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VOLUNTARISM IN A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

by

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Voluntarism will never be the same again! The world of the volunteer is changing dramatically and rapidly. We are at a very interesting point in time. We are living at a time of transition -- between the no longer, and the not yet --. It is not quite the way it was, and it is not quite the way we are told it is going to be. There are mini and maxi transitions. Mini, like going to work a new way because a street has been closed off, or transiting from being asleep to being awake, or vice versa. And then there are maxi transitions -- from work to retirement, from being a couple to being single, and many others. We are also witnessing transition in the usage of words. For instance in many circles "chairman" is a word you can no longer use. Language reflects societal and cultural changes. Language will continue to change, and people who are leaders will be called facilitators, conveners, and coordinators. As society changes, organizations will have to change, including structure change, changes in by-laws, and some will even study and then reorganize their objectives and missions.

What then are some of the specific kinds of changes, trends, pushes that affect the volunteer world at this transitional time?

1. We are moving from a stance of plenty to one of doing more and better with less. We have always thought we could meet most of the needs of people in our countries, and that we lived in societies of plenty. We are discovering this is not necessarily true anymore. We know we are short on all kinds of resources -- material and financial. We know we shall have to utilize human resources and services in new and creative ways. This

is a double bind, because at a time of more demands we must meet them better with less resources. This push affects the volunteer world in a variety of ways. It is providing some new roles for volunteers, and some new confrontations with staff persons who are not feeling as secure in their jobs as they once did. There is concern that as budgets are cut volunteers might replace or displace professional persons. Both unions and professional associations get upset, and rightfully so. This is one of the challenges of transition times.

2. We are moving from knowing our values, and being clear what they are, to a time of changing values. Let us look at how this trend affects the volunteer world. Here are five value changes that are particularly important for us:
 - (a) We are moving from an emphasis on rootedness to a value on mobility; not only mobility from one job to another, but mobility in the way one lives one's life, mobility in lifestyles, in modes of transportation, and, of course, geographic mobility. We are more mobile, and this has a lot of implications for the volunteer world, such as: people are not around as much or as long, and therefore can't take on long volunteer assignments.
 - (b) We are moving from a value on commitment which meant some kind of a long term association, to a value placed on temporariness. That is where the phrase "commitment for the moment" comes from. Surely this has implications for by-laws, for recruitment, and how we "sell" volunteer jobs. People are not available in the same ways they always were. This is a creative challenge for the volunteer world, because "99-year committee memberships" are not going to be very popular, nor are six-year board terms. The challenge is how to utilize human volunteer resources for shorter and more irregular periods of time. We shall have to find answers if we want to tap into new resources.

- (c) We are also moving from a value of awe and respect for authority and of authority, to questioning and confronting authority. This is evident in the volunteer world for example that some volunteers say "nothing that you have to offer interests me", or they come to a volunteer centre stating: "What I want to do is ---". Volunteers have become much more demanding in terms of jobs, contracts, training and environment.
- (d) Another value change is reflected in that success has always meant upward mobility, or at least upward movement. Now, success means different things to different people, for example it may mean doing what you want to do when you want to do it. The president of a telephone company once told me that he could not figure out employees who are happy in what they are doing, and do not want to do anything else, especially if it means a promotion. He described some young people who liked the outdoor telephone work so much that they did not want to become managers, because it meant working in an office with all its restrictions as to clothing etc. This was hard to understand for a man in his late fifties, for whom success had always been an upward climb. We do have the same value change in the volunteer world. There are people who do not want to be on the Board of Directors, and who do not want to run for office. That is not where they feel comfortable and rewarded. So we must ask: What makes volunteering meaningful and attractive to prospective volunteers, satisfying and fun? What opportunities can be offered? Must potential board members be old and experienced? Maybe the newcomer has different and creative ideas and ought to be on a decision-making body. He or she might bring something quite new and refreshing to a group of people who are all molded and melded into the organization, and do all the "right things". Long service often narrows the outlook of the volunteer, and tradition may get in the way of change or movement.

