.

“I didn’t ask if you are being paid for your work,” I smiled, “I wanted to know about the work you do.”

“Well, I help out here three mornings a week. I serve snacks, read stories, and keep attendance records.”

Further conversation disclosed that this “just a volunteer” was co-founder of the daycare center; housed the center for a while in her own home when it was beginning; and still served on the board of directors. She was committed to the need for a daycare center in her

neighborhood and had acted on her commitment to make something positive happen; and, yet, when queried about her involvement, said she was “just” a volunteer.

During forty years of working as a volunteer and as a paid and unpaid staff person administering volunteer programs, I have observed this pervasive “just” a volunteer syndrome among volunteers and, even worse, among paid staff who regard themselves as “professionals” and superior to volunteers.

Volunteers can have the most awesome responsibilities and realize enormous success and yet deprecate themselves because they are not receiving a paycheck for their work. They think of their unpaid careers

as different, less valuable (but maybe more enjoyable) than their or others' paid careers.

The federal government took a step forward in recognizing the legitimacy of volunteer experience when it passed a House Concurrent Resolution in 1988 to urge state and local governments, charitable and service organizations, and private employers to take volunteer experience into account on work application forms. Federal work applications include space for the listing of volunteer experience.

The American Red Cross in its study, "Taking Volunteerism Into the 21st Century," said that from now on The American Red Cross will not refer to "professional staff

and volunteers” but rather to “paid and volunteer staff.” The American Red Cross understands that “professional” is how one does one’s job, not whether one is paid to do it.

Surveys conducted by the Gallup Organization, in conjunction with Independent Sector, demonstrate that over half of Americans volunteer; that they are the equivalent of nine million full-time employees in the independent sector (charitable, educational and religious organizations); that the dollar value of their time exceeds \$170 billion (more than the amount of charitable dollar contributions during that same period); and that volunteers are twice as likely to give money to organizations as people who do not volun-

teer. Yet even this attempt to satisfy the “bottom line” mentality doesn’t arrest the “just” a volunteer put down.

As a culture, Americans pay lip service to the importance of volunteering, but that lip service is too often patronizing: “oh, how nice,” “how thoughtful”; or “I wish I had time (from my important paid position) to do what you do”—even though today the surveys show that the average volunteer works full or part time; or most killing in pre-feminist days, “you ‘girls’ do such a great job”—even though the Gallup survey shows that almost as many men volunteer as women!

I have developed some theories about the “whys” of our underesti-

mation of the genuine and essential value of volunteerism. First, Americans evaluate success by how much money one makes, rather than by the contribution one makes to society. Asked to name the most successful person in the community, most people will identify a wealthy lawyer, bond trader or real estate developer, without reflecting on the impact of that person's life on the community.

Second, we all grew up hearing "there's no free lunch," and we are wary that something that is free can't have as much value as something we pay for. Therefore, we suspect that volunteers who give their time probably don't perform functions as well or as worthwhile as those for which we pay.

Third, the impact of volunteerism is so extensive and intensive that we can't quite grasp it; so we take it for granted. In this country, we have millions of social service, religious and educational institutions as well as local governments which were usually founded by volunteers and which now depend on volunteers to provide services, raise funds, make policy decisions and provide community validation, free from personal financial interest. Volunteers are rich and poor, old and young, differently abled and come from all ethnic, religious, cultural and racial heritages. Volunteerism IS the person who takes a neighbor to the doctor; it IS the political worker who stomps through the precincts in the

rain to leave brochures for a candidate or cause; it IS the person who starts a hospice; it IS the members of self-help and support groups; it IS the person who interviews prospective students for his/her alma mater; and it IS the president of the school board, zoning board or plan commission. It is individual responsibility which is the hope for civilization.

To improve our communities and our own lives as members of those communities, we need to honor the importance of volunteerism more; expect more of it; and demand more of ourselves and others in our volunteer roles. Work, paid or unpaid, should be evaluated on its merits. Saying one is “just” a volunteer is

not humility but a deprecation of the significance of one's choice, commitment and effort. Volunteerism gives us opportunities to work for things we care passionately about; to advocate passionately for those causes; and to be passionate in encouraging others to join the circle of caring.

WHY?

“It’s a good conference program you have proposed,” said the young theology student about our program to aid college students engaged in campus community service efforts, “but you haven’t said anything in it about ‘why?’”

He was right. Our program focused on “how to’s”: how to recruit, motivate and train volunteers; but ignored the “why”—the vision that guides us and makes us work to make the seemingly impossible possible.

