

# As I See It

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## Don't Forget the People

By Nora Silver



Life's most persistent and urgent question is, "What are you doing for others?"

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

**I**t all starts with the people. Organizations—simply put—are groups of people who have come together over a common cause. And in community agencies, our cause is generally providing a service to people through the

power of (largely) unpaid people called volunteers.

What we are about is people helping people.

So—when we ask questions about volunteerism, let's start with remembering who volunteers are—they are people, first.

### The Questions

#### 1. Motivation

"How can we motivate people to volunteer?" After a Ph.D. in psychology (clinical and organizational), a license in counseling, and 21 years of experience in education and human services, I have learned—and am convinced—that people do not motivate other people. Rather, people motivate themselves. And in volunteerism, we are fortunate, for people are motivated. Just listen to what they're telling us:

■ Seventy-five out of 100 adults in this country think that people *should* volunteer to help others. (INDEPENDENT SECTOR, 1988)

■ Fifty-four out of 100 of them already do so! (INDEPENDENT SECTOR, 1990)

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- More people volunteer than vote!
- Eighty-seven percent of those people who reported being asked to volunteer last year, did volunteer. (INDEPENDENT SECTOR, 1990)

What we have here is not a problem of motivation, but rather a challenge to our organizations to respond to an expressed interest in volunteering. Our job is to help people with "how-to" rather than "if" or "whether-to" volunteer. We've already gotten our first "yes!" Our real challenge lies in involving and utilizing people well.

#### 2. Getting Volunteers: Recruitment

"How do we go about recruiting volunteers?" First, by knowing who they are. I'd like to suggest that everyone is a potential volunteer. Thus, we need to know, "Who is everyone?" And luckily we have some answers, so let's look at what you need to know about today's volunteers:

■ Roughly half of volunteers are women, and half are men (INDEPENDENT SECTOR, 1990). So, if you're having trouble getting men, it's not because they're not volunteering.

■ Most of us (volunteering or not) are working (INDEPENDENT SECTOR, 1990 and U.S. Census, 1990). Have you expanded your evening and weekend volunteer opportunities?

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- Our demographics are shifting, with major trends including:

—The graying of America, with the fastest-growing age groups including people 85+, those 75-84, and those 25-44 (commonly known as baby boomers)—but don't forget to get ready for the "baby boomlet" of those under 5 years old (U.S. Census, 1990).

—Our growing multicultural diversity, with the fastest-growing ethnic groups (as a result of higher birth and immigration rates): a diverse group of peoples categorized as "Asian-American/Pacific Islanders," ranging from long-time American citizens to newly immigrated people from different countries, speaking different languages and observing different customs. Did you know, for instance, that the largest-growing Asian sub-group in the U.S. between 1980-1990 was the Hmong peoples from Laos (U.S. Census, 1990). Also, those "of Hispanic origin"—another group of persons from different countries of origin, and most notably between 1980-1990, immigrating from Latin American countries other than Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico (U.S. Census, 1990). Finally, although not the fastest-growing ethnic groups, the African-American and Native American communities continue to grow at rates higher than those of the Caucasian population.

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# As I See It

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—Our diverse households, shifting from the “traditional” household of working father, at-home mother, and children (now comprising only 7% of households), to increasing numbers of single people living alone, groups of non-family members living together (28% of households; United Way of America, 1987), multi-generational or extended-family member households (particularly in Asian-American/Pacific Islander, Latino and Native American communities), and single-parents (usually mothers) with children.

—Growing discrepancy between the rich and the poor, with the gap between upper-income and lower-income families greater than at any time since 1947, the year in which the Census Bureau began collecting this information (*Facts and Trends 1987*), with the wealthiest and the poorest segments of our population growing more rapidly than the shrinking middle-income groups.

And we need to listen to what people are telling us about how they want to volunteer:

- More short-term volunteering (look at special events, time-limited tasks, people sharing traditionally “individual” volunteer jobs, fundraising opportunities, special projects)
- More volunteer opportunities on evenings and weekends (and not necessarily at the agency’s central office, but perhaps at the volunteer’s home, place of work or out “in the field”)
- More volunteering for causes than for organizations (this may involve your organization promoting what it does more than who it is)
- More group volunteering such as families, work groups, church/religious groups, school groups, neighborhood groups, professional association/civic/community groups, specific ethnic/cultural groups

Who people are, and what they are telling us, must begin to guide our volunteer recruitment. Take, for instance, the fact that there are increasing numbers of people living alone. We may want to develop more opportunities for socialization for these volunteers as an important means to recruit and address the needs of single people volunteering. Or consider the aging of our population. We may do well to start thinking more creatively about interesting volunteering opportunities for those 75 years and older—possibly group opportunities on site at apartment buildings or senior centers or churches—and including appropriate support services such as lunch or reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses. The important thing is to *play with the data* and learn to apply it to your volunteer situation at your particular agency.

