

From Motivation to Action Through Volunteer-Friendly Organizations

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Abstract

In excerpted remarks to delegates to the 2005 Asia-Pacific Regional Volunteer Conference of IAVE, The International Association for Volunteer Efforts, in Hong Kong, the author suggests three “myths,” three “truths,” and six leadership “sins” about volunteering. He encourages managers of volunteers to move toward “Volunteer-Friendly Organizations” by embracing four basic concepts.

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Here are three great myths that circulate about volunteering:

- **Myth #1.** There are not enough people willing to volunteer to do all of the work that needs to be done.
- **Myth #2.** There are more people willing to volunteer than there is work for them to do.
- **Myth #3.** If we could only find a way to better match people who want to volunteer with opportunities available for them, we would solve the problems described in Myth #1 and Myth #2. Technology must be the answer.

While each of these may have a grain of truth to them – and certainly the reality may vary from country to country or even from one region of a country to another – the truth looks more like this:

- **Truth #1.** There is an almost endless supply of volunteers - if we recognize who they are and know how to mobilize them.

- **Truth #2.** There is a limitless amount of meaningful, useful work for them to do - if we let them do it.
- **Truth #3.** There is no “magic bullet,” no “free lunch”- that is, there are no simple ways to translate these two Truths into practice.

Compounding the situation is that those of us who are in leadership roles for volunteering are guilty of committing six sins. They are:

- **Sin #1.** We tend to think of volunteer opportunities as existing only within organizations rather than outside them.
- **Sin #2.** We think more about activities to be done than the results to be achieved, resulting in more attention to operational management than to impact of the work being done.
- **Sin #3.** We put more faith in technology than we do in the power of people to mobilize others - or we put our faith in the wrong kind of technology.

- **Sin #4.** We accept resistance to volunteers from paid helpers and from rigid organizational cultures rather than adopt effective strategies to overcome it.
- **Sin #5.** We do not invest in the organizational change and development required to create “Volunteer-Friendly Organizations.”
- **Sin #6.** National and local volunteer centers have been co-opted into these sins.

There have been any number of efforts in innumerable places over uncounted years among legions of smart people about how to break out of the self-reinforcing cycle of myth and sin – although probably very few of the participants really thought about it in the terms I am expressing it here.

One of those efforts, in the United States, was research designed to learn why some organizations are more effective than others at engaging volunteers - the “Changing the Paradigm” project of the Points of Light Foundation. There was a flurry of interest in the results and a serious effort to turn what we had learned into tools that would help organizations change. But the sad reality was that what we learned was complicated and putting it to work within organizations was hard.

We are not in a field in which things that are complicated and hard are easily accepted. That doesn’t mean that what we learned wasn’t valid - just that it was not easy to embrace and use.

Out of that research and the opportunity I have had to observe and work with volunteer-involving organizations around the world has grown the concept of “Volunteer-Friendly Organizations.”™

They are those organizations that:

- recognize that volunteers are an important asset in achieving their mission;
- identify and address barriers to effective volunteer involvement at all levels of the organization;
- empower their paid staff to work in partnership with volunteers; and
- understand that their volunteers have important observations, perspectives, and knowledge that can help the organization do its job better.

The four basic concepts of Volunteer-Friendly Organizations are that they:

- lay the foundation through mission and vision - that is, they are driven by their mission and by their vision of how the world will be different because of their work, and they enroll both paid staff and volunteers in working to achieve that vision.
- combine inspiring leadership with effective management - that is, people at all levels of the organization assume leadership responsibility for engaging volunteers effectively while, at the same time, responsibility for management of volunteers is decentralized.
- build understanding and collaboration - that is, they seek to build partnerships between paid staff and volunteers by defining their respective roles, helping them understand and appreciate one another, and keeping them focused on mission and vision.
- learn, grow, and change - that is, they are always seeking to learn from their volunteers in order to help the organization perform more effectively both in its core work and in the way it engages volunteers.