“I don’t know why I care so much about volunteerism,” said one of the students, “but I do know that my mother was very involved in the com-

munity. I remember one Christmas Eve when she said that she needed to take some things to the shelter for the homeless, so she would have to forgo attending Mass with the family that evening and go by herself in the morning. When I protested, she looked me straight in the eye, and said, 'Now, what is more important: to attend church with my well-fed family or to help those who have no food or shelter of their own?'"

Reasons for volunteering are as varied as individuals.

To work for social change

To improve my own community

To be a responsible citizen

To demonstrate my love for others

To enrich my own life
To learn
To keep busy
To feel useful
To give meaning to my life

To me, one of the most insightful reasons for volunteerism came from a speech I heard by Dr. James Comer. Dr. Comer is a distinguished educator, currently at Yale University. He spoke of himself and his brothers and sisters—African-American children with a mother who could not read or write but who had great aspirations for her children. They grew up in East Chicago, Indiana, and all have advanced degrees. When asked what was responsible for this, beyond the determination of their

mother, Dr. Comer replied, "It was the conspiracy of the community" that made it happen. The conspiracy of the community. . . what a remarkable phrase and what a wonderful reason for volunteerism.

A community that is in conspiracy to keep its children in school; help those who can't read; involve people of all cultures and backgrounds; feed the hungry; house the homeless; support the dying; visit the sick; soothe the despondent; improve the laws; and involve the lonely will be a community of volunteers.

I remember during Hands Across America, a campaign in 1986 to raise money and consciousness for the hungry and homeless, the actress Lily Tomlin explained her

involvement by saying, “I used to wonder why someone didn’t do something and then I realized I am somebody.”

Individual responsibility for the community—be it a block or a continent—is the “why” of volunteerism. We need to think and talk about the “why” before the “how-to” because it is our vision that will guide our plan.

It has been said that a vision without a plan is an hallucination; but a plan without a vision is busywork. There is too much to be accomplished in our communities for us to waste our time on busy work.

THE JOY OF VOLUNTEERISM

“When I retired as CEO of a women’s apparel company, I was lonely. The phone didn’t ring any more; nobody asked for my opinion; so I looked around to see what needed to be done. I organized a chapter of SCORE to help small businesses; started a Friends of the Library organization; and my wife and I read for Recording for the Blind. Life is good; and I enjoy what I’m doing.”

Freud told us that love and work make life tolerable; and volunteers have the joy of choosing work they love.

Over and over again at ceremonies to honor volunteers for thousands of hours of service, I have

handed a volunteer an award and heard the volunteer say, "Thank you, but I got out of it more than I could ever give."

This is the win/win of volunteerism—enriching one's own life while working with others. One hears echoes of Biblical quotations—casting bread upon the waters and having it come back a thousandfold; losing one's life to find it; and seeking, as St. Francis said, to love rather than to be loved.

How often we look for happiness in a new car, a new outfit or a trip. The car turns out to have problems; the new outfit doesn't fit as well as we thought; and the trip is soon forgotten. Happiness, we learn, is a by-product of relationships and not

something we can seek for itself.

The friends we make while we are involved in our meaningful work become the most treasured because our friendship is the result of shared values and experiences—another by-product. People who have shared meaningful experiences together grow and learn together.

This is one secret of the “City Cares” programs which involve young working people in group volunteer activities. While they are building a Habitat for Humanity or staffing Special Olympics, young adults get to know others in a more significant way than they can over a beer glass in a bar or through a computer dating service.

I remember a Foster Grandparent

I met in a mental health facility in Iowa. Foster Grandparents is a federally subsidized program to enable low-income seniors to volunteer by giving them a minimal hourly stipend (less than \$3) which can cover their transportation and lunches. This Iowa volunteer had been with the program 25 years. She admitted her original interest was piqued by the stipend, since she was all alone and had just retired from her work in a laundry. But over the years what kept her in the program were her relationships with her foster grandchildren; her relationships with her fellow volunteers who shared her economic position and concerns; and her relationships with the paid staff at the institution whose

in-service trainings taught her about mental disabilities. Out of her volunteerism came friendship and growth.

Many other foster grandparents have said to me, “My foster grandchild gives me a reason to get up in the morning, a reason to put on a nice outfit and a reason to climb on the bus. My reward comes when my child says, ‘Hi grandma [or grandpa], I’m glad you’re here.’”

Public service careers have begun because of volunteer service—the idea behind the Peace Corps, VISTA, and National and Community Service, all federally funded efforts to encourage volunteerism.

