

Volunteerism in the 21st Century

The days of "do more with less" are hitting the non-profit sector rather hard, I am discovering. The continued economic struggles being experienced are making it even more crucial that the money non-profits raise is distributed back to society via mission-supporting activities, and not consumed by staff doing work that volunteers could do.

But, we are facing a challenge: Traditional volunteer support provided by local businesses, in support of *community-based* activities, is dwindling, as the employees of these typically smaller organizations put their energies into their salaried positions. They are less available for committee meetings or committee work. They are less available for phone-a-thons or walks. They are less available to host fundraising events. Bottom line, they are less available.

This availability limitation is further aggravated by the emergent trends associated with the expanded use of Web 2.0 technology, or as it is more commonly known, social media. The generation now graduating from college has matured in a society that is comfortable with pervasive technology, perhaps more comfortable with that than with interpersonal connections.

The above has a profound impact on how traditional charitable work will be accomplished in the 21st century. Today's non-profit organizations relying on volunteerism need to look at their business models and determine how they will adapt to this new world.

Recent Evolution of Volunteerism

The leadership of today's non-profit organizations came of age in the 1950's and 1960's. These were the decades of the single income household, a sense of community, and a value structure that was cured by the shared experiences of World War II and the Korean conflict. During these years, women in particular were encouraged to participate in community activities, such as the PTA, Girl Scout troops, or working in their local churches thrift shop. Men were expected to contribute to their local community by participating in service and fraternal organizations such as the Kiwanis, Masonry, and the Rotary Club. Local businesses viewed it as a good investment in their local community to support participation in these organizations. It was not uncommon to find a local fundraiser for the community hospital being planned and executed by a committee consisting of the wives of a bank director, hardware store owner, practicing physician, and the local newspaper editor. And the men were all too happy to serve on the boards of directors of community institutions.

We saw a shift in this approach to volunteerism in the 1980's and 1990's. The economic structure and demands impacted the ability of would-be community participants to volunteer within the local community. One significant factor that aggravated the situation, and which continues to have a major role, is the globalization and nationalization of industry. Through consolidations, mergers and bankruptcies many local businesses ceased to exist. Most banks are now subsidiaries of national banks that do not have a close relationship to the local community. The philanthropic activities of the large-

box stores that have replaced Main Street stores are often dictated by the policies of some remote corporate headquarters.

Compounding the challenge during these decades was the emergence and standardization of the multiple income family. The adults within a family unit plus any teenage member of the family unit are most likely committed to one or more employers. The hours required by the employer have increased, especially in the past ten years.

Additionally, the past several decades have seen an increase in mobility as families relocate to maintain employment. Or, if they chose not to relocate they might have chosen commuting out of their residential community to employment in some other town. Families no longer identify with a particular community. Rather they identify with a more global community, perhaps a virtual community.

The recent years have also seen an explosion of social media tools, tools that permit interaction between individuals without any face to face or even voice to voice communications. Users of this technology, primarily recent college graduates and younger people have embraced the technology almost to the exclusion of interpersonal relationships. Their need to physically meet, greet, and converse with someone is just not there. They are just as likely to feel a member of a virtual community as they are their local neighborhood.

Volunteerism In the Future

We are now seeing the impacts of these trends on organizations that rely on volunteers. The generation entering the work force defines “community” as “a virtual global community”. They are more likely to embrace volunteerism in support of a cause rather than a local organization. For instance, in a recent conversation with several 2010 college graduates, we discussed their options for community service. They were much more animated in the responses relative to global hunger than they were in the challenges of the local food bank. One of the graduates stated that her ability to raise money locally was limited because her social network was distributed around the globe. She was not constrained in her friendships by geography.

This heightened sense of being part of a global community also means there is sense of global problems to be solved. These big problems attract the media and celebrities; therefore, they are the causes to which potential volunteers naturally gravitate. These are the causes that obtain the media exposure often required to recruit volunteers, to market a cause.

Unfortunately, society, especially in the larger metropolitan areas, seems to have also lost an appreciation for those values honed in the previous decades. The focus on the bottom line has precluded any emphasis on volunteerism as a desirable corporate trait. Certainly, there are large corporations who will support causes that are aligned with their corporate objectives such as environmental matters. However, they tend to show their participation at the national level, not at the local community level where the needs exist.

What Does This Mean?

The successful non-profit organization will acknowledge this evolution in volunteerism and will plan for it. This planning should start with a review of the organizations strategic objectives. Analyzing the community through these objectives should identify those entities whose business objectives could align. These are the entities to which a request for volunteer support could be made. Just as a case statement is formulated for any appeal or campaign a case statement should be developed for the volunteer appeal. That statement should include some insight into the “*what’s in it for me*” question.

Likewise, the successful non-profit will determine how to embrace the new generation. The organization will review its fundraising and volunteer management techniques to ensure they include the approaches to which this new generation will respond. The techniques will include leveraging Facebook, virtual meetings, and other forms of social media. The techniques will not be overly concentrated in face to face meetings, lengthy written reports, or other tools viewed as bureaucratic.

The successful organization will connect with its volunteers and its volunteer providers in a manner which acknowledges the contributions of each and reinforces the mutual benefit of working together within the local community on common causes. A well-performing volunteer recognition program will include a means by which the needs of the volunteer are known and addressed, whether those needs are for public recognition, professional development, increased responsibility or networking access.

Finally, the successful organization will adopt and embrace those business practices that will enable the optimal utilization of available volunteers. The full implementation of project and project portfolio management disciplines supports that goal. Knowing what positions on what project teams or committees are best suited for a particular volunteer, knowing what that particular volunteer values and is skilled in, and knowing the importance of that project relative to the organization’s strategic objectives is crucial to being able to maximize the benefits of that limited resource: an hour of volunteer time.

About the Author

The author of this series, Karen R.J. White, PMP, PMI Fellow, is the founder of Applied Agility. An independent consultant with over 25 years experience assisting organizations manage projects, she has assisted organizations as diverse as Fortune 1000 companies to government agencies to local philanthropies more effectively manage projects, projects ranging from fundraising efforts to technology improvements and business process reengineering. Recognized internationally as a leader in the development and management of volunteer-based projects, Ms. White has spoken on the topics of project management and technology management at numerous conferences. Ms. White is the author of the acclaimed **Agile Project Management: A Mandate for the 21st Century**, (Center for Business Practices, 2009) and a contributing author to the **American Management Association's Project Management Handbook, 2nd Edition**, as well as the 1st edition of the acclaimed **Project Management Maturity Model**.

Ms. White was named a Fellow of the Project Management Institute, from which she also received the Distinguished Contribution Award, in recognition of her contributions to society and the profession of project management, including the development of an international code of conduct for the profession. A former chair of the Institute's Education Foundation and a former member of the Institute's Board of Directors, Ms. White was recently asked to serve again on the Institute's Ethics Review Committee. She is also a member of the Association of Fundraising Professionals and an advocate for the American Cancer Society, in addition to being an active volunteer at the Concord Hospital Payson Center for Cancer Care.

About Applied Agility

Applied Agility is a NH-based consulting company established to assist community-based non-profits and small businesses achieve their strategic objectives with efficiency and agility, through the application of those project and portfolio management disciplines that have assisted large entities achieve their objectives. By providing customized workshops and one-on-one mentoring, Applied Agility prides itself on effectively maturing the skills, knowledge and practices of all clients.

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