### 3. Keeping Volunteers: Retention

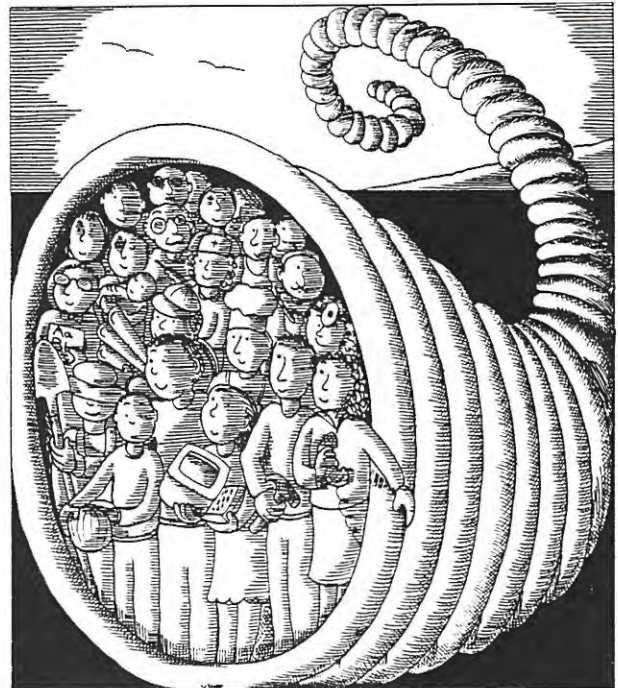
“Why do we have trouble keeping volunteers?” I believe that we are able to retain volunteers to the extent that we succeed in engaging and involving them on three different levels: the task, the people, the organization.

- The task. Volunteers report continuing to volunteer for two main reasons: wanting to do something useful (60%) and

enjoying the work/feeling needed (35%; INDEPENDENT SECTOR, 1990).

The first element of retention, then, may be that the volunteer finds the volunteer job itself to be useful, necessary and enjoyable. (What might this mean for your request to have someone come in regularly to file or do “pick-up” work every Tuesday from 9-5?) Fortunately, there is much good information in the field about job design and the elements of good volunteer jobs to help us with job development.

We must also remember, however, that the job can only be as effective as the match between the job tasks and the needs, skills and interests of the person doing it. Remember to match your volunteer opportunities with the *people* you want to do them. (You may be fortunate to have a Volunteer Center in your community to help with this task.)



- The people. One of the main reasons that any of us stays or leaves a group or organization is because of our relationships with the other people in them. Particularly in volunteering and community service organizations, we like to feel that we are helping *people*, and doing so in conjunction with other people. There is an ethos of “the team,” of being “one of the good guys,” “part of the [organization] family,” “giving back to the community” that influences us to expect to enjoy not just the job but also the people with whom we work. For ultimately, people volunteer to *feel good* as people, to *reach out* to others, and to *connect* as people.

- The organization. Volunteers and volunteer programs are at the heart of community agencies. Neither exists without the other. In the field of volunteer management, we must begin to recognize that larger organizational issues directly impact our ability to retain volunteers. We must learn to understand how these organizational aids and barriers work to include/exclude and utilize/dismiss our volunteers, and to learn to recognize these particular issues at work in our agencies. For the sake of our volunteer programs and our organizations, and for the sake of the people whom we have recruited to volunteer, we must become more skilled at working with these key

organizational issues that influence our volunteer retention:

- Our ability to adapt to change
- The openness of our organizational boundaries
- The inclusiveness of our agency community
- Our organization's response to diversity—of people and opinions
- The issue of gender: men and women
- Our ability to balance "the professional" and "the personal"
- Our organizational maturity or developmental stage, and
- Our organizational culture

Not just our volunteer retention, but even our very organizational survival may depend upon our ability to retain the vitality of our volunteer involvement in our community agencies.

