

The Numbers Game

Quality and quantity is an issue

As reported in *The NonProfit Times*, a few months ago Independent Sector released new Gallup Poll data on giving and volunteering. In summary, the figures indicated that the number of people reporting volunteer activities was up, while the average number of hours served by individual volunteers was down.

As always, interpretation of this data is in the eye of the beholder, but it's worth examining some of the implied premises of the entire survey process.

What do hours tell us?

Within a survey that also tries to reveal the amount of money given to charity, "hours contributed" by volunteers is viewed as an alternative form of donation. The rationale is that, since one can calculate (even if poorly) the dollar value of an hour of volunteer time, having a grand total of hours expresses the philanthropic worth of the activity. But is this a valid premise? The true "worth" of both money and time is relative to the giver, and may be quite differently valued by the recipient. To a low-income person, a check for \$25 may reflect a significant

donation while the agency development office sighs at the "nuisance" amount. To a highly paid and busy professional, taking an afternoon off to help clean up the local playground may represent a substantial sacrifice of "billable hours," but the work donated is unskilled labor "valued" at far less than the earnings capacity of this volunteer.

On the flip side, volunteers providing free technical assistance that indeed has a high fair-market value may be under-appreciated by the agency - or subsumed within the easy-but-inaccurate method of assigning "minimum wage" equivalency to all volunteer services lumped together.

Even more important is the question of whether the amount of money or time given translates into meaningful services. If agencies squander funds raised, do we keep applauding their successful development officers? If volunteer time is wasted or underutilized, who cares how much of it is given?

Impact, not quantity

One reason that the Independent Sector study showed high numbers of

people and lower numbers of individual service is the success of a decade of proliferating one-day volunteering opportunities. United Way "Days of Caring," Make a Difference Day, Martin Luther King Day service projects, and the calendars arranged by City Cares affiliates all offer today's volunteers quick in-and-out types of volunteering.

Sure, this will never solve society's biggest problems, which need more continuous, consistent attention. But, if well-organized, a day of group effort can accomplish a great deal. In fact, some organizations are better at showing real results after a one-day project than they are with the taken-for-granted, every-week type of volunteer. What matters is what was accomplished each time, not the starting and ending times.

The number of hours served is also bogus in another way. Right now, too many organizations "reward" volunteers for reaching benchmarks of time contributed: the 100-hour pin, the two-year plaque. Yes, it is important to recognize loyalty and ongoing service. But acclamation solely of time logged without a discussion of results achieved is almost silly.

Think about it. You may be giving the most thanks to the slowest volunteers. If Volunteer A works efficiently to complete as much work as

Volunteer B is able to produce in twice the time, Volunteer B is rewarded twice as heartily for plodding away.

Old-fashioned tallying up of hours is used by some organizations to determine who is even invited to the annual recognition party. So the computer-savvy volunteer who spent two weeks converting computer data from one software program to another is simply left out of the thank-yous in favor of volunteers who come in week after week, sometimes spending as much time socializing as providing service.

The point, of course, is not to stop thanking long-term volunteers but to add ways to show appreciation for wonderful short-term service, too.

What is worrisome is the implication that no one can figure out a better way of assessing volunteer contributions than the clock. Is having "more" volunteers and/or hours logged each year self-evidently a good thing?

Consider some possible arguments to the contrary. For example, it's conceivable greater quantity may lead to less productivity for the organization as a whole. More volunteers - without any additional infrastructure to support the growing numbers - can divert staff attention from other needed

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On Volunteers

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activities. Trying to meet a quota set for external publicity purposes ("We'll have 10,000 volunteers by 2001") may push staff into accepting volunteers with fewer credentials simply to meet the body count goal.

The number of volunteers or hours contributed is never an end unto itself. It's a strategy. First state what work needs to be done; then figure out the intensity of effort necessary to accomplish it. If you want to winterize 500 homes for low-income elderly residents, how many people, putting in what kind of effort, will that take? Will the numbers required be differ-

ent if a certain percentage of volunteers are already skilled in caulking and laying insulation than if all are novices needing training?

After the project ends, success will have nothing to do with how many volunteers were involved. Success is 500 homes winterized.

Ironically, when organizations evaluate the impact of volunteer involvement, they may discover that they ought to cut their volunteer force in half and do a better job with the people remaining. Bigger is only better if the service goals warrant greater effort.

It will soon be time for annual vol-

unteer recognition events, whether during National Volunteer Week (April 9-15), student graduation, or some other spring occasion. Don't just plan a party. Use the opportunity to evaluate and report the impact of volunteer services, beyond a boring list of names and hours served. For example:

- How many clients benefited from services provided by volunteers? What were those benefits?
- What were new activities paid staff were able to do because volunteers handled other tasks to free staff time?
- What kinds of public outreach were done by volunteers, with what

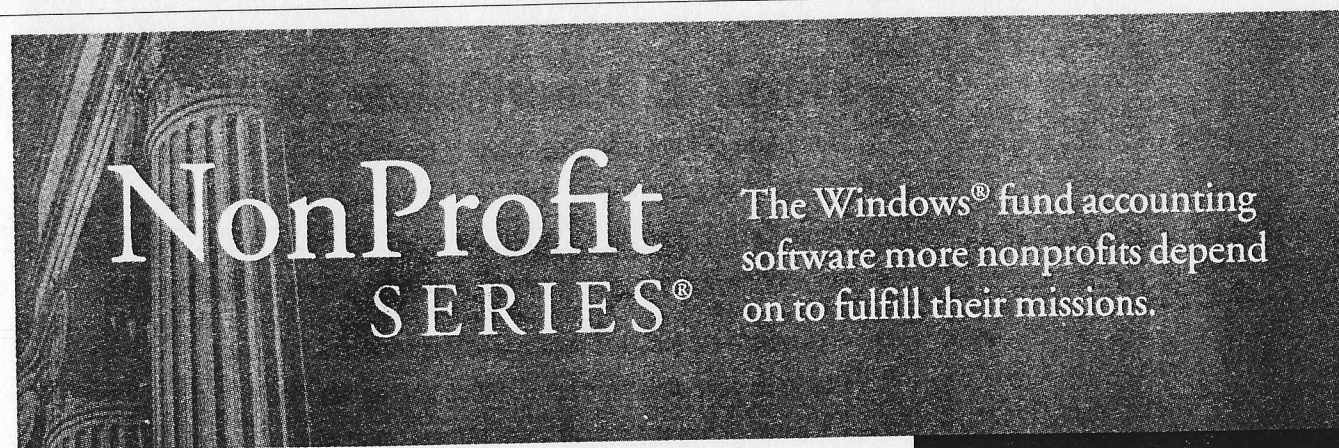
results?

Carry a tape recorder for a few weeks and ask clients, employees, visitors, and anyone else what they have gotten from volunteers during the past few months or what they have witnessed being done by volunteers.

Beware the trite testimonial. Ask probing questions when someone says something like "Volunteers are the heart of our work." What does this mean? Specify how volunteers make a difference. Then, edit the audio tape and run it as background to a set of slides - a visual record of volunteers at work. Remember that even volunteers do not necessarily know what other volunteers do.

Annual recognition events are times to re-commit and re-motivate everyone. Appreciation has nothing to do with 100-hour pins. Real recognition is when the organization can actually identify what volunteers did that made a difference - whether once a week or once a year. Visible results make people proud and happy to get to work again.

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