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Seven Stages
The history of volunteer involvement

As the International Year of Volunteers 2001 launches, it seems appropriate to take a look at the recurring cycle of organizational development — from a volunteer perspective. Just about every nonprofit organization evolves from the actions of a small band of founding volunteers. While not every agency moves through all the following seven stages, every organization can be found somewhere on this timeline:

Stage 1: One or two people see a need before anyone else does and start shouting about it. Major innovation and change rarely occur within established institutions. In fact, it is often those very organizations that put obstacles in the way of visionaries.

The first people who recognize what needs to be done are often met with hostility. After all, who are they to tell us that spousal abuse is a serious problem? That we don't know how to treat the dying and their families? That AIDS is an epidemic? That Earth will be invaded by Venus? Welcome to the "Lunatic Fringe."

It may take a long time for pioneering volunteers to break out of isolation. It takes courage and staying power — but not necessarily money. Passion drives the activity and these volunteers accept the role of mavericks until...

Stage 2: Others start to see the validity of the cause and raise the decibel -- and acceptance -- level.

Not everyone escapes the Lunatic Fringe. But those visionaries who succeed in articulating something that others can see and accept begin to attract a few followers. This small band of volunteers support one another and develop some synergy to move their plans forward, but they still view the "Establishment" as indifferent, if not antagonistic.

Stage 3: More volunteers join in and social approval follows.

At some hard-to-define stage, the core of founding volunteers realizes that the cause has reached critical mass. Enough new supporters have joined in the work that the organization is no longer "underground" and is even gaining in popularity.

There are enough hands to start new projects. Enthusiasm and a sense of accomplishment keep volunteers engaged. Thought is seriously given to incorporating and some small fundraising (often dues assessed to each member volunteer) underwrites out-of-pocket expenses such as postage and supplies.

Stage 4: Someone says: "Hey, we all have paid jobs to do and this unpaid work is exhausting us. Let's find some money and hire staff."

This is a watershed point. Clearly, very few organizations can sustain meaningful activity over time without at least a few people who can spend full-time focusing entirely on the development of their programs.

So, fundraising goes forward and the first employees are hired to assist the volunteer leaders. In fact, at this stage, volunteers often find it difficult to let go of tasks they have grown accustomed to doing. Initial employees feel both underutilized and dumped on — a strange combination resulting from being given a long list of tasks volunteers no longer want to do, but not necessarily what ought to be delegated.

Stage 5: More staff are hired and volunteers eventually become assistants to the paid workers. The board of directors is still comprised of volunteers, but now they "govern" rather than "manage."

This is the longest stage to date, and the conversion of service provision by volunteers to service provision by paid staff usually evolves slowly. Of course, there are examples of the opposite. Most urban AIDS organizations watched themselves grow within a year or two from a dozen people in someone's living room to a staff of hundreds in a multi-story office building.

The signs of what is generally called "professionalizing" an organization can be heard in remarks such as:

- "We really ought to be concerned about confidentiality."
- "Isn't it risky to allow volunteers to do this? Aren't we incurring liability?"
- "Our clients deserve the most professional service possible."

It's not that such thoughts are wrong, it's just that they are often misapplied to volunteers out of ignorance and stereotypes. Regardless, frontline volunteers are slowly moved into peripheral roles and board volunteers are asked to think only about policies and governance. No one asks: How do they do this effectively if they are disengaged from the work of the organization?

Stage 6: The organization becomes an entrenched institution with all work of importance done by employ-

ees and even possibly legislated into a government function.

Of course, the founding volunteers can claim success if their maverick vision ends up as an important community service, having survived over the years. But there are dangers, too. For example, a paid-staff-only agency can become more concerned with financial survival than with client service. Or it can become the very "Establishment" that the current Lunatic Fringe is screaming about.

Stage 7: Someone says: "Do you know what would freshen things up around here? Let's recruit some community volunteers!"

Yes, the proverbial pendulum swing. Sometimes the motivation for re-discovering volunteers is positive. The organization might have become more educated about the ways that volunteers expand both perspectives and the budget, and recognizes that there are unique roles only volunteers can fill in community relations, friendship to clients, and advocacy. But there are also negative motives such as reluctantly settling for volunteers to fill budget shortfalls or seeking to window dress community involvement.

Regardless, it takes a conscious effort for a long-established agency to open its doors to the best and most diverse types of volunteer participation.

Full circle

Watch the street corners because the signs of the prophets are written on the subway walls and new visionaries are out there agitating for innovation and change. The question is: Will you force them to begin at Stage 1 on their own or can you welcome them into your organization at whatever stage you are in?

If you think of volunteers mainly as assistants to the staff, this won't happen. But if you encourage the volunteer program to be an in-house think tank, experimenting with new ways of providing service, asking volunteers to be social entrepreneurs, and harnessing the out-of-the-box vision that the right individuals offer, think of the possibilities.

After all, giving volunteers the freedom to deviate from business as usual might lead to projects you can then find funding for — allowing the historical cycle to spin inside instead of outside.

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Margaret Tyndall Appointed YWCA's CEO

Margaret A. Tyndall, Ph.D., was appointed chief executive officer of the YWCA of the U.S.A. by the organization's National Board. She takes over the helm of the country's oldest and largest women's membership movement as it moves to revitalize itself for the 21st century.

Tyndall joined the YWCA of the U.S.A., based in New York City, as chief operating officer and interim chief executive officer last July. She has been