Theory-to-Practice

Humane or Merely Human: Can Volunteerism Reach the Core Needs of American Society?

Priscilla A. Sissem

Introduction

Historically the United States has prided itself on a spirit of altruistic giving that permeates our society and impregnates our culture. From the earliest days of settlement one can picture people setting up stake on the western frontier. Early settlers navigated the vast expanse in horse-drawn wagons, travelling together in a "wagon train" representative of community. Upon arriving at their destination, settlers arranged their wagons in a row as a symbolic gesture of unity. A mile-long table covered with mounds of food held a place of honor adjacent to this commonly depicted row of wagons. A feast had been prepared in gratitude for each family's help in founding the settlement. From building the barn to planting the corn to educating the children, the message was clear: People help people in America.

Even when farming gave way to industry and communities of European ethnic groups pocketed the city, one can remember the closeness of friends and family. The cup was always full of sugar, awaiting the next neighbor in need. The media carried pictures of charitable women caring for orphaned children or feeding the hungry. Some of these women were called "Sisters of Mercy," some were simply called "sisters," but the charge remained the same: Help people in need.

One of the reasons Americans have given so freely stems from the realization that we have received so freely. We have considered ourselves to be a "blessed" society, rarely worrying about what we will eat or wear or where we will sleep. We have an abundance of material wealth–for the most part–and we have given out of our abundance. We have

Priscilla A. Sissem is an Instructor in the Department of Sociology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

celebrated our heritage and have shared our inheritance. Nonetheless, as society has grown in size, it has grown in complexity, leaving Americans perplexed to know what is truly ours to give. We have become divided, factioned by daily demands vying for our attention. We have been tempted to blame the advent of technology for our increasingly complex society, but complexity has not stopped at technology's threshold. Other social institutions–the family, the economy, the government, and education–all have been altered by the effects of progress. The needs that once were met by one's neighbors, family, church, or other primary reference group have all but disappeared in a maze of new values emphasizing individualism and self-determination. Care for family, friends, and strangers is now relegated to a "system" of human services. Overwhelming societal complexities have stymied even the most astute social policy analysts who struggle to maintain order through bureaucratic controls. Despite attempts to rationalize social change, advocates of chaos theory maintain that social change has accelerated and has become impossible to contain (Iannone, 1995; Kiel, 1994; Mathews, White, & Long, 1999).

Social progression–in particular, our individualism–has changed the American volunteer landscape. Volunteer demographics differ by the number of people who participate in some form of volunteering effort, in the reasons for volunteering, and in the methods employed in volunteering. In this brief overview I will describe some of the trends in volunteering. More importantly, I will reveal a sobering thought: Volunteerism is a study in responsibility. I will attempt, therefore, to assign responsibility to the appropriate party, be it the volunteer, the volunteer administrator, or the American society. By assigning responsibility, I will argue that, for volunteerism to meet its goals successfully, each involved party will need to move beyond the limits of the systematized version of volunteering. Socially current volunteerism must embrace the spontaneity found in the early settlers and couple that ideal with some of the management advances of this emerging age (Apps, 1994).

The "Spirit" of Volunteerism

Having established an ideal of helping and giving, one must turn and face the reality of a progressive, individualistic society and meld that reality with the needs of the people in this new millennium. Despite efforts toward social equality, American citizens continue negotiations in areas where some people flourish, while others merely exist. Be those areas related to economic disparities, interpersonal difficulties, or educa-

tional inequities, people need assistance in negotiating a system that bases giving on rational outcomes (Matthews, 1997). Indeed, the human services is a system, a mode through which our progressive society has reckoned with and met human need (Alter, 1995). However, human service organizations have become so deeply entrenched in the economy and in decision-making politics that they cannot keep pace with social change. Consequently, our society has reacquainted itself with a more contemporary version of giving–the new American volunteer.

Although the idea of volunteerism has been around for centuries, volunteering recently gained position with American people. The institutionalization of AmeriCorps sanctioned volunteer efforts (Gerson, 1997). Americans suddenly became "points of light" in darkness (Romano. 1994) and have been encouraged to accomplish "random acts of kindness" in our daily lives (Alexander, 1991). Yet despite convicting messages, recruiting individuals to work for no tangible reward in a leisure-driven, egocentric society seems as insurmountable a task as the social problems themselves. To fill the volunteer void, recruiting agents must focus on and play to present-day motivating forces.

Rubin and Thorelli (1984) suggest that the decision to volunteer is based in social exchange theory–a system of cost and reward–and may not be as selfless as originally believed. The "new" volunteer expects reciprocity in a fleeting relationship that Rubin and Thorelli argue is "elected by an individual to satisfy social-psychological needs incompletely satisfied by the dominant social roles associated with work, marriage, and family" (p. 224).

