

Global Challenges

Volunteer managers dealing with similar dilemmas

Despite wide differences in cultures and settings, remarkably, the trends and issues facing the leaders of volunteer efforts around the globe have more things in common than the things that separate them.

It seems that everyone is grappling with definitions, vocabulary and stereotypes, in all languages. The word "volunteer" or its native equivalent most often evokes images such as women, older people, low-level work, and other stereotypes similar to those in the United States.

There are debates about what the activity of volunteering includes and who's a volunteer. Does it have to be formal and agency-based or does it include acts of neighborliness? Are students who receive academic credit to be considered volunteers? What about the wide range of professionals who donate their specialized services and call it *pro bono* work? What about political activists?

Further, there is the recurring problem of confusing volunteering with the "voluntary sector." Over and over public figures and academics inaccurately discuss non-governmental organization issues and assume or imply that these are synonymous with volunteering. Yet the number of volunteers working in government settings in most countries is enormous. Just consider as an example schools, libraries, courts and prisons, parks, and other public services that rely on citizen involvement. "Nonprofit" might

be "voluntary" in terms of privately organized, but it does not necessarily imply the wide engagement of volunteers.

Another universal problem affecting volunteerism in all countries is the lack of solid baseline data about volunteering from the past – and not much good data still today. Even the United States produced its first-ever national study of volunteering

as recently as 1971. Many other countries only began their research in 2001, stimulated by the United Nations' International Year of Volunteers. This lack of data (in the context of disagreement about definitions and what should be included in the studies) hinders educated decision making about what is needed to support or further volunteer involvement.

POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL FACTORS

It's possible to identify a number of key factors that will determine how volunteering will manifest itself in any nation. These factors create the environment in each country to encourage or impede the strength of volunteering.

The effect of a nation's political system and the interrelationship of its citizens with their government. It's simplistic to conclude that it requires a democracy to produce volunteering. Certainly any government "of, by and for the people" requires citizen engagement and is healthiest when people work for the common good. Democracies engender volunteering because of the widely-held belief that anyone can influence change if the person puts the effort into organizing others to call for it. But, individuals can hold this belief in repressive regimes, as well. And, any "underground" movement of rebellion is led by activists who are, in fact, volunteers. No one is paid to start a revolution.

The traditional and current role of organized religion. Every major religion in the world preaches the value and moral obligation of helping others, especially the poorest and weakest people.

In countries where a single major religion continues to hold strong influence, charitable activities focused on meeting social or human needs might be defined and even coordinated by religious leaders and done by the faithful as an expression of their belief. The more secular a society, the more choices there might be in how someone can volunteer for a wide range of causes.

Traditions of helping family, helping others, and helping self. Also affecting volunteering are cultural mores about the role of the individual within society. Is individuality valued or is it most important to fit in with the majority? Does one therefore serve the good of the whole? What are family obligations – and what defines members of the "family"? If a culture considers even extremely distant blood ties to merit all the generosity and support of kinship, ultimately most members of the society can rely on a helping network.

The role of women. When women were limited in their economic and political roles in the United States, volunteering became the path to female power. As strong volunteer leaders, women could and did affect everything from abolition to child labor laws to the treatment of mental illness. Volunteering provided them a platform for their voices to be heard. In many developing countries, this is still true. Women pursue the issues of civil society, especially when they are disenfranchised or limited in their economic options.

POLITICAL INFLUENCES

Around the world, politicians love volunteering. Unfortunately, it is often for the wrong reasons. It seems so easy, so helpful, so inexpensive to deploy. Depending on the political motives of those in power, volunteering can be touted as a rationale for cutting budgets and letting government off the hook.

Volunteering is motherhood, apple pie, and getting government "off our backs" while we "do it ourselves." Rarely do politicians recognize that volunteering is how citizens (taxpayers and voters) hold government accountable. In many countries, including Canada and the U.K., volunteers consider it a goal to convince government to put more funding into the things that matter to them.

Something else that is becoming an international trend is mandated community service. Many countries have or are implementing alternative sentencing programs, welfare-to-work plans, student graduation service requirements and other forms of coercion to volunteer. This directly affects

the volunteer world because it is existing volunteer programs that must find the best assignments for such participants, as well as deal with the challenges of meshing workers who freely choose to serve and those who are forced into it. Happily, there is some evidence everywhere that how or why someone enters service might not be as important as what happens to them once they begin to give their time. What begins as a mandate evolves into genuine volunteering.

One additional challenge is the effect of money beyond reimbursement of expenses. What happens to volunteering when enabling funds, after-service educational grants, and other types of stipends inch up in monetary value to close to (or even above) a country's minimum wage? Where is the line between reimbursement of expenses, a "stipend," and a very low salary?

CONCERN FOR INFRASTRUCTURE

The last global issue is a growing concern for the "infrastructure" of volunteering. At the national or regional level, this means providing adequate resources for those bodies that support volunteering and provide technical assistance and tangible services to both the public seeking volunteer work and organizations seeking to involve volunteers. A wide variety of countries today have some national "Center for Volunteering," often funded by a blend of government and private money. States, provinces and regions also have what the Australians call "peak

bodies" to support volunteerism, and there are more and more volunteer centers in local communities around the world.

Unfortunately, these support organizations are struggling. Beneath the national level, these centers are chronically under funded and understaffed. The public is largely unaware of their work and their influence is minimal. This situation is receiving attention with the development of new "compacts" and "codes" between government and the volunteer sector, often leading to new roles for the peak bodies.

On the front line, in each organization that involves volunteers, "infrastructure" has a very practical meaning. It refers to the recognition that a foundation must be laid in which volunteers can be welcomed and supported. A vital element of infrastructure is the designation of a staff member to coordinate volunteers, given a budget and other resources with which to develop a volunteer program. Accompanying this is the emergence of a global community of volunteer program managers, including increased training and professional credentialing for practitioners.

The Web is playing a major role in international professional exchange, reducing the isolation of leaders of volunteers, offering a wealth of learning materials, and reaching new audiences about volunteering. Because of the Web, other new communication technologies, and the ease of international travel, the globe is getting smaller and smaller. In volunteerism, this means a growing understanding of the challenges colleagues face around the world – and mutual efforts to overcome common obstacles and achieve the maximum potential of volunteers. *NPT*

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