

The Volunteer as Change Agent

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The pioneer founders of a nonprofit and those that step forward to take their place bring a diversity of passions and energy to the evolutionary course of a successful nonprofit. Armed with purpose and resolve a succession of volunteers can objectively focus on social outcomes and impacts rather than just financial performance. Volunteers often are the leaders of change in the world of philanthropy that leverage their business acumen, charisma and empathy to craft great organizations and turnaround failing ones.

The stereotypical volunteer is often considered a casual worker who is a follower rather than a leader. However, in researching nonprofit, you are often struck by the large number of dedicated individuals that exhibit true leadership characteristics. They are advocates for total quality improvement and exert a brand of 'personal power' through competence, persuasion and networking. It is remarkable how few volunteers abandon ship when things are going badly even though it is easy for a volunteer to simply disappear. Most are willing to hang around and confront the immediate issues while plotting a strategy for future success.

Accountants, lawyers, investment advisors, marketing specialists, personal managers, engineers and social workers populate nonprofit boards and have the skills to provide an umbrella of oversight and governance to insure operations are running smoothly. One or more engaged visionary leaders on the board are the potential change agents that can reinvent, reengineer and increase capacity and impact within an agency.

With a wealth of ideas and fresh looks at worn out programs, policies and procedures, frontline volunteers also have a leadership role to play. They can afford to be outspoken and insistent upon change especially since there are few repercussions. What are the consequences: they could cut your pay or take away the meal ticket. Plus, if a volunteer is not given a voice, he can always find meaningful volunteer work elsewhere. The volunteer who pushes back and ventilates constructive criticism is often gratified by the results. Often the suggestions are initially resisted, but months later it is noted that the volunteer coordinator claims the idea as her own and runs with it. There's no justification to accept the comfort zone of "this is the way it has always been done."

Volunteers can play a variety of transformational roles as they rotate positions or increase their responsibilities within an organization. They can be a proponent for diversity and team work, a mediator who helps two charities exploit their synergies through a merger or strategic relationship, a mentor who suggests a new program to fill a gap in services or offerings, and a system's analyst whose practical ideas smoothes operations.

Volunteers can be the white knights who come to the rescue, or receptionists whose testimonials brand the organization and delight clients. Volunteers can be management wizards who introduce leading-edge technology; strategic thinkers who solve organizational problems, and well-networked businessmen who can open the gates to funding resources.

Examples of Transformational Leaders

- Founded in 1920, the Cincinnati Opera is the second oldest continuing opera company in North America. As a jewel in Cincinnati's crown, it had enjoyed enormous success, but began to experience problems in the 1980's due to increased competition, higher production costs, stodgy repertoire, declining attendance, financial deficits and a general director with limited managerial experience who was responsible for both managing the business and artistic programming. Kingston Fletcher, a recently retired senior vice president from P&G, volunteered to be the Opera's executive vice president to address the crisis. His first priority was to analyze and take measures to control the finances. Secondly, he abolished the title of general director and replaced it with two positions; an artistic director to oversee everything from the orchestra pit back, and a managing director to concentrate on everything else. He introduced a participatory management culture and new performances to satisfy a broader audience. The quick turnaround in the fortunes of the Cincinnati Opera is legendary. Kingston, commenting on the experience said, "One of the most important changes in any organization is the selection of a new leader who can maintain the momentum and yet seek out new ways to do things effectively that the previous one would probably have never thought of."
- Cincinnati Arts and Technology Center is a very young organization, but has become the artistic hub to more than 175 disadvantaged Cincinnati public high school students and occupies an 8,000 square foot studio with plans to triple the

space in two years. Linda Tresvant, a retired physical education teacher, was the founder and executive director of the organization that is modeled after one established by Bill Strickland in Pittsburgh. Linda is a master of networking and quickly recruited a dynamic board with community leaders. The agency receives no public funding and the \$1.8 million budget is derived equally from private donations and corporations. The art modules currently include classes in jewelry, pottery, painting, computer-aided design, and wall decoration. Many more disciplines are on the drawing board. Linda says with pride that “the graduation rate of kids in the program that would not have graduated is 76 percent, and 80 percent of these kids go on to post-graduate programs.”

- Cincinnati Cooks, or the Rosenthal Community Kitchen, is an offshoot of the FreeStore/Foodbank in Cincinnati founded under the inspired leadership of Mike Kremzar, a retiree from Procter & Gamble. Dick Rosenthal, a major contributor, helped to launch this endeavor to teach disadvantaged inner-city adults with potential how to be cooks and restaurant managers. It employs three faculty members (director, master chef, and career counselor) and offers 10-week overlapping courses that graduate 80 percent of the 10-12 enrollees each period. The kitchen produces over 500-1000 meals for surrounding schools and homeless shelters. The students are permitted to take food home. With over 400 graduates, the program has many success stories to tell, and at the graduations, Dick and Mike personally congratulate each graduate and Frisch’s Restaurants gives each a set of cutlery.
- Jobs Plus Employment Network, an offshoot of the City Gospel Missions, was founded in 1994 by Burr Robinson, a retiree from Procter & Gamble. He had a passion to provide the support, encouragement and training to enable people in low-income communities to get jobs and break the cycle of poverty. Jobs Plus takes no government funding and two-thirds of its \$380,000 budget comes from individual donors. The program employs a 10-week five-step agenda to achieve job readiness for about 700 referrals per year. Their intake includes convicted felons and drug addicts. Each year, approximately 125 of the 700 finish the course and find job placement, and of these, 65-70 percent are still working six months

later. His remarkable ministry boasts 6,000 graduates, and the referral network for Jobs Plus includes most of the larger inner-city charities and over 25 for-profit businesses.