A Detroit, Michigan, VISTA volunteer told me, with great pride, “I learned to do things as a VISTA vol-

unteer I never thought I could do.” She worked in a domestic violence shelter, and her tasks included fund raising, volunteer recruitment and publicity. She had not gone to college but through her VISTA experience was accepted into a Masters in Social Work program.

A successful young lawyer in an interview for a job responded to my question, “What was the most meaningful experience you had in your life?” with a firm “My experience as a VISTA volunteer.”

Lives are changed by volunteer service. A young man arrested for drunk driving was sentenced to some hours of community service. He worked in a center for the young people with developmental disabili-

ties. He had never known before the power he had to make a difference in other people's lives. He returned to school and continues now as paid staff in a similar facility.

Understanding the power we have to change the world—or at least a small corner of it—is key to empowering volunteers and key to leading a productive, meaningful and joyful life.

SERVICE LEARNING FOR EVERYONE

“A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimension.”

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

Many colleges and high schools have community service programs - programs which encourage students to volunteer in the community. In some instances, the schools give credit for the programs.

ACTION, the Federal Volunteer Agency, has made many small grants over the years to help start service learning projects, and a major focus of the Commission on National and Community Service, established in 1990, is service learning.

Some states, like Illinois, require that state-funded colleges and universities make volunteer opportunities available to students. The State of Maryland recently required community service as part of the educational curriculum. The move sent shock waves through some members of the educational community who apparently hadn't thought of volunteerism as experiential learning—the kind of learning that sees the human mind not as an empty pail to be filled with facts but as a complex mechanism incorporating the soul, conscience and experiences of a human being.

The root of the word education is “educere,” meaning to “lead out”—to “draw out” what is best in a per-

son through exposure to the thoughts, realities and knowledge of our civilization.

Through service learning, students are connected with the world; develop a sense of self worth by understanding that they, too, have something to give; explore the importance of community responsibility; and are exposed to potential future careers.

Service learning programs provide structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience. Students write a paper, keep a journal or are involved in discussions about what they learned through service, how their attitudes were changed and how they changed others' attitudes.

However, wonderful as school-based service learning is (and it is), it is shortsighted to view it only in that context. Just as education does not begin or stop when we start or end our schooling, neither does service learning. Service learning, it seems to me, is a lifelong experience, beginning in kindergarten and ending at death. Most important, service learning is a relationship where both parties, volunteer and client, have a learning experience.

At a conference in 1991 at the Wingspread Center in Racine, Wisconsin, a group of people from throughout the United States met to discuss Service Learning—a Lifetime Imperative. I was fortunate to be there, and was most moved and inspired by the

notion of service as a lifetime joint learning experience. This takes the noblesse oblige connotation out of volunteerism and elevates it to a concept of service “with” another, where both parties learn and grow.

Giving all volunteers a chance to debrief their volunteer experience is a way to put more passion and more commitment into volunteerism. As Socrates said, “An unexamined life is not worth living”; and reflecting on volunteer experiences encourages people to examine their motivations and their results, and to make the most of their opportunities to learn through service.

A society as deeply divided as ours can be improved by building good relationships, one by one. Service

learning relationships based on a concept of “service with” encourage us to hold out our hands and hearts to another human being; they acknowledge that we, too, have much to learn and that we wish to grow; and they demonstrate that we regard the other member of our service relationship as an equal participant in a mutual effort to improve society.

STRENGTHENING VOLUNTEERISM

Ten Things Government Can Do

Government can't row all the boats, but it can help make the waters less treacherous for everyone—particularly for volunteers and nonprofit programs that are working to help meet needs. Some specifics are listed on the following pages.

1.

**Legislate Liability
Limitation for Volunteers.**

Many states have already done this, limiting liability to acts that are willful and wanton. Such state limitations do not override the tort law of the state, but protect volunteers from whimsical suits which could force them to hire costly legal help.

**2.
Mean What They Say
When They Say Volunteer
Experience Will Be
Evaluated the Same as Paid
Work Experience When
Applying for Government
Employment.**

Clearly, such experience must be of similar depth as paid experience and relevant to the job, but it should not be dismissed by personnel people with a cavalier, "Oh, that's just volunteer experience."

3.

Fund State and City Offices of Volunteerism

through which people who want to volunteer can be connected with programs. One-stop shopping for volunteer jobs makes it much easier for the willing volunteer and more productive for society. A little money invested in such an office can reap great return in donated hours.

