

## Old & New

### 20 years of change and no change

The *On Volunteers* column debuted in *The Non-Profit Times*' May 1990 issue, and so this marks my 20th anniversary as its writer. It's hard to believe that this installment is number 106. A 20-year milestone invites some retrospection, so here we go.

What is striking is how the essays demonstrate that volunteering has made great progress in some areas, while standing still in others. Change and evolution are natural and desirable, particularly when volunteering adapts to important social and cultural trends. Sometimes progress forces us to react, but volunteering shines when it proactively seeks solution to new problems.

The long tradition of being on the cutting edge of issues, even if seen as maverick or anti-establishment, proudly continues. The column on the *Seven Stages of History* for volunteer involvement, January 2001, explained the process.

The *On Volunteers* column subjects reflect key changes. Volunteering is never in a vacuum, so all of the things that affect individuals and organizations have an impact on current and prospective volunteers. For example, as our concept of what is a "family" evolves, we need to re-design traditional volunteer roles for single parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, and blended families. We need to learn from projections of what retiring Baby Boomers, as well as upcoming Millennials want from volunteer service.

Most recently the theme has been the economic downturn: what can we expect to happen to volunteering when money is tight and also how can volunteers play a role in economic recovery? One can only guess at what the future holds, but what is certain is that volunteers will be somewhere in the middle of what's new.

#### THE TWO SIDES OF STANDING STILL

Standing still, however, needs to be examined. On the positive side, it can mean that some volunteerism principles are universal and enduring. They remain critical for volunteer success and so we legitimately recommit to them even if the things that volunteers do (or who volunteers) might change.

The very first column is a great example. The World Wide Web was not in unbridled use during May 1990 when the article on *Recruitment: Finding the Right Volunteers for Your Agency* appeared. So you can imagine what was presented were some methods of recruitment that might seem quaint in light of today's electronic communications. But the principles in the article have not changed at all: the most successful recruitment results from offering attractive volunteer roles, targeting different potential sources that are logical for each role, honestly explaining what the volunteer will do, and actually issuing an invitation. Publicity is not recruitment until there's an ask.

In the intervening years, there have been 21 columns that dealt with some aspect of volunteer recruitment. In March 1995, *Volunteers Can Be Found in Cyberspace*, was intended at the time as a visionary piece, acknowledging some new online registries of volunteer opportunities and urging organizations to make use of what held potential for reaching new prospective volunteers in amazing ways.

But even electronic recruitment must follow the basic principles or it won't work. The same message holds in the columns that offered new thinking about reaching out to emerging types of volunteers, whether international visitors, professionals giving pro bono service, teenagers, virtual service, or business people.

On the negative side, of course, standing still can also mean stagnation. There are aspects of the way that organizations view and manage volunteers that seem stubbornly and frustratingly resistant to change, despite all the signs that the old ways are obstacles to realizing the full potential of volunteer contributions. The May 1993 column raised the question: *Are You Using Volunteers Effectively?* And while the term "using" is now politically incorrect, the issues remain disappointingly relevant.

#### ONGOING CONCERNS

Among the topics visited through the years and which remain of concern are:

- Overcoming barriers of control, confidentiality, and risk management, most of which are based more on fear and prejudice than on fact;
- Lack of executive support, despite lip service to the value of volunteers, shown by inadequate resourcing, low status of the leader of volunteer involvement, non-engagement by top managers in assessing the role and impact of volunteers, and more;
- Limited vision about how powerful volunteer involvement can be, leading to limits on what volunteers are asked to do. The resulting minimal roles not only cheat the organization from accessing a wide range of talents, but also make it hard to recruit the best volunteers into positions that are unattractive and inflexible;
- Rare understanding that there is a correlation between how to work with the volunteers who serve on nonprofit boards of directors, and best practices in partnering with direct service volunteers; and,
- Similarly, the rare understanding of the interrelationship of money donors and time donors – and why the common complete separation of the development office from the volunteer office might miss great resource-raising opportunities.

Despite considering volunteers to be "community representatives," very few organizations ever ask volunteers any questions or the chance to give input into planning or evaluation from their unique perspective.

#### REAL SUCCESS, TOO

The good news is that there have been real successes during the past 20 years. For example:

- After a long gap of no research, there is now an annual report of data on volunteering in the United States collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. There have also been seminal studies, perhaps most notably *Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations: A Briefing Report* by the Urban Institute.
- Every candidate for the American presidency in these 20 years has articulated a position on volunteering and offered a platform of ideas for what they might do for the field if elected. This might have reached its height during this past presidential election, when both major party candidates appeared for a public forum on service on answered questions about their positions with the cameras rolling.
- Although the United States largely ignored the United Nations' Year of the Volunteer in 2001, many other countries used the opportunity to launch a wide range of initiatives, many of which continue today. Volunteer management is truly an international field now, with all sorts of opportunities for professional exchange and new best-practice resources.

#### THANK YOU

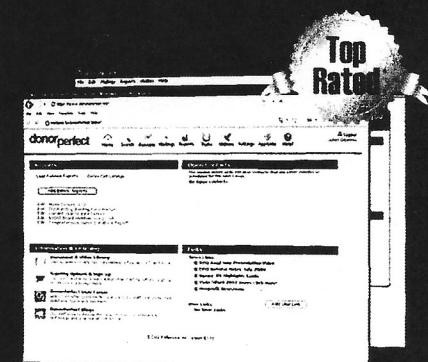
I have now been in the volunteer management field for a total of 39 years. (I was, of course, 5 when I started). It's possible to summarize the entire career in a single sentence, which the "On Volunteers" columns have demonstrated. Here it is:

I try to take organizations and individuals from being relatively thoughtless about volunteers to being thoughtful.

Sometimes that means tilting at ancient windmills, but it's always worth it because volunteers are worth it. Thank you to *The NPT* for allowing me this forum and to all the readers who stop here for a moment every other month to think about volunteer involvement. *NPT*

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