

Values In Volunteerism

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Time to Reconsider

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((Way back in 1978, this article stated values I still try to hold to and implement.. I.S.))

Volunteer leadership can be divided into two parts. The first is technical and implemental representing crucial skill building – advances in information, knowledge, techniques and methodology.

The second is represented by "why" questions, relating us to the general area of values, belief systems and ethics. Many practitioners are a bit embarrassed or even resentful when such topics turn up on a workshop agenda or in a college course. The quick clear-cut "answers" just aren't there. Values seem difficult, impractical, a little corny. They threaten return to our old softie, do-gooder image. Yet I believe we need to get in better touch with our values for some very practical reasons.

I believe volunteerism has the potential to integrate with the best and most powerful values in our society today. We can draw more fully on that power if only we will understand, appreciate and publicize values. This means raising our own consciousness first, launching dialogue and debate, reaching some decision on what the main values are, then announcing them.

The first announcement should be to ourselves – volunteer leaders and volunteers. Then announcements should be made to the world. The purpose is to buttress our case for fundamental, rather than ornamental, status in the world of work and caring, to place us more securely in the mainstream of society. This article attempts to stimulate dialogue.

Certainly, scholars are far more sophisticated about ethics and values than I am. (My grade in graduate ethics was a compassionate B-). I hope they will join in with suggestion and critique based on their foundation in day-to-day field experience.

As a launching point for discussion, here are five basic values or beliefs volunteerism may represent in our society. Very few of the impossible implications are fully drawn.

1. **Pride in Work, the Dignity of Work**

Let us begin with a crashing simplicity: Money is important. On most fronts, the volunteer leadership world need not object to money; indeed, we had better not. We are at least as obsessed with money (for support of our volunteer efforts) as the next person. I believe the volunteer movement has no quarrel whatsoever with people wanting and needing money in return for their work. High unemployment rates are bad for everyone, including volunteerism. I am skeptical about money in its use as a primary measure of the intrinsic value of work. If you earn \$20,000 a year for your work, and I only make \$10,000 a year, the strong implication is that your work (and you) are worth more than my work (and me). If you earn no money at all

in return for your work, the work devaluation consequences can be disastrous.

A muted counterpoint remains. Voices still ask where pride in work has gone. Where is the craftsperson who took special care to do the best job possible, above and beyond the money? Where is the salesperson who really wants to serve you, the businessman who genuinely wants customers to get the best possible product and service, the teacher who works overtime without pay because he/she cares about learning? They are still there. Some of them happen to receive money for their work, but they also serve as volunteers because they don't receive "profit" money for their work. We need to underline this alliance of the spirit between all the people who do more than they have to because they want to, whether expressed as pride in paid work or in volunteering.

Volunteering is the work model which goes furthest in removing immediate money as a yardstick of intrinsic work value. This is the ideal. In fact, there are certainly some work-external incentives in the "motivational" paycheck of many volunteers. There are also staff or other gatekeepers who block volunteers from more meaningful work.

Nevertheless, I believe volunteering and the volunteer attitude represent pride and dignity of work in the purest form today, our last best hope for recapturing that spirit. We should say to all people concerned with rejuvenating such pride. Many of them are not in the volunteer field today.

2. **The Opportunity to Participate**

Any society which is free, or aspires to be, seeks to guarantee the right to participate. For example, we have the right to vote, the right to assemble peaceably. We can advocate any cause nonviolently, if it doesn't restrict unduly the rights of others. But try reading the Bill of Rights alone on a desert island. The point is the right to participate means little or nothing without the opportunity to participate. Volunteering is a principal way our society has of adding practical opportunity to abstract rights.

Insofar as volunteer leaders do their job, they increase the range of accessible participative opportunities. None the less volunteering is in a sense an extension of the ballot. Citizens have greater opportunity to "vote" with their volunteering every day, instead of maybe once a year. They also have greater choice of "candidates" for their "vote:" a whole range of service, policy and advocacy volunteer roles.

There is more of a potential rather than actual situation as long as the volunteer movement remains significantly elitist instead of "people approach" in character. The "ballot boxes" for the volunteer vote must be located not only in marble agency halls, but also near all people – with transportation gladly provided as needed.

To the extent we take serious responsibility for achieving this, volunteering can implement a central value in our society: making rights to participate more meaningful by linking them with opportunities to participate. I know of no other vehicle in our society more promising in its capability for doing this. We should say so to anyone interested in good citizenship.

3. **Freedom/Free Choice**

One important index of freedom in a society is the range of choices open to people, realistically limited by death, taxes, school, the draft, traffic lights, and the like. Volunteering represents a main vehicle for extending permissible, realistic freedom of choice. Theoretically, you can choose not to volunteer or you can negotiate and/or choose among a range of volunteer opportunities, and quit any one of them. In the real world, "staff resistance" diminishes this, as does a limited range of accessible volunteer opportunities to choose from. In some cases, there are also real pressures to volunteer; for example, the ambitious executive who knows his/her firm links promotion to community participation. Not incidentally, volunteer leaderships itself may be creating some of these freedom diminishing pressures,

with overkill in incentives and pleadings for volunteers to remain, or other undue pressures on the nature of volunteers. Possibly a realistic "right to turnover" is more consistent with the voluntary spirit than pressured perseverance.

Volunteering today is thus somewhat flawed as a representative of "freedom work." Moreover, one also can refuse, change, or quit paid work jobs. But freedom here may be infringed upon by the need to keep wolves and creditors away from the door, however much you dislike the work.

Volunteering, as we know it, is still in the process of arriving as a prime expression of freedom. Nevertheless, I think we should enunciate the ideal as a kind of civil rights in work to all who care about freedom, but who may not recognize us as companions.

4. **Actualizing the Ethics of Caring**

There is a strong message in our society carried by our great religions but with a secular parallel: We are meant to do something in this life besides taking care of the first person singular. We are meant to care about others. We can do this in some kinds of paid work. Nevertheless, I believe volunteering is a crucial, more accessible way of actualizing abstract ethical principles. I support this is perilously near platitude. But people who feel strongly about the ethics of caring tend to implement them through action, much of which is voluntary in nature.

There still may be a position vis-à-vis ethics which holds that contemplation needs implementation, and I believe this is also the essential ethical position represented by volunteerism. Therefore, we ought to make ourselves know to others who feel the same way in a different language, then join forces.

5. **The Worth and Power of the Individual**

Every "volunteer value" we've discussed is orientated to the individual; participatory rights, freedom of choice, pride in work, and caring about others. In these and other ways, volunteering at its best says you can do things by yourself. I believe volunteering in our society today continues to offer the hope of power in individuals, if only they will make an effort to use it while we effectively facilitate their efforts.

This volunteer sense of worth/power is probably lessened in many agency volunteer programs, because volunteers are seen mainly as fulfilling the will and mission of the agency. Their caring is co-opted rather than facilitated. But it can be nurtured more so in all-volunteer or volunteer-dominated groups, in advocacy groups and by individuals themselves.

Alienation in our era seems to be based on a belief that important things can be accomplished only by big business, big government, big labor, and maybe big volunteerism. So we need to say it again, to all who are concerned about erosion of worth in the individual, though unfamiliar with our lingo. Volunteering says "you can." Not many other groups are making that statement.

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To these five values, I would today add only

(6) a commitment to inclusiveness and

(7) a deep skepticism of extreme materialism via an appreciation of keeping quality of service as uncontingent as possible on how much money a person has.

All seven values overlap to some degree; so dealing with one of them is to some extent also dealing with the others. ***I.S.***