**4.
Encourage Government
Employees to Volunteer in
Their Communities and
Recognize Them for Their
Efforts.**

It's strange to me that government, which proposes to help people, doesn't recognize often enough the importance of employees who give of their time to the community. Most governments encourage employees to be involved in fundraising for the United Way and the other members of a

(continued)

combined campaign; but volunteerism is more than money, it is involvement through which people relate one on one with others and their problems.

legs that financially strapped agencies need, they become advocates for the agency. Most people pay their taxes and then sit back to complain about what government does or doesn't do; but when someone volunteers for an agency, he/she sees firsthand the problems that staff is facing and the overwhelming case load that exists. The volunteer testifies about this to the community, and the community believes the volunteer in ways he/she would never believe a politician or bureaucrat who has a financial interest in

“spin control.” Government volunteerism requires a strong agreement with labor unions that volunteers will be involved to “enhance” rather than to “replace” paid employees.

**6.
Think About Volunteer
Involvement Upfront,
Not Just As a Last Minute
BandAid When the Money
Runs Out.**

Government agencies should plan for the most meaningful way to involve volunteers; and then recruit, train and recognize the people most appropriate to do the work. Sometimes this means starting with a small program, because all volunteer programs require management; but it can lead the way to more and more in-

volvement of citizens in helping to solve problems and providing citizen input.

7.
**Continue Some
Financial Support of
Efforts to Involve People
in Community Service.**

While government-funded volunteer programs are not and should not be THE answer to community involvement, federal programs like ACTION (VISTA, Retired Senior Volunteer, Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions and Student Community Service), the Peace Corps and, now, those spawned by the Commission on National and Community

Service demonstrate our national commitment to volunteerism. They also provide stipends for people who otherwise could not subsist doing full-time volunteer work.

**8.
Pass Legislation Which
Supports the Nonprofit
Community.**

Federal and state government needs to pass legislation which encourages volunteerism and charitable giving. For example, most people believe that the prohibition on deducting charitable contributions if one files the short tax form is a disincentive to charitable giving. The volunteer mileage allowance of twelve cents is half of that allowed to paid staff.

9.

**Crack Down on
Charities That Abuse
Their Privileges.**

People must have faith in the charities to which they contribute, and government can play a role by not just having charities fill out many forms but by dealing fairly and quickly with those who abuse the system. Tax-exempt status is a privilege and should not be misused.

10.

Use the Bully Pulpit to Encourage Volunteerism and to Recognize Volunteers.

Most elected officials have a once-a-year program to recognize selected special volunteers, but volunteerism should be acknowledged constantly. Volunteers are often elected officials in small towns; volunteers serve on advisory committees, task forces and commissions; and volunteers give that special boost during the year and pitch in feverishly

when there are floods and other disasters. One way to encourage people to volunteer is to recognize its importance. It has always amazed me that elected officials, most of whom owe their election to volunteer campaign workers, aren't always among our strongest advocates for volunteerism.

Ten Things Nonprofits Can Do

Nonprofit agencies frequently have a “staff” infection: that is, they want people to give them more money so they can hire more staff. They owe it to their donors and their cause to make the most out of the volunteer power available to them before asking for more money. Listed on the following pages are things they can do.

**1.
Have an Effective
Person as the Director
or Administrator of the
Volunteer Program.**

The volunteer director should be considered of equal stature with the fund-raiser; they are both in development work. It takes all of the same skills to direct and manage volunteers as it does to manage paid human resources, but more so, since volunteers must receive a motivational paycheck so they keep coming back. Agencies should have personnel

policies for volunteers and job descriptions, interviews, orientation, training and evaluation. The agency that takes its volunteers seriously will find the volunteers take the work seriously.

2.

In the Yearly Planning Process for Assessing Needs and Designing Programs to Meet Them, Involve the Volunteer Administrator.

Figure out at that point what programs could lend themselves most effectively to volunteer involvement. Too often, agencies run out of money and then expect someone to open a drawer full of willing volunteers who will run, not walk, to meet the immediate emergency.

**3.
Have a Board Member
Who Relates Directly to the
Volunteer Administrator
and Reports Regularly on
Volunteer Participation.**

Board members are volunteers, too, but need to be reminded that their goals can be advanced by involving other people.

4.

**Report to the Board
Regularly (At Least
Quarterly) on the Amount
of In-Kind Donation Made
by Volunteers.**

Use the minimum wage; or research going hourly fees for the type of work done; or use the Points of Light Foundation hourly annual figure (based on national volunteerism and the professional and educational level of those involved). Whatever figure is used, be consistent; the board will be amazed at the contri-

bution made. This is also good material to use when seeking grants because it shows a funding source that the agency is making the best use of its resources.