The "volunteerism for self-satisfaction" hypothesis surfaces in other writing. D'Braunstein and Ebersole (1992) found personal growth to be behind some volunteer efforts. Alter (1995) describes volunteerism as the entwining of entrepreneurial efforts and citizenship that is built on the foundation of enlightened self-interest. Even in the corporate structure volunteerism is pursued for self-serving reasons: to improve staff morale, provide leadership training, aid in company public relations, increase productivity, and create a healthier organizational climate (Romano, 1994).

The number of people performing some type of volunteer service also suggests a self-serving bias. While Alter (1995) found that over 40% of college freshmen typically perform some type of volunteer service, Kauffman's (1997) figures on older volunteers disagree. He found that the number of volunteers in human services has decreased consistently over the last 15 years, with less than 8.4 million of the 93 million

Americans currently volunteering. Points of Light Foundation statistics further attest to self-interest as motivation for volunteering. Of the 90 million American households, 46% of them have at least one adult performing some volunteer work. This figure seems impressive until one examines the reasons for volunteering. Points of Light statistics show that, of the American population of active volunteers, 95% of the women and 93% of the men performed service activity to "gain personal satisfaction" (Points of Light Foundation, 1999). Undoubtedly, volunteering in the human services can be a tough, thankless experience, an adventure that may be hindered by less-than-altruistic motives for participation. Nonetheless, it appears as though the current "spirit" of volunteerism centers on the volunteer, rather than on a society in need. The old adage may be applicable here: While the spirit is willing, the flesh may be quite weak.

Strategies for Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers

If volunteers offer their services anticipating self-fulfillment, it remains then to discover recruitment methods that address some volunteer expectations. The first "rule" of volunteer recruitment, then, may be to render old methods obsolete (Alexander, 1991). Practically speaking, recruitment and loss are central to the dynamics of volunteerism. McPherson and Rotolo (1996) note that the composition of volunteer groups is dependent on the number of competing groups vying for the same kind of volunteer. "When competition is low, groups will be more likely to recruit and retain members" (p. 200). Volunteer recruiters and supervisors may estimate their volunteer group by the number and type of competing organizations.

Because the present demand for volunteers so greatly exceeds the supply, volunteers' skills often are stretched, subsequently depleting their desire. Recruiters and supervisors can use realistic estimates to their advantage by remaining careful of the limits and realities of volunteering (Eisner, 1997). Eisner pleads a case for sensitivity to the volunteer:

> Volunteer work, if done right, is work, with complexity and consequences. If not done right, it can accomplish nothing, or, worse, it can leave the lonely and suffering even more bereft, and blunt the passion of those willing to serve. (p. 40)

Further documentation attests to the development of realistic and

sensitive expectations toward volunteers. Miller, Powell, and Seltzer (1990) suggest that supervisors and administrators be cognizant of volunteers' schedules, adjusting demands to meet competing obligations. Volunteers also respond when their desire to be challenged is balanced with their present capabilities. Myers (1997) echoes these sentiments and reveals the consequence that occurs when administrators insensitively burden their volunteers:

> Many [volunteers] are disheartened by the fact that responsibilities assigned to them do not jibe with their capabilities and fields of expertise. At times, they are not even given adequate information on what they are supposed to do. The resulting frustrations lead them to abandon volunteer work altogether. (p. 16)

Volunteers may "own" a position when they feel included in the mission, goals, and ultimate purpose of the agency or service. Supervisors may find that they need to model expectations by treating volunteers with kindness (Ernest, 1998), including them as a valuable part of the "team" (Alexander, 1991), and mentoring them to fulfill their leadership potential (Gerson, 1997). Ultimately, the volunteer supervisor becomes the one who initiates humility, servanthood, and a desire to learn. Supervisors need to protect volunteers from internal carelessness, thereby demonstrating responsible and effective service. By assuming responsibility for volunteer development, the supervisor submits to the volunteer's role in the supervisor's professional renewal and in the organization's growth.

Finally, volunteers cannot be expected to perform tasks with efficiency and effectiveness if they have not received adequate training. Myers (1997) discovered that volunteers became frustrated when assignments were not explained, when orientation to organizational policies was insufficient, and when superfluous explanations confused assignments to the extent that volunteers were incapable of completing them. In order to ameliorate frustration, Myers suggests that volunteers be provided the same orientation as would be given to paid staff. Ongoing training can relieve the stress caused by rapid changes inevitably found in human service organizations.

