

ABSTRACT

Recently a group of volunteer administrators and experts in the field gathered with Ivan Scheier, the internationally-known author, trainer, and mentor who has contributed to the development of our profession for decades. The event was a Challenge Think Tank for a thoughtful "Reconsideration of Volunteerism." For two days the group was challenged to think beyond the micro and macro levels of our work and wrestle with some philosophical issues and assumptions. What follows is thinking that provoked significant "ah-ha's" for many members of the group, altering some of our perceptions of volunteerism today and our roles as leaders and managers.

Keeping Our Eyes on the Mountain Top

Katherine Noyes Campbell

The discussion began with a story from a member of the group who shared an experience she had while working in Mongolia one summer:

The countryside was uninhabited, a sea of green grass about knee high. In the background, between us and our final destination, were majestic mountains jutting high into the sky. The driver seemed to know which of the many paths to take—not "roads" really, just small paths through the fields. Sometimes there were twenty or thirty of them in a tangle like a pile of pretzels. Always the driver seemed confident. Finally I asked, in a hesitant voice so as not to challenge or question his expertise, "How do you know what path to take?" He laughed and replied, "I just keep my eyes on the mountains, and I know I'll get there."

What is our "mountain," our unmoving landmark, reference point, and spiritual guide? Perhaps, for us as volunteer administrators, the mountain consists of the values that we hold to be true, that capture the essence of our commitment to volunteerism. Consider the following val-

ues that are at the core of everything we do:

- *Everyone has the capacity to contribute, to give.* Our society often designates certain groups as primarily receivers of service rather than providers of service. But volunteering offers a way for every individual to become a resource to someone else. Youngsters, oldsters, those with disabilities, those with limited economic resources—all are capable of giving something that enhances their community. From this perspective human resources are theoretically infinite.

- *Citizen participation is critical to a democratic society.* It challenges the status quo, experiments with new ideas, holds political leaders accountable. Without it, we become stagnant, complacent, and divested of our ability to influence our future.

- *There is value in unpaid work.* In the paid world some jobs are regarded as worth more than others as reflected in varying salary levels. However, we believe that money is not the only measure of the value of work. In the world of volunteerism there are those who are willing and able to perform very important tasks with little or no financial compensation. Firefighting, teaching someone to read, crisis intervention—all are regarded

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as extremely valuable types of activity even when they are done by unsalaried individuals. The paycheck or lack thereof is irrelevant.

• *There are some things that volunteers can do better than paid workers.* We often say there is no task being done by a salaried worker that a volunteer can't do (given the appropriate credentials, training, authority, etc.) But what about the reverse statement: Is there any task that volunteers do that staff can't do? Are there some instances where volunteers actually are more effective? Mentally ill individuals and people in prisons and jails often can connect better with someone they see as a peer, not a "professional." Fund raising and mentoring come to mind as two additional examples where actually it may be preferable they be done by non-salaried individuals.

• *Volunteerism is universal.* By that we mean two things: First, there is no limit to *who* can volunteer; and second, there is no limit to *how* volunteering can be applied.

• *Volunteerism has a duality of impact.* When we volunteer, we benefit ourselves and others at the same time. We often hear this reflected by volunteer statements such as, "I get back so much more than I give." There is also value in building capacity for change within the community. As volunteers learn and apply skills, the community becomes more valued which, in turn, leads to more investment of time and energy to it by others. This transformational potential is significant and offers a very powerful argument for the value of volunteerism to our society.

These statements represent our beliefs—the philosophical base for why we do what we do, and why we strive so hard to convey the value and power of volunteerism. If this is our "mountain top" in the distance, the goal we seek to attain, where does our profession fit in?

Imagine for a moment that there are no volunteer coordinators/managers/administrators on this planet. Volunteerism would most likely still happen starting

with single acts of leadership. Individuals would still take voluntary actions to solve problems and eventually begin to mobilize their neighbors to get involved as well. Over time, in order for these groups to sustain their volunteer activities and have a significant impact, new leaders would emerge. Leadership is what ultimately makes volunteerism happen and continue happening. We have seen this repeatedly throughout history. But leadership is not embodied primarily in a position or title, and the same people don't have to be leaders all the time. Leadership is action. It is demonstrated through skills and attitudes in a particular time and place—the role model who sets the pace, the charisma that inspires, the organizer who offers a process for getting things done.

If we truly wish to help our fellow citizens experience the mountain—defined as the power and value of volunteerism—perhaps we need to become less fixed on our titles as "managers" and "administrators" and increase our skills as coaches and guides. Instead of standing on top of the mountain and directing newcomers to the field who are trying to make the climb, perhaps we should position ourselves in the valley and all along the trails, cultivating leadership skills in others so they have the vision and strength for their journey to the summit. We can help people believe they have the ability to "fix" what needs fixing in their communities. We can help people let go of "myth-conceptions"—the mythical stereotypes about what volunteers can and can't do that limit action. We can be conservators of the unique values listed above, articulating them so that our organizations and institutions keep them in sight.

By assuming a greater "coaching" role, we empower many citizens to become leaders who, in turn, strengthen the fabric of volunteerism wherever they go rather than making them dependent on our position as "volunteer administrator." The intrinsic elements of service to others do not change no matter what words we

use (volunteering, community service, etc.), no matter what we call ourselves (manager, coordinator, director, administrator, etc.), no matter how we are compensated, and no matter who we are. Embracing this philosophy means letting go of the notion that there is only one way to operate, one way to climb the mountain, one path to follow. This is a somewhat scary thought since we have invested almost half a century defining one path known as "volunteer management." But the reality of today's world is that flexibility, creativity, and diversity are essential for survival. The values of volunteerism

(the mountain) don't change, but the paths and climbing tools can (and must). Isn't it time we added some new tools to our backpack, came down into the valley, and looked around for hikers in distress who need some guidance? There are many trails worth exploring, and we need not fear we will get lost as long as we keep our eyes on the mountain top.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you have discovered new "climbing tools" that are helping others reach the mountain, please share them with *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*.