5.
Reward Paid Staff for
Successfully Involving
Volunteers.

Staff resistance to volunteers can be overcome when staff understands that volunteers can help them realize their dreams and do some work that they either aren't qualified to do or free them up to do other important work. Volunteers can give paid staff a management experience that a member of a small agency may not always have. Yes, we need to recognize volunteers, but we

also need to recognize paid
staff.

6.

Don't Ask Volunteers to Do Anything the Agency Wouldn't Ask Paid Staff to Do.

This includes drug tests, testing for AIDS and tasks which are not safe or which the volunteer is not trained to do.

7.

Be Mission-Oriented, Creative and Collaborative.

People today are very busy. They want to work for a cause they believe in, and they want to do meaningful work. Look for the person who can do a job staff can't do, as well as the person who will do a job staff doesn't want to do. Involve people on a contractual basis, so that they know there is a beginning and an end to a project. Involve people on the weekends in family projects—

(continued)

even provide babysitting. Involve volunteers from corporations. Make opportunities for evening volunteerism so that the person who works during the day can be involved. Involve displaced homemakers who need job training; involve students; involve interns; involve people with disabilities; involve retirees. Reimburse volunteers for expenses.

8.

**Welcome and Seek Out
Diversity.**

Statistics show that volunteerism knows no racial, economic, ethnic or cultural limitations. Involve all groups in the community.

9.

Recognize Volunteers Appropriately.

Volunteer recognition should be part of daily life—thank you's, how are you's, and here is your place to work and your coffee cup. Many volunteers love the annual chicken dinner with the carnation corsage; others much prefer a note, an article in the newsletter, a letter to their boss, a special training, a promotion, or a reference for a college application or a paying job.

10.

**Involve Volunteers in
Talking About Their
Volunteer Experience and
Exchanging Ideas.**

Teamwork and team building are essential to all work environments. Volunteers will flourish if their opinions are sought, and agencies are amazed at what they can learn from their volunteers. And, through these opportunities, volunteers and staff will learn from each other.

Ten Things Volunteers Can Do

In addition to never saying, I'm "just" a volunteer, you can do the following things.

1.

Have an Important Dream.

Like Martin Luther King, have a dream and inspire others to join you in making that dream a reality.

2.

**Don't Waste Your Time
With Busy Work.**

Choose a volunteer job that will help make the change in society you envision.

3.
**If You Can't Find a
Nonprofit That Shares
Your Dream,**

start your own small program
. . . organize your block, your
community. . . but get started.

4.

**Ask Yourself Regularly
What You Did Recently to
Bring You Closer to
Realizing Your Dream.**

It's easy to get derailed by minutiae, so write down one thing you did, however small, to bring you closer to your dream, and then write down what you hope to do next.

5.

**Be Realistic, Flexible and
a Team Player.**

Know that many days you will take two steps forward and one step backward, but be glad for the one step of progress. Be empathetic toward paid staff; listen to others; and be able to put your personal ego aside in favor of having the right thing happen—whether you do it or not, whether you receive credit or not.

6.

Be Responsible.

If you say you will do something, do it.

7.

**Be Comfortable Demanding
That Volunteerism Adds
Value to Your Life.**

Make sure you are learning and growing through your volunteer work. If you aren't, maybe you need a vacation and time to think through whether yesterday's dreams are still relevant to today.

**8.
Make Sure That Good
Human Resource
Management Policies are
in Place.**

Whether you are running the program or working for someone else, programs are more successful when volunteers know expectations and guidelines. These work better when they are thought through in advance and not made up as you go along.

9.

Be Able to Say “No”.

Know your own abilities and your own tolerance level for hard work. There can come a time when more involvement is a disservice to you and to the program.

10.
Multiply Your People
Power.

If your dream is something society needs, others will share it and join with you. Be sure you ask, ask and ask again for people to join with you. Surveys show that most people who don't volunteer, simply haven't been asked. Invite them in, and know you are doing them a favor; for when they volunteer to make the community better for others, they are also making it better for themselves.

SOME PARTING WORDS

Volunteerism is too important to be taken for granted, trivialized or patronized. Nonprofit organizations, government and volunteers, themselves, need to be vigilant to make sure that doesn't happen.

There is no doubt that we have enormous challenges in today's society. Government can't do it all; the private sector can't do it all. We need to forge an alliance among all our citizens and commit ourselves as active partners with government and private agencies to work to improve our world.

It is very easy to blame others for the problems we see in the newspapers and on TV. We can blame the

politicians; we can blame others' values; but we should also blame ourselves and our values if we are doing nothing to help.

For democracy to work, all must take part in finding solutions . . . otherwise, we will be part of the problem.

Be involved in this alliance with commitment and passion. We owe ourselves and the future no less.

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