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Lessening Social Exclusion through Volunteering

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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I just returned from a week's stay in London. The National Centre for Volunteering there has been undergoing many changes, both in leadership and mission. One "internal memorandum" written by staff members to stimulate discussion is entitled: "Volunteers in the Twenty-first Century: How Different?" I was impressed with this document and obtained permission to share an excerpt with you:

"The UK, along with most European countries, has seen accelerated trends towards multi-cultural living, and progressive weakening of the traditional 'national moral values' previously promoted by governmental and professional elites as appropriate standards for all citizens. Marriage will become a minority status, bringing big changes in child care and tax/benefit regimes...The proportion of the UK population with cultural roots traceable to other countries will rise from the 1991 level of five per cent to something much more substantial, reinforcing issues of 'integration' and 'difference.'"

"The experience of the USA seems an obvious precedent and, if current emphases on market freedom and restriction of state help to the poor continue, we may be heading for the American 'urban stress' syndrome. Already there is a noticeable trend of enquiries about volunteering at the Centre from people living in high-stress areas of London...who suffer from pressures towards 'social exclusion' and want to do something about it. This represents a cultural shift from the twentieth century pattern whereby most volunteers, whatever their race or faith, were likely to come from relatively secure home situations, and wanted to 'give something back' in thanks for their good fortune."

This perspective challenges us to consider what the role of volunteering is for poor people, particularly those we sometimes speak of as "the disenfranchised." By and large, our traditional organizations see this part of the population as people to be served, not necessarily as people interested in activism. In fact, the common wisdom is that people who are "have nots" will not volunteer. So, in circular fashion, we rarely ask them to.

It is this issue that separates those who identify themselves as "volunteer program managers" from those who see themselves as "neighborhood organizers." The question for me is: Why should activism

and self-help be separated from support and service? One answer, of course, is rocking the boat. Or, more accurately, not rocking the boat. Volunteer programs are envisioned as “helping,” not instigating. Why?

Consider some possible scenarios to empower the people usually seen as “clients”:

- Recruit past clients specifically to advise the organization on various issues (like an alumni board). This would reinforce past help while building the self-esteem of the advisors and giving the organization access to what might be the most important set of opinions available. Note: even if your organization as a whole does not want such input, what is stopping you from forming such an advisory group for the volunteer program itself?
- Recruit older siblings of at-risk youngsters to be after-school group leaders and mentors. Instead of “outside” volunteers, such an approach would build neighborhood strength and encourage leadership qualities in the teenagers. Many teens feel caught between stressed parents and straying younger siblings, without a viable way to do something about what they see.
- Train teenagers to mentor or tutor their parents. In immigrant homes, this has always occurred naturally, particularly with English-language skills. But a more formal recruitment and training approach could strengthen families. The current interest in “family literacy” programs is one excellent example of how this can work.
- Focus on micro-enterprise development, recruiting volunteers who can work in neighborhoods to form revenue-generating businesses and cooperatives. While not the “traditional” form of volunteer activity, we ought to ask why not? If we all agree poor people need money, why not work toward that end? It may have gotten VISTA into political hot water in the 1960s, but I still don’t see anything wrong with all those craft-selling enterprises volunteers helped to create in Appalachia.

The point here is that we in volunteer leadership have to refocus our energies on involving the people we “serve” as part of their own solution. Or, as the English Centre on Volunteering paper said, tapping the desire to “do something about” an unsatisfactory situation. Historically, this is how change happens. Will we be facilitators of change or obstacles in its path?

I am reminded of the various Gallup Poll studies that provided data on the educational level of volunteers, apparently showing that the more education a person receives, the more likely s/he is to volunteer. Many interpret this data as meaning “education teaches the value of service” or some such conclusion. I, on the other hand, find myself wondering if the true reason for the data is that organization staff are most comfortable with volunteers who are as similar to themselves as possible. Given the general employee/volunteer tension issues that occur even when college graduates are

recruited to work alongside other college graduates, consider the possible conflicts if an organization truly recruited blue collar workers or unskilled laborers.

What do you think? What would be the attitude of your organization if you began to facilitate self-help among your target client population? Do you already try to do this? Please share what you do!

