

Are We Tending to the Future of Volunteerism?

Irv Katz

President, National Human Services Assembly
Managing Director, Volunteer Impact Fund
1319 F St, NW, Suite 402
Washington, DC 20004
Tel. (202) 347-2080
E-mail: irv@nassembly.org

Abstract

The author discusses the need for change among volunteer nonprofit organizations in partnering with public, private, corporate, and community organizations to provide the resources necessary to catalyze innovation. People of all ages and backgrounds have the skills, passion, and interest to help strengthen their communities. Whether and how they are engaged and supported is the difference between meaningful and sustainable impact, and disassociation with a sector that no longer meets their needs. Who better to develop and champion innovation in the sector than volunteer managers?

Key Words:

change, nonprofit, volunteer, collaboration, partnerships

We are rather proud in the United States (US) of our tradition of volunteerism and the “third sector,” the voluntary or nonprofit sector. While there are similar traditions in other countries, it is exhilarating to witness, as this journal documents it, the growth of volunteerism around the world. But is the voluntary sector in the US as dynamic as it needs to be? Is it changing to adapt to sweeping societal changes? Has it found its place alongside the public and private sectors as they evolve?

If I thought the answers to these questions were “yes,” I would not be writing this commentary. These issues are on the minds of many in the nonprofit sector but there is not yet a movement to reinvent or re-conceptualize the sector as the tectonic plates that hold it shift--the changing workplace, a primary source of volunteers for many organizations; increased work and family demands that cut into discretionary time; the changing nature of community and

how we relate to one another, including the enormous explosion in online communities, among them.

Today, it is impossible to consider the nonprofit or voluntary sector as something entirely distinct from the other two sectors. Consider the massive support for voluntary organizations and volunteerism that comes from government and business--financial support, in-kind support (including volunteers), policies and practices that make it possible for nonprofit organizations to function. There is no doubt that volunteerism is fueled in great part by contributions of time and treasure from individuals, but nonprofit organizations would have a fraction of the impact they now do without funding and volunteers, both policymaking and hands-on volunteers, that come through the other sectors.

Is the nonprofit sector cultivating the other sectors to help it meet the demand for volunteers it anticipates in coming years?

For example, are we prepared for the enormous changes the aging of the baby boom generation will bring? Can we fill the volunteer slots they will empty or will many of them be there as volunteers but with very different expectations than those to which we are accustomed? Another: The private sector has historically played a significant role in populating the boards of nonprofit organizations. Will that change as companies struggle to fill management and leadership positions as anticipated, by the same demographic trends that will affect nonprofits, in the coming years? And beyond the voluntary sector's relationship with the public and for-profit sectors per se, what are we doing on any kind of significant scale to engage the increasingly diverse populations that make up these United States?

It comes down to the sector's capacity to recruit and manage volunteers, today and as the kinds of changes noted above unfold. In February 2004, the Urban Institute, the well-regarded independent think tank, released a report entitled, *Volunteer Management Capacity in America's Charities and Congregations*. The study, commissioned by The UPS Foundation, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and USA Freedom Corps, found that *nonprofit organizations and congregations have the will but not the way to engage more volunteers*. Capacity to engage more volunteers—in terms of staff to manage volunteers, widespread adoption of accepted volunteer management practices, access to more potential pools of volunteers and those with specific skills, and the like—is severely limited.

The Urban Institute report suggested strategies for addressing the volunteer management capacity deficit and that work was detailed further in *From Research to Action: A Unified Response to the 2004*

Volunteer Management Capacity Study. *From Research to Action* was produced by the National Human Services Assembly based on significant input and involvement from diverse people and organizations in the voluntary sector. It identified three aspects of the challenge to increasing volunteerism: suppliers—current and potential sources of volunteers; demand—the need for volunteer services; and management capacity—the abilities of organizations and the sector to receive and deploy volunteers and achieve results.