- (e) The last value change to be mentioned here is that we are moving from an era of conformity, or from an emphasis on conformity in our agencies and organizations, to an appreciation of the beauty of difference. We are beginning to realize that a good committee is one that has a menu of different people with different ideas, instead of like-minded people who come together to agree. We are also beginning to realize that any decision-making group is more productive and comes to wiser, more interesting, more creative conclusions if the texture of that group is one where people are different -- different ages, different opinions, different lifestyles, and from different backgrounds. It is too bad that most nominating committees in agencies are made up of like-minded people who choose nominees from people just like themselves, and whom they know best. It would be helpful to have these committees reflect the differences that you want to attract to your organization.
3. Another major push is from few roles that most of us play to lives with multiple roles, that is multiple personal roles, multiple community professional and volunteer roles, in fact, we wear a lot of different hats. Multiple roles also mean multiple loyalties. So a volunteer can give time and service in a variety of volunteer jobs in addition to work, community, and family commitments. We must learn to deal with people's multiple loyalties, rather than hoping for a commitment of all their available time. Multiple roles and loyalties may make us richer because we have more experiences to bring to our volunteer jobs.
4. Also, a transitional change is that we are moving from organizational turfdom to interorganizational collaboration. Indeed, turfdom is going out of style rapidly, being replaced with cooperative, collaborative modes of work. We need to meld

resources so that we have more available from which to choose, and this will enable us to utilize our dollars better. We are moving from turfdoms to a willingness not only to see what the other agency has, but to feeling that together we can do a better job. We can decrease overlaps and find some of the gaps that need filling. Some people are not being served by anybody. Single, unemployed men, for example, have a hard time finding services, and that is true particularly of single unemployed middle and upper-class men. We shall also move into some new collaborative patterns between the public, the voluntary, and the business sectors, because we shall need each other more in the present era of restraint.

5. We are moving away from a pattern of leadership of one person being the leader for a number of years or a lifetime. We are moving from the single leader concepts to shared leadership; There are groups and committees where every six months someone else offers to be the chairperson. It works well. For instance, there is a volunteer centre which has three co-presidents. They divide the chairing of meetings. They may all be present or not, but they take turns with the leadership responsibilities. They manage the business well, and the Executive Director finds it an interesting and challenging pattern. We certainly see the emergence of new patterns of leadership in the corporate workplace as well as in the volunteer workplace.
6. Lastly, we are moving from very little explicit concern about the quality of volunteer work life to great concern about the quality of volunteer work life. There will be written agreements or contracts between the volunteer and the agency, spelling out hours, training, insurance, meetings, supervision, support systems, etc. There will need to be consideration of enabling funds for parking or mileage, luncheons, training fees, baby sitters, and others. This is not payment for service, but rather money that enables people to volunteer. We do

believe in equal opportunity to volunteer. In an era of restraint many people will need this kind of financial assistance, or assistance in kind. Enabling fund development must be analyzed and developed for economically poor people, and for people who are on a limited budget. Also, the concern about the quality of volunteer work life requires developing written volunteer personnel policies. Here we can take the advice from the literature on humanizing the corporate workplace, such as W. Ouchi's book THEORY Z.¹

So, now why is volunteering turned upside down? Because the rest of the world is changing rapidly, and the volunteer world is a part of those dynamics. Volunteers are no longer only middle-aged, middle-class, white ladies, and people who are economically able to volunteer. Volunteers include men and women, the young and the older, from all religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and lifestyles. In some instances we are boxed in in a variety of ways. For example there are still many well defined hierarchies in the volunteer world. By and large there are the right names on the left side of the stationery for members of the board. The visibility of volunteers is via the decision makers, yet often the most important persons are those who are giving the direct service, such as counselling, transporting, or reading to the blind. We often think that we, in order to give the person the opportunity to volunteer, also have the right to require them to take training, and not only to require them to take training, but do it at a specific time and place also. Part of the upsidownness is that we shall have to develop portable training at different times of the day and week. For example, there are 24-hour crisis lines which are a fairly recent development. Now people can volunteer at night, and over weekends, but some professionals have to be available to them. We are developing twenty-four hour cities, and volunteer opportunities and volunteer training will have to be available around the clock in many communities.

¹Ouchi, William, Theory Z, How American Business Can Meet the Japanese challenge, Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Reading, Mass., 1981.

