

Plenary III

Topic: Volunteerism: from Motivation to Action



From Motivation to Action through Volunteer-Friendly Organizations

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Abstract

People want to volunteer. There are endless things that they can do. Their work will make a real difference.

Where is the problem? Too often, it is in the organizations in which we would expect volunteers would be most welcome – in the organizational barriers they create to effective volunteer involvement and in the attitudes of their paid staff members.

We know what it takes for an organization to be highly effective in the engagement of volunteers. We have an understanding of the reasons why paid staff is resistant to volunteers. Neither is about skill training. Rather it is about change in organizational culture and in people's perceptions of themselves and their roles as paid helpers.

So if we know the answer, why do we not see significant progress in reducing the barriers? The short answer is because it is hard, usually unrewarding work that requires committed resources, skilled consultants and a willingness on the part of organizations to participate.

Perhaps what is needed is a new kind of leadership by local, national and international volunteer resource organizations to a long-term campaign to build “volunteer-friendly” organization.

Here are three great myths that circulate about volunteering:

Myth #1. There are not enough people willing to volunteer to do all of the work that needs to be done.

Myth #2. There are more people willing to volunteer than there is work for them to do.

Myth #3. If we could only find a way to better match people who want to volunteer with opportunities available for them, we would solve the problems described in Myth #1 and Myth #2. Technology must be the answer.

While each of these may have a grain of truth to them – and, certainly, the reality may vary from country to country or even from one region of a country to another – the truth looks more like this:

Truth #1. There is an almost endless supply of volunteers – if we recognize who they are and know how to mobilize them.

Truth #2. There is a limitless amount of meaningful, useful work for them to do – if we let them do it.

Truth #3. There is no “magic bullet,” no “free lunch” – that is, there are no simple ways to translate these two Truths into practice.

Compounding the situation is that those of us who are in leadership roles for volunteering are guilty of committing six sins. They are:

Sin #1. We tend to think of volunteer opportunities as existing only within organizations, rather than outside them.

Sin #2. We think more about activities to be done than the results to be achieved, resulting in more attention to operational management than to impact of the work being done.

Sin #3. We put more faith in technology than we do in the power of people to mobilize others – or, we put our faith in the wrong kind of technology.

Sin #4. We accept resistance to volunteers from paid helpers and from rigid organizational cultures rather than adopt effective strategies to overcome it.

Sin #5. We do not invest in the organizational change and development required to create “Volunteer Friendly Organizations.”

Sin #6. National and local “volunteer centers” have been co-opted into these sins.

There have been any number of efforts in innumerable places over uncounted years among legions of smart people about how to break out of the self-reinforcing cycle of myth and sin – although, probably, very few of the participants really thought about it in the terms I am expressing it here.

One of those efforts, in the United States, was research designed to learn why some organizations are more effective than others at engaging volunteers. There was a flurry of interest in the results and a serious effort to turn what we had learned into tools that would help organizations change. But the sad reality was that what we learned was complicated and putting it to work within organizations was hard.

We are not in a field in which things that are complicated and hard are easily accepted.

That doesn't mean that what we learned wasn't valid – just that it was not easy to embrace and use.

Out of that research and the opportunity I have had to observe and work with volunteer-involving organizations around the world has grown the concept of “Volunteer-Friendly Organizations.” They are those organizations which:

- recognize that volunteers are an important asset in achieving their mission;
- identify and address barriers to effective volunteer involvement at all levels of the organization;
- empower their paid staff to work in partnership with volunteers; and,
- understand that their volunteers have important observations, perspectives and knowledge that can help the organization do its job better.

The four basic concepts of Volunteer-Friendly Organizations are that they:

- Lay the foundation through mission and vision – that is, they are driven by their mission and by their vision of how the world will be different because of their work and they enroll both paid staff and volunteers in working to achieve that vision.
- Combine inspiring leadership with effective management – that is, people at all levels of the organization assume leadership responsibility for engaging volunteers effectively while, at the same time, responsibility for management of volunteers is decentralized.

- Build understanding and collaboration – that is, they seek to build partnerships between paid staff and volunteers by defining their respective roles, helping them understand and appreciate one another and keeping them focused on mission and vision.
- Learn, grow, and change – that is, they are always seeking to learn from their volunteers in order to help the organization perform more effectively both in its core work and in the way it engages volunteers.

So now we have two dynamics that, it can be argued, can redefine volunteering. On the one hand there is the notion of Volunteer-Friendly Organizations, creating organizational environments that engage volunteers effectively. On the other hand there is the notion that we can find ways to empower people not only to work as volunteers within organizations but to become leaders in their own right, creating new opportunities for people to contribute as volunteers.

It is possible to find examples of innovation that address both of these dynamics.

- In Taiwan, the hospital of the Tzu Chi Foundation for Buddhist Compassion Relief is a living example of the concepts of the Volunteer-Friendly Organization at work in a truly world-class volunteer program.
- In Brazil, the Portal do Voluntario and its adaptation that supports corporate volunteering, V2V or Volunteer-to-Volunteer, is using the power of the Internet to build communities of volunteers in which opportunities and leadership grow from the bottom up rather than the top down.
- In more and more corporations, we see that their employee volunteer efforts are being led by employees themselves – identifying priorities and building partnerships in the community, deciding how they can contribute, organizing and leading projects, mobilizing and managing employee volunteers.
- International Youth Service Day and other “days of service,” the programs which mobilize large numbers of volunteers for one-day projects, are spreading throughout the world as highly visible examples of people being empowered to create and manage their own work and to mobilize others to join them.
- The Internet is being used to mobilize people for political action and advocacy – as volunteers to support candidates for political office, to influence policy-makers and to be new sources of information, alternatives to the media and government management of the news.

- There are examples of programs that are built around the belief that people usually defined as “clients” or recipients of services also can contribute as volunteers and that through their contribution, they also will benefit.

So how do we take what are still isolated examples and bring them to scale? It needs to begin with a change in how we are thinking about these kinds of issues. We need:

- A “paradigm shift” – that is, we need to challenge the framework within which we think about volunteering and reconceptualize the way we understand it and the implications for how we promote and support it;
- To give greater attention to the systems within which volunteering happens – societal, community, organizational, personal – and the dynamic relationship between volunteering and each of those systems;
- A new style of leadership, one based on building mutually beneficial partnerships and learning that gives value to all experiences, no matter where they are from;
- A globalized response – volunteer service has become one of the great movements to help people maintain their sense of community and their connections with one another in an increasingly complex, globalized world – we now must think and act globally to continue its development and increase its impact.

In practical terms, that might translate to work like this:

- More research on effective engagement of volunteers;
- More documentation of best practices;
- More international, cross-cultural analysis and transfer of knowledge;
- Conversion of data into knowledge and knowledge into tools;
- Preparation of “volunteer managers” to be agents of change;
- Professional development for paid helpers;
- Demonstration of effective people-based mobilization strategies;
- Recognition of innovation in volunteer mobilization and engagement.

One way that all of this might get done would be through a carefully-conceived, well-planned and appropriately-resourced global initiative. It would need to:

- Combine best practices and best thinking from throughout the world – full inclusiveness matters;
- Build a global knowledge base;
- Develop global tools that can be adapted to different realities;
- Secure funding from throughout the world to ensure a balanced, global approach.

Even considering such an ambitious undertaking will require new leadership to emerge. If, as many believe, this is to become the “Asian Century,” it would be most appropriate if that leadership could come from here.