From Research to Action depicts these three as part of a giant pipeline for channeling volunteers and voluntary effort to produce impact in communities, with several pinch-points that, if not addressed, can constrict the flow. Among those factors that can facilitate or impede the flow are: support by nonprofit and civic leaders for increased investment in volunteer management; policies and practices of “suppliers” of volunteers that are conducive to volunteering; accessibility of information leading to desirable volunteer opportunities; and the range of options for getting involved.

IMPACT: A Fund for Change Through Volunteerism (also known as The Volunteer IMPACT Fund) was launched by The UPS Foundation two years ago to support innovative efforts that address some of the key challenges to increasing the capacity of the sector to recruit and manage more volunteers effectively; among them: establishing new suppliers and sources of volunteers (e.g., recruiting from industries and settings which had not promoted volunteerism as prominently in the past; broadening dissemination of curricula and information on effective volunteer management practices; and educating community leaders on the value of investing in volunteer management capacity).

Projects selected by the Volunteer Impact Fund demonstrate the kind of outside-the-box thinking and action necessary to increase our collective capacity to engage more volunteers and widen the pipeline of volunteerism. Some examples:

- The Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration engaged business and civic leaders in understanding the value of volunteer management and has taken a training program on volunteer management practices across the state.
- The Rhode Island Land and Water Partnership is taking to scale a pilot effort in which multiple environmental groups share volunteer management support.
- The Free Library of Philadelphia, working in partnership with the local United Way, Chamber of Commerce, municipal agencies, and others, uses the infrastructure of the library system to leverage volunteerism for the benefit of public and private agencies.
- Action Without Borders, perhaps better known as Idealist.org, a go-to resource for young adults inclined toward public and nonprofit service, is raising the visibility of volunteer management as a viable and important career path.
- United Way of America will leverage its work with the national 2-1-1 information and referral network to equip 2-1-1 programs to effectively handle volunteers in times of disaster or crisis.
- American Humanics, which works with universities across the country, is working with the Points of Light Foundation and others to introduce students and faculty to careers in and skills of volunteer management.
- The National Council on the Aging is capitalizing on the skills and leadership of retiring baby boomers and other older

adults by helping agencies understand how to engage volunteers with higher-order skills.

- Through Temple University's Center for Intergenerational Learning, immigrant college students reach out to immigrant communities to engage them in volunteerism.

Space limitations prevent my listing all of the exciting initiatives that will contribute to our knowledge and skill in this arena.

The Volunteer Impact Fund, in which The Home Depot, Capital One Financial Corporation, the AT&T Foundation, and others have invested as well as The UPS Foundation, is not alone in employing strategies of *From Research to Action* to increase volunteer management capacity. The Corporation for National and Community Service, state service commissions, local and national nonprofit agencies, volunteer centers, and many others have begun to address the challenges identified in the Urban Institute study and strategies cited in the National Human Services Assembly report.

The UPS Foundation, Corporation for National and Community Service, and USA Freedom Corps did the sector an immense service by commissioning the Urban Institute study, which has served to shed light on the deficit in volunteer management capacity the sector experiences. These organizations, the Points of Light Foundation, and many others continue to press the issue and encourage solutions. For example, the \$1 million invested by The UPS Foundation has helped leverage an additional \$3 million from some 30 other organizations and funding sources. And the will to increase volunteer management capacity was clearly demonstrated as 152 concepts papers and proposals were submitted for the relatively modest Volunteer Impact Fund,

which would eventually support seventeen projects.

The challenge moving forward is about nonprofits embracing the need for change, and funders—public, private, corporate, community—partnering with them to provide the resources necessary to catalyze innovation. People of all ages and backgrounds have the skills, passion, and interest

to help strengthen their communities. Whether and how they are engaged and supported is the difference between meaningful and sustainable impact, and disassociation with a sector that no longer meets their needs. Who better to develop and champion innovation in the sector than volunteer managers?

About the Author

Irv Katz is president and CEO of the National Human Services Assembly in Washington, DC. The National Assembly is an association of the nation's leading national nonprofit health and human service, human development and community development organizations. The National Assembly manages the Volunteer Impact Fund.