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Submitted by Alyson Woloshyn, Youth In Motion - Kitchener Parks and Rec, Ontario, Canada

I think the idea of empowering and using the people "we serve" in the development of the program is ideal. A volunteer may volunteer for many reasons, but as leaders we are there because we feel we are making a difference to the people we are serving. If we don't feel this commitment we can't do our job effectively. Using the talents, skills and ideas of those you are directly working with, is such a simple idea that has been over looked for too long. I think it's an untapped resource that we should now try to use to the best of our ability.

Submitted by Julie Gillis, Austin State Hospital Community Relations, Austin, TX

Involving clients in their own volunteer service organization, empowering the people we serve and encouraging them to serve themselves as part of their own solution is taking service organizations to the next level of community building organizations. This brings with it unique challenges. For one, the organization must be willing at a certain point to back away from the community it has helped to build and nurture. The clients cease to become clients; they become community members, retrained in ways of taking care of their community.

Another challenge is definitely that of "sameness" vs "differentness". It is no longer enough to say "we" know what is best for "them" or even, "they" know better than "we" what is right for their community. We (meaning all of us-staff, volunteers and client) can bring unique problems and solutions to the table. It is through a real commitment to community, a dedication to sticking through conflict, and a true desire to challenge all our values, ideals and perceptions of who we are that will help us involve the people we serve in changing their own lives (and ours) for the better.

Easy enough to say, and I think very hard to do. I stretch into different volunteer/work situations and very often find myself shying away merely from the cultural differences. I go back and forth believing in the principals and struggling with my own capacity for differentness. I think most of us are aware of that internal struggle and as long as we continue to try and bridge the gap, I think we'll eventually get there.

Submitted by Peter Timusk, Student of MVS, Ontario, Canada

Well any memo that starts "most European countries" is a bit exclusive by itself. I started to write about matching volunteers in 1995, and came to the conclusion that educational background, family and racial background aren't keys in motivation rather these affect area of service chosen by the volunteer. Sometimes directly like myself, a professor's son tutoring math to other disabled individuals, and other times like the other commentator noted using our knowledge on graduation from school to give that back in an area of service that leads us to more skills and more accomplishments perhaps in an understudied area of service. I think generally there are many colors to volunteering and activism, yet still they clearly mean different things, but could be played off one another in a community or one volunteer's career as a volunteer.

Submitted by Helen Lowery, National Service Fellow - CNS, Washington, D.C.

I am a National Service Fellow for the Corporation for National Service 1998/1999. My current research is in exactly the area that you are talking about. I am looking at the inclusion of people with disabilities in National Service (e.g. AmeriCorps/Vista). It is important to the Corporation that AmeriCorps look like the communities they serve. In working with people with disabilities it is important to them to be included. Inclusion means everyone. Why should a person be deprived from the good feelings that are realized from volunteering. I am all for including everyone in volunteer service. It will make for better, safer, more open communities.

Submitted by Jayne Cravens, Virtual Volunteering Project, Austin, Texas

Susan, your comment "I, on the other hand, find myself wondering if the true reason for the data is that organization staff are most comfortable with volunteers who are as similar to themselves as possible" is provocative and probably right on target. I'm astounded when I walk into a group of volunteers for a particular organization and realize that almost no one represents the demographic the organization is serving client-wise. Or that everyone "looks" just like the staff (economic background, education, age, etc.) I'm also astounded when organizations that have helping been under-served populations as a central part of their mission dismiss the idea of involving these folks as volunteers. I would love to read comments from organizations that have a commitment to involving clients as volunteers, particularly what's worked and what hasn't. GREAT TOPIC (again)!

Submitted by Sarah Oliver, Asst. Regional Director, Women in Community Service, Seattle, WA USA

In our work with youth who are in, or recently exited, a job-training and education program, we are really focussing on involvement in community service and service-learning projects. Obviously, the results for the young people have been overwhelming...a sense of empowerment in their communities, new social and vocational skills, real friendships based on shared interests and

activities, a sense of pride in their work, and most importantly, since many of these young people come from extensive backgrounds of welfare-dependency, their first experience of being publicly recognized as a contributor to the greater good of society.

There are challenges as well...youth who think they have nothing to contribute, adults who are uncomfortable working with youth or "allowing" them to take part in decision-making and planning, lack of understanding on all sides when youth and adult cultures collide...what I've found is that careful preparation and pre-training have helped... The most important thing is that the youth (or whatever "client" group) have authentic power to inform, guide, make decisions, and implement projects/programs...tokenism is an easy trap to fall into!

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