## The Answers: For the People Who Work With People

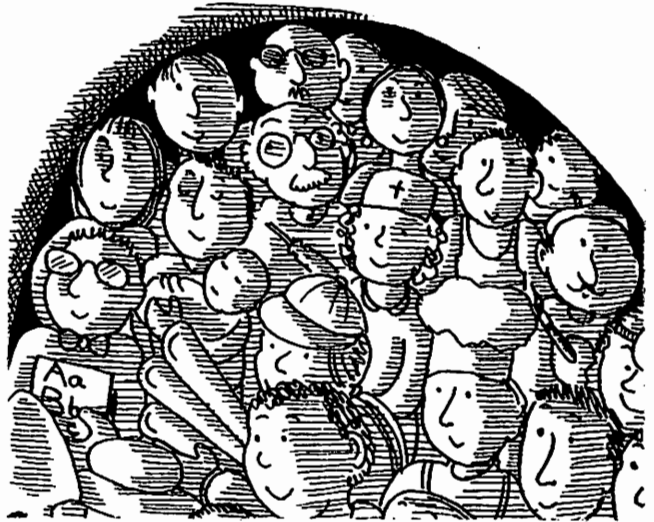
A critical challenge for people working with volunteers is to keep current about people. The preceding information, for instance, is good for now, but it will not work forever. Change is as foreseeable as death and taxes. But one advantage of living in this quick-paced information/communication age is that we do have access to accurate and up-to-date information.

If I have learned anything at all in this field of working with people as volunteers, it is that no one way works for everyone, and that no one way works everywhere and every time. And I have learned that my best source of information about how to adapt—no matter to whom, where and when—is to keep current with information, and that the best information is from and about people. So, if I may leave you with three suggestions, they are as follows:

1. Devour information about demographics and trends. Right now we are especially fortunate—newspapers and magazines are publishing 1990 census data with gradually more cross-cuts and analyses of people and demographics. Read books (such as *Megatrends 2000* by Naisbett and Aburdene) and articles (such as the ones about the shrinking middle class in *Newsweek* or volunteer management in this journal) covering trends and issues. Read about developmental issues related to people, such as about adult stages of development in *Passages* (Gail Sheehy), or gender-related issues in *Necessary Losses* (Judith Viorst) or *Iron John* (Robert Bly). Read information from other fields, such as advertising, economics and the natural sciences. Your volunteers come from these fields, and discoveries in one field are often applications of knowledge learned from another discipline. Become more aware of customs in different cultures, and at the same time, treat yourself: Read a novel, such as *The Joy Luck Club* (Amy Tan) or *Jasmine* (Bharati Mukherjee).

Play with that information. Practice applying what you learn about people (people now and projections about people in the future) to what might interest them, recruit them and retain them as volunteers.

2. Get to know your constituents, and remember that everyone is a potential volunteer. Get out there among people, and pay attention. Look, watch and listen. Ride the buses, sit in a park, go to a ball game, hang out with kids, spend a day in a courtroom, help out at a senior center, go to a supermarket in the middle of the day and in the middle of the night, visit a church or a synagogue or a mosque. Learn from the people



around you. Consider everybody potential volunteers of yours, with something to teach you about who they are, what's important to them, how they like to do things. Become a lifelong student of people. Remember that *people* are your constituents.

3. When you don't know, ask the people. No matter how much you know now, or how much you learn in the future, you will never know it all. If you're like me, you may be discovering with age (and two teenagers at home!) how little you know. But, fortunately (or just in time!), I learned an invaluable lesson in this field: People volunteer not only to do hands-on tasks, but also to share information, viewpoints and suggestions. So, when you don't know, find people who do, and ask them for help.

Do what you already do best—ask people to volunteer. Ask them to share their information, to help you problem-solve or plan. Discuss your questions with your colleagues—call them, meet with them, and *listen* to their responses. Attend meetings of directors of volunteers, conferences on volunteer management, and workshops on problem-solving or group dynamics.

And don't forget to ask your volunteers, when you want to know something about the volunteer experience or program in your agency. Also, ask potential volunteers whom you would like to recruit—to help you learn, understand, plan a recruitment strategy, or undertake outreach to a community to which they have some access or affinity.

And always remember to start with the people. People are our best sources of information about volunteering. For, after all, volunteers—and people who work with them—are people first.

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