In our upside down world more people are available to volunteer than ever before. We need to develop skills to tap into the resources of new populations. We must learn how to work with people who are different from us. There are newcomers to our shores, single men and women, handicapped persons, the very young and the very much older persons whom we can recruit if we develop ways to transport them, and to turn them on to exciting volunteer opportunities. For instance, there is the Geri-Teen Project, in which highschool teenagers provide the wheels, the transportation, for older citizens to do volunteer service. While driving they talk about the history of the town, and they do all kinds of interesting things when they get together. The cars are provided by a local car agency that encourages the young people to use the demonstrator models, and the Red Cross trains them to drive safely. This is a real collaborative model. There will also be new roles for volunteers, and new jobs. For instance in one youth group agency, adult youth group leaders were not available for weekly meetings September through June. So neighbourhood resources committees were developed. These committees were made up of adults who were interested in helping the young people in the organization once in awhile, but not every week. So, a schedule was worked out; somebody coordinated it, and a different adult was available every week for each of the youth groups in the neighbourhood, and it was found valuable for youth to have a variety of adult role models. The neighbourhood resources committee thus provided the adult leadership for the youth groups on a year around basis.

Kinds of Volunteers

There are or will be a wide variety of volunteer jobs and categories in addition to administrative and direct service volunteers.

1. The connector volunteer is the person whose major job is to connect potential clients with human service providers. We have directories of services in most communities, but often special orientation and education is needed to understand the directories. Some agencies are offering volunteers the opportunity to be the connectors to potential customers, clients, patients, members, and connecting them with the providers of the service.
2. Research volunteers are people who help with all kinds of community research in relation to needs and resources.
3. Cause or social action volunteers go and plead a cause, whether it is to provide treatment for parents who have abused their children, or to keep a rape centre going that has been defunded or underfunded. They may collect money or people to help the Heart Association or the Cancer Society. There are many people who are cause oriented and want to be involved in the action end of their causes.

Challenges to Meet Human Needs

What are the challenges? To meet human needs through volunteer opportunities, including transitioning needs, and the need to use one's skills and resources. This means that somebody has to take the trouble to find out what the potential volunteer's interests are beyond those that are already known. There is also the need to work for causes, or to further a cause in a small or large way; the need for creativity, may be the creativity of helping people uncork their potential, may be the creativity of flower arranging. People are creative in a variety of ways. There is also the need to be part of "we" rather than being a lonely I. Human beings are looking for humane human relationships. There is the need to give of oneself, of one's talents, or one's time, of one's caring.

We also need to have fun! We make such a chore out of life, and life does not need to be a series of chores. Volunteering might be the place where one can have more fun than anywhere else. Another need is to help make decisions and solve problems, and this is very important. Most of us need to be involved in those decisions and in the solving of those problems that affect us. Just think of how many boards make decisions for people without consulting them, and then they expect them to vote "yes", because the decisions are "good for them". The need to feel powerful or influential is also important, together with the need to make a difference somehow someplace.

Good, creative volunteer jobs can meet some of these needs in elegant, satisfying ways.

Possible Action Steps - Right Side Up!

What are some action steps we can take? We can review how and where volunteer energy is being tapped right now. We could brainstorm all the ways in which we could utilize volunteer energy to deliver our services in better, more humane, and perhaps in bigger ways. We could develop personal ways to recognize people's contributions. We could develop community-wide skill banks or human resource banks headquartered in volunteer centres. We could study our demography and make sure we are tapping into all of our populations in all sectors of our geographic community: culture, religion, recreation, education, health, business, social control, welfare, unions, politics, etc. We could look into developing written humane volunteer personnel policies, and get agencies and other employers to count volunteer experiences as part of the qualifications required for further education or jobs. Application blanks could reflect this interest, and give appropriate credit. We could design more participative and fun meetings and training events, and help people write their own job descriptions, instead

of handing them to people. Job descriptions need to be more realistic and dynamic with more ongoing, reciprocal feedback evaluation, review, and redesigning built in. At some meetings of professional people volunteers would have a great deal to offer, because they would look at the situation from their point of view.

We could develop more volunteer jobs to extend and humanize our services.

Some Guiding Concepts

We have the opportunity

- to involve rather than isolate
- to welcome difference rather than look for similarity of performance
- to act rather than re-act
- to celebrate steps of movement rather than worry about the gap between where we are and where we want to be
- to reward people when they have some success, small or large
- to plan rather than wing it
- to create rather than to depend only on the ways we have always done it - known as precedent management
- to understand resistance and apathy as a challenge rather than an insurmountable problem
- to be excited and puzzled, rather than concerned, depressed and overwhelmed.

Happier are we who are willing to dream dreams, and willing to take actions to make these dreams come true, and that is the springboard for the world turned upsidedown. We can turn it any way we want to, if we have the **will** to do so and the wit to act.

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