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Missed Opportunities for Good Help

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Consider: A businessman contacts your office and, completely unsolicited, offers you a donation of \$10,000. Imagine your reaction. Perhaps it would be some variation of dancing around yelling, "manna from heaven!"

Now picture a slightly different scenario: The same businessman contacts your office, unsolicited, and explains that he has taken early retirement and hopes to become a volunteer with a worthwhile organization. He has a lifetime of proven business success and wants to contribute a minimum of two days a week of his time. What's your reaction now?

During the last few months there have been three interesting cases two such prospective volunteers and to a younger man (more on him in a moment) who asked for help in finding meaningful voluntary work to do.

Their experiences are a concern because what they encountered happens every day to people who do not fit the mold of supposedly "traditional" volunteers.

Neither of the retired people (who don't know each other) have yet found a volunteer placement that suits them. The problem is that they can't seem to find an agency willing to create a position to tap their skills. Even worse, they have yet to feel welcomed or appreciated for their offer of contributed time.

The Profiles

These men are 55 to 65 years old, college educated, with a wealth of management experience. They also have been financial donors to a range of community organizations over the years.

To be truthful, neither is particularly well-informed about the realities of nonprofit life nor about the issues and problems of the clientele of most human service agencies. They may believe that nonprofits are generally poorly managed by well meaning novices. In other words, to put these men to work effectively as volunteers will require the right balance of respect and training. But it would seem that the rewards would be worth the effort because these volunteers will probably stick to their commitment.

Independently, the pair have experienced frustration, dismissal, and rejection from a combined total of 10 organizations so far. Their first challenge is getting in the door. When they call an agency and explain what they want to do, they are often referred to the executive director's office – even when there is a director of volunteers. This is because receptionists sense that the applicants are different from "ordinary" volunteer candidates.

So the executive takes the call, but is at a loss as to how to respond. Does the gentleman mean that he wants to be considered for the board? No? Well, now, we'll have to think about what we might be able to do with you. Can we call you back? Several have not.

Most organizations are unprepared for the unexpected offer of help, particularly if the prospective volunteer is highly skilled. Such offers are even met with an unspoken level of suspicion about possible hidden motives: "If you're who you say you are, why do you want to give us this time when you could be doing other things?"

As illogical as this reasoning may be, it results in the dismissal of valuable resources. The technical assistance, consultation, or project management that volunteers such as my friends can provide would truly not be affordable to most nonprofits, yet the effort required to make such a placement work seems insurmountable to many. It may even seem a bit threatening.

This is not to imply that a nonprofit needs to accept any and all offers of assistance, nor that it is always worth the time and effort to work with people inexperienced in your field.

But is there not great potential in being offered the services of someone with a different perspective, a record of achievement, and substantial free time?

Here are a just a few creative ways that the men might be put to work productively - while they independently learn more about the agency:

- Design and possibly run surveys of many types: client satisfaction; public image; donor interests.
- Compare past fundraising efforts and analyze/project the factors that lead to more success.
- Provide one-to-one "counseling" to middle managers on questions of supervision and personnel policies.
- Research local economic and demographic data to alert the agency to possible trends that will affect it.
- Be the coordinator for a specific project that requires staff input but generates administrative work – such as scheduling, monitoring, and reporting.

Such assignments are not "make work." Ideally, they are projects that have long been on someone's back burner "wish list." Unexpected volunteer expertise is like a "designated gift" that gives you the opportunity to move forward on plans that no one else has the time or perhaps the talent to do right now.

Yet another twist on the theme of missed opportunities is demonstrated by the experience of another potential volunteer who has a Ph.D and has been working in research labs for more than a decade. He just decided that he misses human interaction and is considering medical school.

But first he wanted to do a reality test. He sought suggestions as to how he might find some volunteer work in a medically related setting that would give him contact with patients and the chance to observe doctors at work.

Almost every hospital has a pre-med type of volunteer placement. It was suggested that he call the directors of volunteer services at a few hospitals and see what they could offer. It didn't work out as expected. The problem seems to be that medical centers expect such calls from young students. A man in his 30s didn't fit that description.

The good news is that he found a satisfying placement with an AIDS clinic.

Here are some interesting excerpts from the e-mail he sent describing the training required by the two settings:

These were a study in contrasts. The AIDS training lasted 15 hours and was very well done. It included units on science, legal issues, counseling, coping with loss, diversity awareness...facilitated by experts...highly interactive...we were asked to evaluate each unit.

The hospital volunteer orientation lasted only two hours but it almost felt longer than the 15-hour training. It consisted of listening to the head of the hospital volunteer program talking in what I considered to be a condescending manner. I felt that the necessary information could have easily been conveyed in about a half hour. She must have spent 20-30 minutes discussing what to wear. The scary part is that when I was calling different hospitals, they all said they had a "two-hour orientation program."

The hospitals lost a great volunteer because they could not adapt to his special circumstances despite having patient and staff needs that he could have addressed in the right assignment.

How clear are you on your organization's capability to respond to unusually qualified volunteer applicants? It does take planning and some staff training to be open to a more challenging type of volunteer. But consider another potential consequence of turning such people away: how likely will they be to give money to an agency that is disinterested in anything but their checkbooks?

So here's an even more interesting question: when was the last time you actively sought people to contribute sophisticated expertise? If you only look for cash, you may well be missing the boat.

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