

Getting the Most From Volunteering

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"What a man does for others, not what they do for him, gives him immortality."

Daniel Webster

This topic will help participants:

- understand that it is OK to "get" while "giving" to others,
- discover some of the current trends/data regarding volunteers, and
- learn how to consider what they want from volunteer involvement.

Redefining Volunteerism

In 1989, the American Red Cross conducted a comprehensive study of current issues in volunteerism. Among the conclusions in its "Volunteer 2000 Study" was a new definition of volunteers:

"Volunteers are individuals who reach out beyond the confines of their paid employment and of their normal responsibilities to contribute time and service to a not-for-profit cause in the belief that their activity is beneficial to others as well as satisfying to themselves."

This definition contains all the basic elements of what we've always considered volunteerism to be:

- service to something beyond oneself;
- willingness to contribute time and effort without pay; and

- donation of time and effort beyond one's normal responsibilities.

The new definition is much more nonjudgmental, flexible and inclusive than former definitions. It takes into account today's world and the complexities of a changing society.

It broadens the traditional concept by acknowledging that volunteers benefit from their charitable activities--yet it does not pass judgment on their reasons for volunteering. It includes employees who volunteer on company time if the service they provide is not part of their regular job, the loaned executive and "pro bono" services considered as in-kind donations by firms. The definition does not rule out training, stipends, vouchers, or other benefits to assist volunteers to overcome financial barriers or improve their skills.

Who is Volunteering?

The volunteer work force of today is different from that of 20 years ago, according to Marlene Wilson in her book, **You Can Make A Difference**. In 1970, the majority of volunteers were white, middle income housewives who did not work outside the home. To many of these women volunteering was their job. Today, the volunteer work force is as diverse as the population itself. Some traits of today's volunteers are:

- * Two-thirds of today's volunteers work outside the home.
- * Almost as many men volunteer as women (47% of all women volunteer; 45% of all men).
- * Many volunteers are from two-career marriages or are single professionals.
- * Single parents do volunteer
- * Corporate-sponsored volunteer programs are increasing.
- * Many people are willing to volunteer technical and professional skills.
- * High school and college students are contributing many hours to a variety of causes.
- * Minority, self-help, and neighborhood volunteer groups are growing in some communities.
- * More handicapped and home-bound people are given the opportunity to help others.
- * Newly retired blue- and white-collar workers, as well as seniors, are becoming the mainstay in many volunteer efforts.

Look at your community. What is happening? How have volunteer patterns changed during the past 20 years? Cite examples of current volunteer efforts by: youth, seniors, men, handicapped, businesses, others.

Why Volunteer?

"It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

People volunteer for a variety of reasons. *Ask participants about their volunteer experiences. What are they doing and why do they do it?*

The need to be needed and feel useful is a major motivating factor. The Gallup Organization, in a 1987 survey, found that more than half of

those who volunteered, did so because they **wanted to do something useful**. Other major reasons for volunteering given included: **thought they would enjoy the work, a family member or friend would benefit, or for religious reasons.**

Sometimes, reasons for volunteering change as people enter different stages of life. For example, young people might increase their chances of attending the college of their choice. (Some colleges use community service as a criterion for selection and give scholarships exclusively for community service.) Some youths volunteer to experience the joy of service or to have fun with their friends. Others volunteer to improve job prospects, to clarify career interests, or to get to know their community better.

Senior citizens may volunteer for other reasons. *See if those present can identify some of the reasons older folks might volunteer.* Among some of the reasons given by this age group are: to relieve boredom, to continue to feel productive (especially following retirement), to continue to have responsibilities and challenges utilizing management and technical skills, and to work with others and thus continue to feel needed.

Today's volunteer often wants to learn skills in return for volunteer efforts. For example, corporations now actively recruit employees as volunteers and educate them about volunteer service. Many now credit volunteer service in hiring and promoting. Others are initiating job-release programs--allowing the employee to use work time for a volunteer job, or creating opportunities for on-site work.

Continue identifying why people in other special groups might volunteer. You might consider

members of your club, businessmen, young mothers, others.

For all age groups, volunteering can improve health. Research shows that people who volunteer and help others live longer and enjoy their lives more.

Agencies wanting volunteer help have also made some changes. They have taken giant strides toward involving volunteers more efficiently, recognizing their professional contributions, offering more flexible schedules and hours, and stepping up the opportunities for both service and self-fulfillment.

The Right Match for You

"He that does good to another, does good also to himself, not only in the consequences, but in the very act; for the consciousness of well-doing is, in itself ample reward."

Seneca
Ancient Roman Philosopher

Each person is a unique human being. We enter into most new situations with a touch of enthusiasm and anticipation, hope and fear. This is as true for volunteers as it is for those who become employed. Whether we want to volunteer or are recruiting volunteers, we need to be sensitive to the volunteer's needs.

Discuss some of the reasons for volunteering. Think of questions or ways of identifying if the volunteer's needs can be met by the job. Can you think of volunteer opportunities to meet those needs?

- To improve or learn new job skills. Does the job fit your career goals? Will the contacts be helpful? Will growth occur because of the training received and responsibility taken.
- To help other people, perform a civic duty or effect change. Is

the project worthwhile? Do the paid staff care? Will you have the opportunity to see results?

- To meet people. What are your needs? New in the community? Stuck in a solitary job? Want to meet people who are similar or different?
- Just for fun. What do you like that you don't seem to get the time or chance to do? What's missing in your life? What are your fantasies?

Get participants to outline their capabilities.

- * Inventory the expertise acquired through life.
- * Consider the untapped resources that could be harnessed.
- * How much time could be given?

Authorities agree it isn't the amount of time that counts so much as the regularity with which it is given. Many agencies are coming up with flexible schedules and stay open in the evening to accommodate those who work outside the home.

- * Can you volunteer weekends, in the evening or during the day?

Suggest that potential volunteers find out some things about the volunteer job in advance.

For a volunteer's work to be successful, there needs to be a commitment on the part of the agency.

- * Has the agency analyzed the job they want the volunteer to do? Is there a job description? Find out duties, hours, responsibilities.
- * Do they keep records of the work done and the skills acquired?

- * What kind of training, supervision and evaluation will you receive? Is there significant paid staff involvement?
- * Will you have input into the job? What kind of impact will your job have?
- * What is the climate of the agency and the attitudes of the staff who work there?

In Conclusion...

Earl Nightingale, in one of his radio programs, noted: "You may wish for a sense of accomplishment, for the adventure of something new, for a change of pace from the work a day world or for self-expression, or you may simply wish to belong. There is no better way to banish the blues or to counteract the stress of world crises than by engaging in thoughtful work with and for others. The end result is self-fulfillment. ...Volunteering for service of some kind is an immediate cure for loneliness and boredom. It gives richness and meaning to life."

Follow-up Activities

- A. Inventory the agencies/ organizations seeking volunteer help in your community. What benefits do they offer the volunteer? Review brochures, ads or radio messages.

- B. Have a slogan contest. Ask participants to write a slogan for one of the agencies or organizations in your community or with which they work. Challenge them to present volunteering with a new twist. (Examples include: "Volunteer- The Gift That Comes Straight from the Heart." "Show Your Care... Share Your Care...Through _____ " "You May Work for free, But You Won't Work for Nothing!" "Have a Heart, Give a Hand."

- C. Encourage group to assist with a volunteer fair. The fair could serve several purposes: a mall fair might help inform the community of volunteer opportunities; a volunteer fair in a local school might offer youths opportunities to volunteer in order to find out about different careers, learn about their community, etc.

References

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