

"Rewards for volunteering: in agencies' programs, versus clubs and churches."

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For the past few years I have been doing a life-history study of outstanding volunteers. (1987) I have also had some dealings with the professionals of the volunteer field: cities' volunteer centers, agencies' and hospitals' volunteer coordinators, ACTION and other such national centers and backups for the cities' programs. To a great extent, the professionals, and my outstanding volunteers, operated in two different worlds. The network of the professionals-- from ACTION, and Volunteer: The National Center, down through the local volunteer bureaus and individual agencies--represents just one part of the world of volunteering. There is a realm of volunteering outside the professionals' network; and I think it is very important. This is what I want to talk about today.

This other realm I am going to call, for want of a better term, clubs and churches. By "clubs" I mean voluntary organizations which operate without a paid staff, other than perhaps a skeleton-crew, national-level staff (such as, for example, in Boy Scouts). Service clubs, civic organizations, "societies," "associations," youth organizations, would all be included: Rotary, Kiwanis, Junior League, League of Women Voters, the Legion, Audubon Society, Masons and Demolay, AAUP, AARP, NAACP... and so on.

In these groups, the individual chapters or clubs have to be run by the members. Office-holders, committee members, people to take responsibility, and help arrange events, and do whatever has to be done--these are often in short supply. If you are a member of such a club, and you volunteer to do something--and if you do it (whatever it was that you were supposed to do) all right, satisfactorily: then you will be asked again. And again. And again. In such fashion you can soon become a mainstay of the group. The group will be depending on you; you will feel obligated. The club has "claimed" you, in Paul Gump's term. (19 )

This is the way my outstanding volunteers usually got drawn into volunteer work: in voluntary organizations, and in churches. (Also, during an earlier study of youth organizations, I saw this happening to some of the youth who became officers.)(1983) My people did other kinds of volunteer work too. They volunteered in hospitals and

nursing homes, and in social agencies; some of them were community leaders and served on boards; and they worked on various fund-raising drives. But this process of being drawn in, usually began in voluntary organizations and in churches. Then their involvement in the originating organization, became a springboard into other activities, elsewhere.

I think there are other reasons why the outstanding volunteers became so active. They had special personal characteristics (such as willingness to hold offices) which help account for their careers. But most of them have some church or club to thank, for giving them their start.

Work in these voluntary organizations has an open-ended quality. One thing leads to the next. A volunteer tends to be drawn upward into committees and leadership positions, if he or she has any inclination for this at all.

This is less apt to happen in "agencies." These are organizations with paid staff: not only social agencies, but also hospitals, nursing homes, school systems, museums, parks and recreation departments, (etc.) This is the realm of volunteering that the network of professionals is tied into. Agencies' volunteer coordinators run volunteer programs; cities' volunteer bureaus refer prospective volunteers to them; and backup is provided by national offices such as ACTION. In agencies, the core people are the paid staff. Volunteers are specially recruited and trained, and fit into a delimited niche in the organization. A few of the volunteers may move up, become staff members themselves some day, or board members. But usually the volunteers are not drawn into leadership positions. This kind of volunteer work is much less likely to lead onward and upward, to new experiences and social involvements, either within the organization (once the original job is learned and done), or outside. It is less apt to be a springboard.

For a person who seeks volunteer work in order to make friends in a new town, become grounded in the community, become a part of things; for a retiree, who wants to not only keep busy but do meaningful work and feel important; for a "career," an unfolding of new experiences in volunteer work--the clubs and churches are a better bet than the agencies. This is especially true, I think, for people who are willing and able to hold offices and sit on committees. If a person has time, it is good to shop around and try both kinds of volunteer work, since of course the agencies offer worthwhile experiences too. The danger is--for people who are not church members--that they will volunteer in agencies and not discover what this other form of volunteering might do for them. An example is a widow who needs to build a new life in a new city. She is happy with her volunteer job as a hospital aide; but she is still relatively friendless and ininvolved, after a year in her new home. She would probably

2

be farther along, in building her new life, if she had devoted that time to a civic organization instead.

People who seek advice about where to volunteer--from a city's volunteer bureau, or from an office for retirees' volunteering, such as RSVP--are referred to the agencies. (Actually, I wish I had sampled more widely among the referral sources into volunteer work. Perhaps I would have found some interesting exceptions.) Evidently the reasons for this are simply procedural: one agency, with its procedures (the volunteer bureau), inter-relating with another. A club, by contrast, is seen as lacking accountability; the club leadership is changeable, less dependable, not "professional." A volunteer bureau worker says that when she interviews someone who wants to volunteer, she will "make them aware" of some of the voluntary organizations. But her actual referrals are to the agencies. And she never refers people to churches; evidently the bureau's guidelines do not allow it. Similarly, an RSVP director says she places people in agency volunteering, not in voluntary organizations; certain kinds of church work are allowable. But "ministry-related" volunteering is not, nor is work on political campaigns.

What should be done about this? Perhaps no procedural change is necessary; but I do think some emphasis should be put on "making (applicants) aware" of voluntary organizations; and church work (small churches seem to be better than big churches, for drawing people into involvement); and community work. This would be especially true, for prospective volunteers who need to make friends, get involved socially, and become grounded in the community; and who seem good candidates for office-holding and committees.

The volunteer coordinators, in the agencies, struggle to recruit and then keep their volunteers. They exercise their ingenuity as best they can, within the strictures of their organizations, to keep their volunteers happy, make them feel appreciated and a part of things. They have numerous problems and handicaps (as do voluntary organizations too of course). But they have less leverage, less to work with than do the clubs and churches, for getting involvement and commitment. This is so, because opportunities for mobility are usually so limited in agency volunteering. Moving up in the organization, thereby becoming "claimed," is less possible. Also, in an agency in which the volunteer works alongside paid staff, she tends to be marginal; by contrast, in a voluntary organization, one can become a core member merely by doing some work.

Could the volunteer coordinators overcome their disadvantage, by copying the voluntary organizations? They have little leeway for this. But here and there, among the

agencies, there are opportunities to at least adopt certain features of the clubs. One thing that can be done, is to have a club (of volunteers) within the agency. The prototype of this is the high school band, which has not only the band director, who is a teacher, but also student-officers-- president, secretary, treasurer, and so on; that is to say, it is also organized as a school club. The club raises money for trips and events, like other clubs would do; it has socials and activities and meetings. I have not heard of anything like this within the agencies; but volunteer coordinators sometimes stop one step short of this. A Big Brother/Big Sister director speaks of her concern that her volunteers get to know each other and form a group; so they have parties about four times a year. So: perhaps a bit more development in this direction, might be helpful for certain volunteer programs.

A volunteer coordinator might also widen opportunities for mobility and "getting into things": both within her organization (sponsoring the occasional volunteer into a staff position or onto a board or committee); and also outside the organization, connecting certain of her volunteers with interest groups. This might not necessarily benefit her volunteer program (by strengthening commitment); it would be more in the nature of a gift to her volunteers-- offering some of them a springboard, like a voluntary organization might do.

There are many inventive persons out there in the agencies. Some of them might come up with better ideas than these. Being able to look at detailed models from the voluntary organizations would help, in thinking of adaptations from them, for agencies' programs. Here I can offer my own writings: how the outstanding volunteers were drawn in, in voluntary organizations (1987), which is probably not described in sufficient detail to be really helpful; and the workings of youth organizations.(1983) There must be other examples in the literature. And of course agency people would know many examples from their own personal experience.

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4