So now we have two dynamics that, it can be argued, can redefine volunteering. On one hand there is the notion of Volunteer-Friendly Organizations, creating organizational environments that engage volunteers effectively. On the other hand there is the notion that we can find ways to empower people not only to work as volunteers within organizations but to become leaders in their own right, creating new opportunities for people to contribute as volunteers.

It is possible to find examples of innovation that address both of these dynamics.

- In Taiwan, the hospital of the Tzu Chi Foundation for Buddhist Compassion Relief is a living example of the concepts of the Volunteer-Friendly Organization at work in a truly world-class volunteer program.
- In Brazil, the Portal do Voluntario and its adaptation that supports corporate volunteering, V2V or Volunteer-to-Volunteer, is using the power of the Internet to build communities of volunteers in which opportunities and leadership grow from the bottom up rather than the top down.
- In more and more corporations, we see that their employee volunteer efforts are being led by employees themselves - identifying priorities and building partnerships in the community, deciding how they can contribute, organizing and leading projects, and mobilizing and managing employee volunteers. One great example is Vale do Rio Doce, one of the largest companies in Brazil that is building a company-wide volunteer program primarily through a network of employee teams.
- International Youth Service Day and other days-of-service, programs that

mobilize large numbers of volunteers for one-day projects, are spreading throughout the world as highly visible examples of people being empowered to create and manage their own work and mobilize others to join them.

- The Internet is being used to mobilize people for political action and advocacy - as volunteers to support candidates for political office, influence policy-makers, and be new sources of information as alternatives to the media and government management of the news.
- There are examples of programs that are built around the belief that people usually defined as clients or recipients of services also can contribute as volunteers and that through their contribution they also will benefit. Here at this conference, we heard about the Volunteer Network of Service Users set up by the Eastern Planning & Coordinating Team, Western Wanchai, of the Social Welfare Department of Hong Kong SAR. It involves “deprived children, single parents, delinquent youth, ex-mental patients and probationers” as volunteers in their communities. Or we could have heard how injured workers volunteering helps them reintegrate into the community, a program of the Hong Kong Worker’s Health Centre.

So how do we take what are still isolated examples and bring them to scale? It needs to begin with a change in how we are thinking about these kinds of issues. We need:

- a paradigm shift - that is, we need to challenge the framework in which we think about volunteering and reconceptualize the way we

understand it and the implications for how we promote and support it;

- a greater awareness of the systems in which volunteering happens - societal, community, organizational, personal - and the dynamic relationship between volunteering and each of those systems;
- a new style of leadership, one based on building mutually beneficial partnerships and learning that gives value to all experiences;
- a globalized response - volunteer service has become one of the great movements to help people maintain their sense of community and their connections with one another in an increasingly complex, globalized world - we now must think and act globally to continue its development and increase its impact.

In practical terms, that might translate to work like this:

- More research on effective engagement of volunteers
- More documentation of best practices
- More international, cross-cultural analysis and transfer of knowledge
- Conversion of data into knowledge and knowledge into tools

- Preparation of managers of volunteers to be agents of change
- Professional development for paid helpers
- Demonstration of effective people-based mobilization strategies
- Recognition of innovation in volunteer mobilization and engagement

One way that all of this might get done would be through a carefully conceived, well planned and appropriately resourced global initiative. It would need to:

- combine best practices and best thinking from throughout the world - full inclusiveness matters;
- build a global knowledge base;
- develop global tools that can be adapted to different realities; and
- secure funding from throughout the world to ensure a balanced, global approach.

Even considering such an ambitious undertaking will require new leadership to emerge. If, as many believe, this is to become the “Asian Century,” it would be most appropriate if that leadership could come from here.

About the Author

Dr. Kenn Allen is the founder and president of the Civil Society Consulting Group LLC, a global consulting firm based in Washington, D.C. that specializes in working with leaders of business, NGOs, and government to “unleash the power of people to change the world.” He served for five years as the elected volunteer World President of the International Association of Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and was a senior executive with the Points of Light Foundation for eleven years. Dr. Allen earned his doctorate in human resource development from George Washington University and has worked as a consultant and trainer in over 30 countries.