Conclusion

The trends in volunteerism include providing volunteers with meaningful and inclusive work for which they can sacrifice confidently. Ad-

ministrators, recruiters, and trainers can apply some practical, yet quite "human" skills to retaining volunteers. However, both volunteer and supervisor often can easily assume more than their share of responsibility for the helping relationship. While the work is crucial, it must be placed in social context. As Eisner (1997) urges, volunteer work "must be recognized for what it is: often an enormous help, but not often a replacement for the public or private sector responsibility" (p. 42). While supervisors can pacify most personal and situational variables affecting volunteer turnover, some political and social variables may be beyond their control. As Kauffman (1997) states succinctly,

> Volunteerism is not a comprehensive social strategy. Volunteerism individualizes social problems by putting a human face on a statistical mass. But volunteerism only reaches individuals and most often leaves structures untouched. Volunteerism alone cannot ensure that basic human needs are met and economic opportunity is offered to all. Society as a whole, including private and public sectors . . . has a responsibility to work toward equal opportunity. (p. 15)

For the idea of volunteerism to be effective, we must remain mindful that the idea was not created in a vacuum; it is an interaction among volunteers, their administrators, and American society. Humankind instituted volunteerism for humankind. Because it is the product of imperfect human endeavors, volunteerism struggles to attain its civic ideal. Often the very dilemmas that volunteerism has attempted to ameliorate can be exacerbated through insufficient efforts. Nevertheless, the complex needs of American people cannot possibly be met without the voluntary sector. Through contemporary volunteer efforts American society has come "full circle." Ironically, for volunteerism to work in this individualistic, egocentric society, we must all work together.

The American value of giving presents a paradox to the values of personal freedom and self-sufficiency. As Matthews (1997) astutely challenges, "Being charitable means forgoing our own ends and truly sacrificing to do something for another" (p. 24). By volunteering, one risks and experiments with his or her own life, expecting no reciprocation except, perhaps, the fellowship of a well-deserved meal shared on the vast expanse of this era's unsettled frontier.

References

Alexander, G. D. (1991). Working with volunteers: No pain, no gain. *Fund Raising Management, 21*(12), 62-65.

Alter, J. (1995, May 29). What works: We all know the problems. Here are some solutions–drawn from grass-roots programs that make a difference. *Newsweek*, 18-26.

Apps, J. W. (1994*). Leadership for the emerging age: Transforming practice in adult and continuing education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

D'Braunstein, S., & Ebersole, P. (1992). Categories of life meaning for service organization volunteers. *Psychological Reports, 70*, 281-282.

Eisner, J. R. (1997). No paintbrushes, no paint: The realities of volunteer work. *Brookings Review, 15*(4), 39-42.

Ernest, E. H. (1998). Building your volunteer community: Motivate volunteers to help achieve association goals. *Association Management, 50*, 70-72.

Gerson, M. J. (1997, April 28). Do do-gooders do much good? Most volunteers aren't solving core problems. *U.S. News & World Report*, 26-31.

Iannone, R. (1995). Chaos theory and its implications for curriculum and teaching. *Education, 115*(4), 54-61.

Kauffman, R. A. (1997, June 16). Beyond bake sales: Christian volunteerism needs to be directed toward the deepest hurts. *Christianity Today*, 12-15.

Kiel, L. D. (1994). *Managing chaos and complexity in government: A new paradigm for managing change, innovation, and organizational renewal*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mathews, K. M., White, M. C., & Long, R. G. (1999). Why study the complexity sciences in the social sciences? *Human Relations, 52*, 439-452.

Matthews, W. R. (1997). To the least of these. *America, 176*(2), 24-26.

McPherson, J. M., & Rotolo, T. (1996). Testing a dynamic model of social composition: Diversity and change in voluntary groups. *American Sociological Review, 61*, 179-202.

Miller, L. E., Powell, G. N., & Seltzer, J. (1990). Determinants of turnover among volunteers. *Human Relations, 43*, 901-917.

Myers, E. M. (1997). Possible tasks. *Association Management, 49*(8), 16-17.

Points of Light Foundation. (1999, July 29). *Volunteer facts & stats sheet* [Online].http://www.pointsoflight.org./involved/VolunteerFactsStatsSheet001.htm

Romano, C. (1994). Pressed to service: Corporate volunteer programs are a way to serve a business community as well as boost the morale of employee volunteers. *Management Review, 83*(6), 37-39.

Rubin, A., & Thorelli, I. M. (1984). Egoistic motives and longevity of participation by social service volunteers. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 20*, 223-235.