

“One day we will learn that the heart can never be totally right if the head is totally wrong. Only through the bringing together of the head and the heart, intelligence and goodness, shall man rise to a fulfilment of his true nature.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr.



promoting volunteering  
and strengthening the  
voluntary sector

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## Reverse Discrimination — Volunteers vs. Employers

by Susan Ellis

The recent “Soul of Service” Conference in Winston-Salem, N.C., sponsored by a remarkable, all-volunteer organization called the Human Service Alliance, not only drew 300 participants from around the world but also conjured mixed emotions about the unfortunate conflict that often exists between volunteers and professional staff.

This was an event that started with the premise that volunteers can change the world — certainly a refreshing change for anyone battling for recognition of volunteer contributions in other settings. It was also obvious that there was an undercurrent of reverse discrimination present.

In subtle and sometimes overt ways, speakers and participants clearly demonstrated the belief that people who receive money for helping others take second place to those who volunteer. This philosophy echoed in the often-used phrase, “selfless service,” in which volunteers “leave their personal agendas at the door” to be able to act completely for the needs of those being served. The role model held dear by many conferees was Mother Theresa.

The wide range of organizations represented at the conference demonstrated the possibilities of this type of volunteer dedication. We heard about hospice programs, respite camps for war refugee children, services for famine and drought victims. In almost every case we met the founders of these organizations — individual visionaries who now devote their lives to their cause and motivate others to join them.

In most cases (except for those who were also clergy), these were volunteers who discovered their cause later in life and made what amounted to a 180-degree career change to pursue their new goal of service: ex-soldiers, ex-business people, ex-traditional doctors, etc. Of course, in most cases as well, it was money earned in the previous employment that allowed the person to now devote full-time to volunteering. Or, the original occupation was still being pursued as a means of supporting the greater good of the service work. In other words, money mattered, but only if it did not derive from the service itself.

There are ageless moral, religious and philosophic beliefs at work here. And I do not question either the dedication or the honesty of any at the conference. But I found myself distinctly uncomfortable with what amounted to the unquestioning acceptance of any work performed by volunteers as self-evidently good.

This attitude is as inexplicable to me as the opposite, more common, attitude that performance by volunteers is automatically suspect. Competence — or lack of it — is not derived from pay status. Warmth and caring freely given may indeed always be positive

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human outreach, but they do not exempt volunteers from scrutiny about methods or impact. Some volunteers actually get angry when asked to measure or demonstrate the value of their efforts.

To be sure, not all speakers uncritically applauded volunteers. Elisabeth Hoodless, executive director of Community Service Volunteers (CSV), based in London, cautioned about this very point. CSV has been an unceasing advocate for volunteering in the United Kingdom for several decades, but Hoodless noted that well-meaning volunteers do not automatically accomplish their goals. One example she gave was a project by conservation volunteers who wanted to save the London canal habitat of endangered waterfowl. With all good intentions, the group removed debris and rebuilt sections of the canal embankment. Unfortunately, in the spring the new walls proved too high and steep for the baby birds, who drowned attempting to reach shore.

It is useful to recognize that just because service is performed by volunteers does not mean it is desired, skillful, or beneficial (just as we cannot assume these features of work performed by paid staff).

Volunteering is a strategy. It is neither inherently good nor bad, which

is proven by its use by both sides of a public debate: Democrats and Republicans, pro-choice and anti-abortion, the NRA and the gun control lobby. Another troublesome concept for me is that of “selfless” service. It has an air of the old noblesse oblige attitude about it, making it a calling for those with much, to help those who have little. Unfortunately, this “helping” approach rarely confronts the root causes of the precipitating problem.

This is the main criticism some had of Mother Theresa – serving the needy without addressing the reasons for their needs tends to perpetuate the situation. When someone claims to work “selflessly,” the recipient of service can become a vehicle to demonstrate compassion. There is no real incentive to make fundamental changes to prevent or solve the problem, since it is so wonderful to be giving help.

There are echoes of this sentiment in the old canard about volunteers being the “quiet heroes” of the world, working without drawing attention to themselves. But silence also tends to keep problems invisible. The greatest social changes have been initiated by loud, verbal heroes — most often activist volunteers — who bring issues to light.

The use of the word “selfless” seems to imply that other forms of service are “selfish.” It seems to me that there is something wonderful about bringing oneself to service. The helper and the recipient work together, and all volunteers and staff add their unique characteristics to the mix.

Maybe the larger question is what exactly is meant by “service” in the nonprofit world? True service — to be of service — is an attitude, not an employment status.

Stand in line at any airline counter or bank and watch the personnel waiting on customers. Five staff may all have the same job description, even the same pay, but only three are giving “service” while the other two are simply performing tasks.

Money does not buy — or negate — the ability to help someone else in a positive, welcoming way. Bias against those who earn their living in helping professions is outright prejudice. It is tied to the idea that low pay scales in nonprofits is a sign of moral virtue, as well as to confusing excess revenue over expenses to be “profit.” It draws two lines in the sand: We of highest moral character are volunteers, but we of low pay are at least better than someone who earns a high salary or makes a profit.

#### There are boundaries

In the real world the boundaries are never clear. Staff in large nonprofits can earn much more than employees of small for-profit businesses.

Volunteers can be independently wealthy or use funds from other sources to give them the luxury to donate their time, while the paid staffers sacrifice personally to work at low pay in nonprofit service jobs.

Sometimes being a volunteer is indeed more effective than being on payroll, especially when the service involves the giving of friendship or

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**Reverse Discrimination**

credibility by someone without a vested interest.

Sometimes volunteers do poor work.  
Sometimes employees do poor work.  
Sometimes clients don't care who serves them.

I left the Soul of Service conference feeling that opportunities were being missed. The majority of the at-

tendees had never heard of most of the books, conferences and other networking resources that the paid service world deals with daily.

On the other hand, I was amazed by the titles in the conference bookstore and realized that I was as unaware of the "other side's" materials as they were of mine. Resistance is the common enemy: those paid staff who resist the value of volunteer involvement and those volunteers who resist what they perceive as the outcome of hiring staff.

But what's the point of it all? Making a difference

in this world. All our resources are needed.



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