- SCORE, the Senior Corps of Retired Executives, is an independent resource partner for the Small Business Administration and provides free counseling upon request to America's small start-up businesses. In 2006, the Cincinnati Chapter, one of 389 nationwide, received the National SCORE Chapter of the Year Award in large measure due to the efforts of its first woman Chair, Mary Jane Good. Under her leadership the numbers and diversity of counselors increased, the number of educational workshops expanded in scale and scope, corporate sponsorships and networking within the service area grew and over 10 new sites for counseling were added. The organization is remarkably cost-effective as its 83 counselors counsel over 2000 new clients and a total of over 3000 per year on a budget of \$40,000. A large number of 'client of the year' stories attest to the organization's impact.
- Withrow, a public high school in Cincinnati, had an inactive alumnae association for many years until two retirees, Bob McKeever and Jack Cover, decided to take on a project to revitalize the association. They selectively expanded the alumnae board, rekindled class spirit by assisting in the planning of class reunions, and developed a career and college counseling center. Quarterly luncheons with speakers are held and used as a platform to inform alumnae about academic progress and to recruit mentors. To date, the alumnae association has contributed over a million dollars to the school for a wide variety of projects.

The Untapped Hidden Volunteer Leaders

Before World War II, retirement was uncommon without a precipitating factor such as disability, debility, or senility. In 1950, the average retiree lived just 1.5 years following retirement. Today a "second half" lies ahead for most retirees, with an average life expectancy beyond retirement of more than 20 years. This figure is probably conservatively as the highly functional group of 80 million baby boomers reach retirement age. Retirement will free up time to take new directions and increasingly apply their experience and wealth to altruistic causes.

Depending upon which data you subscribe to and how you define volunteer work, about 50 percent of Americans volunteer. It is estimated that in those over age 50, only one in three volunteer. These figures may be misleading, but still suggest that there is a huge pool of hidden talent that is not being adequately tapped into in this senior population.

In social settings volunteer work is rarely discussed in detail. Depending upon the type of volunteer work, some might avoid discussing it because their good deeds might appear too self-righteous and snobbish, or, just the opposite, too mundane and pedestrian. Or a solid endorsement of a special charity might be interpreted as a request for donations or a sales pitch to sell tickets to a special event. Plus, activist causes may be controversial and cause nasty disagreements within polite company. As a result, party and casual conversation often stays in the comfort zone of children, schools, sports, travel, homes and health rather than the meaningful tasks of giving back.

People volunteer when asked but small charities often have few supporters to do the asking. Moreover, some individuals are embarrassed or feel uncomfortable with asking others to volunteer or donate. Somehow, volunteers should be volunteers and raise their hands and step forward. This conveniently allays the anxiety of being refused.

The notion that value and money are synonyms pervades our culture, and since volunteer work is unpaid, it must be of lesser value than gainful employment. In a social setting when someone asks “What do you do?” he is asking, “How do you make a living?” and not, “Who have you helped today to make their day better.” Gratefully, volunteerism transcends a narrow monetary focus, and aims at improving society, building relationships and being your brother’s keeper.

At a recent curriculum committee meeting for the Osher Institute of Lifelong Learning in Cincinnati, I made a pitch to give greater recognition and a sense of belonging to volunteer course coordinators to aid in recruitment and retention. The following day, I received an e-mail from the committee chairman. “Thank you for taking the time today. Your points were well taken. One of the problems that I see is that these ideas are all very good and can be provided and paid for in the private sector in a for-profit setting. The plot thickens a great deal when one is dealing with volunteers. That is where leadership genius is required. Peace, my friend.”

Money has been shown to be of secondary importance to personal happiness and self-actualization, unless you are living close to the brink of poverty. Helping others and being

abundantly connected to others acts as a stimulant that has been found by clinical research to link to happiness and personal fulfillment. Indeed, volunteerism is the beating heart of human value and values. As a society we need to better market this value and openly boast of our good works as volunteers. This will do more to increase the percentage of Americans who volunteer than volunteer summits and public policy pronouncements. Volunteers bear the gifts that produce human capital.

When discussing money as a motivator and volunteerism, I always feel like the pastor who decries the decadence of materialism from the pulpit at Christmas time. But volunteers are the leading example where a true split can be made between money and good works. And volunteers have and will continue to change the world without personal gain.