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Volunteers and the Quest for Innovation

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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After viewing endless television commercials, a European friend of my family once remarked, “You Americans want everything to be new and improved...or high and moist.” His reflection echoes in my ear every time I see the emphasis of funders on *innovation*, as in the United States government and its [Social Innovation Fund](#), described as “a key White House initiative and program of the Corporation for National and Community Service [with] the simple, but vital goal of finding solutions that work, and making them work for more people.” Numerous private funders also emphasize new initiatives and are reluctant to support the continuation of ongoing services or basic overhead expenses to keep organizations running.

Of course I understand the desire to support creativity, out-of-the-box thinking, even experimentation. But the stress on “innovating” or “reimagining” programs implies some assumptions that deserve to be questioned, notably that we must wipe away all those “old-fashioned” programs that must be failing. Is it right to assume a program is ineffective based on when it was first implemented? Just because an idea is new does not necessarily mean it is better. What is perceived as traditional today was new at some point in time. Maybe we simply have not given earlier good ideas the resources or time to prove their success.

The trouble is that our culture seems to lack the *staying power* to take a new idea through the long-term effort needed to gain results. Many of the problems we face today are themselves not new. Are we inventing bigger and better Band-Aids for the symptoms rather than eliminating the root *causes* of seemingly intractable problems?

Where do volunteers fit into the quest for innovation and what does any of this mean to volunteer resources managers (VRMs)? I propose that volunteers are already vital in a number of ways, with great potential for even more impact.

Volunteers as Contributors to Change

First, as I've often said, volunteers have a venerable tradition of pioneering. Many are the activists, mavericks, and visionaries who see what needs to be done before established institutions (public or private) recognize that need. My question, therefore, is how many organizations who apply for innovation funds have ever involved frontline volunteers when creating their proposals? For example:

- Are current volunteers surveyed for their observations or suggestions, at least to comment on plans as they are being developed? This would seem valid, given that most organizations speak of volunteers as their "community representatives." VRMs could arrange for volunteers to serve as public sounding boards. We all know that often volunteers have their ear to the ground in ways that paid staff cannot, including hearing comments from clients that would not necessarily be voiced to someone in authority.
- Are there activities for which it is becoming harder and harder to recruit volunteers? Diagnose why. Perhaps the public is letting you know that this type of program is no longer viable as presently designed. This may be the place to innovate.
- Is there a mechanism for an excited volunteer to offer a suggestion for a new activity or approach to service? With all the talk about "entrepreneurial" volunteering, do we encourage such suggestions?
- Another time-honored role for volunteers is to *experiment* with new ideas to see whether they ought to be developed further. Are we strategically launching pilot projects in which volunteers know that what they learn from the pilot may lead to full funding and staff jobs – with continued engagement of volunteers?



Most of the time funding is sought by organizations for program ideas generated by paid staff, often to hire more paid staff. Only *after* money has been obtained does someone say, "let's get volunteers to help." Waiting until the end of the process to "add in" volunteers is a huge missed opportunity because it does not maximize the contribution of volunteers to the *brains* of an organization! Instead, involve volunteers from the beginning of planning a new initiative, to generate more ideas and add their perspectives and knowledge. Next, strategize what volunteers will be asked to do in implementing the initiative if funded, and explain that in the actual proposal – including budgeting funds to support their efforts. This sequence of events considers volunteers as essential team members, not as an afterthought.

Volunteers as Maintainers of What Should Continue

In the environment of new-and-improved, organizations that want to stay the course, honing and improving methods that incrementally work to alleviate a need, find it very hard to get financial support. "Mission creep," the result of bending and tweaking an organization's activities to match funding requests for proposals (RFPs) even if the new work seems a bit off-mission, is inevitable if

there is no money to *maintain* even successful services. In some cases, adaptation works well; Big Brothers Big Sisters of America successfully adapted to the cause-du-jour of mentoring and continued its one-to-one matching of adult volunteers to kids in need. But often organizations simply drop what seems not fundable and grab on to something else to keep jobs going and the lights on.

Changing course or eliminating projects to follow new money directly affects those volunteers who are passionate about a cause or an organization's mission. These are the dogged supporters ready to do what needs to be done. They understand that both time and money are needed for success, but their main concern as volunteers is to provide the services they feel matter to clients. If they see results from their time and effort, they will stay at it. Paid staff may have to redirect their work to a new project because funding demands new activities, but devoted volunteers may not want to be diverted from something they believe continues to have value.

Money is just not the issue when it comes to volunteers. It is not what motivates them or keeps them committed. Making a difference is what matters most.

Hanging on to the Old or Grabbing the New?

The real questions for leaders of volunteer involvement are:

- Who determines what is *innovative* as opposed to simply *new*? How can volunteers, especially long-time volunteers, be included in this determination?
- Upon the introduction of a new campaign deemed “innovative,” can we make the case for maintaining activity that seems demonstrably useful to clients and volunteers?
- When faced with the potential cut of a valued service, can we engage committed volunteers as advocates for continued funding? (I dealt with this in a past Hot Topic that remains relevant: “[When the Ax Falls: Budget Cutting and Volunteers.](#)”)
- What about giving volunteers the option to keep the service going even if paid staff is focused elsewhere?

Perhaps volunteers are canaries in the coal mine. If we truly cannot recruit volunteers for an activity (assuming competent recruitment outreach), maybe we should consider changing course. But if volunteers are still committed to what they are doing, doesn't that indicate something worthwhile is going on and deserves to continue?

What do you think?

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Submitted on 28 June 2014 by Liza Jacobson, Portland, Oregon, USA

The question of what is new versus innovative is especially interesting to me. If we use the definition of innovative being something that is new and also better* then we won't know if something that is

new is also innovative until it has been proven -- or not -- to be better. In that case, the Social Innovation Fund is using the same definition and ensuring that the grants are being used for programs that are proven to be better. Perhaps a good idea on the surface, but not what is often most needed.

When funders and donors don't want to support ongoing services it's important to consider the Overhead Myth and use it as a teaching moment to help funders and donors understand why the day-to-day services and overhead is so essential. (As Susan said in "When The Ax Falls.")

Can an organization be innovative all the time without having the "normal" or "boring" services that are integral to mission? I think not.

*Innovation definition from this article:

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/frederickallen/2011/06/29/the-difference-bet...>

Submitted on 10 June 2014 by Clare O'Kelly, Manager, Volunteer Resources, Fraser Health, Burnaby Hospital, Burnaby, BC, Canada

I liked the paragraph encouraging volunteer involvement in the planning stage, to determine how volunteers might be involved, rather than as an afterthought once the program is up and running.

Such great thoughts! Thank you for your insight.

Submitted on 04 June 2014 by Sam Elliston, Cincinnati, OH, USA

Excellent questions, Susan - I like the focus on the American desire to be new all the time, AND these questions should be asked anyway, if a program is being managed well; right?

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