

VOLUNTEERISM

It's a New (Old) Day for Volunteerism:

Crowdsourcing Social Change

by Peter O'Donnell, MREd

For too many of us, engaging the communities we serve is an afterthought, at best. Unless we begin to view engagement/volunteerism as integral to our organizational success, and recruit and empower stakeholders as active participants in our work, we will be wasting one of our most multifaceted and renewable resource levers. The good news is, it has never been easier to do this than now, when we are all connected online.

TWO NONPROFIT NEWSWIRE STORIES ON NPQ's website recently caught my attention. "Community Volunteers Step in to Save a Y" was a classic story of community ownership of a cause, enabled by the supportive efforts of an organization. It's too bad it took the near demise of that organization to reveal the level of volunteer support it could have mobilized

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to avoid reaching the point of deciding to close its doors. A few days later, a Newswire entry mentioned a 2010 Canadian report, *Bridging the Gap: Enriching the Volunteer Experience to Build a Better Future for Our Communities*, that identified a number of significant gaps and barriers in the ways nonprofit organizations recruit, develop, and deploy volunteers. To me, these two short pieces frame a much larger question: Do today's nonprofits really want volunteers/an engaged community?

My organization works with dozens of nonprofits every year, most of which have anemic volunteer strategies. I can't think of more than a couple of these otherwise highly successful services that would ever be "saved" by community volunteers like that YMCA was if the need arose—there just wouldn't be that level of community ownership of their work. But, as the second story revealed, most leaders of nonprofit organizations would admit that they've done little to nurture that kind of support, and I am concerned that much of the sector has lost sight of the true value of volunteers—those engaged and committed community members who are willing to invest their precious time, social capital, and intellect on a common cause.

I'm struck by the sense that today's volunteer mobilization challenges are not that different from those which many organizations have faced for at least the last quarter century. My first in-depth exploration of volunteerism was in the mid-1980s—the result of seeing a worrisome decline in volunteer participation in an international youth-serving organization I worked for. In many of our national programs, the numbers of volunteers were dropping, but, more troubling, staff expectations were dropping even faster. A small group of staff from several different countries formed a short-term task force to study the situation. We tried to understand the cause of the decline, and also looked for exemplary programs around the world that were growing their volunteer bases.

One of our most sobering findings was in the area of volunteer mobilization rates, typically measured in terms of the number of volunteers an organization deploys per paid employee. In most developed nations, programs reported between three and ten volunteers per staff member (with most volunteers serving just a few hours

a week). What was exciting, though, was identifying a handful of programs with much higher ratios—50:1 or higher. A program in Singapore, for instance, had mobilized so many volunteers that it worked out to the equivalent of ten full-time workers per paid staff member—that's 25,000 volunteer hours per staff member per year. We then set out to discover what these exemplary programs were doing differently.

Our discovery process was framed by some insights from social-movement theory, provided by our "resident sociologist," Johan Vink, of the Netherlands. Vink was a leader in one of the six exceptional national programs we had identified. The earlier bankruptcy of his own organization had convinced him that, left to their own devices, organizations face an almost inevitable process of decline, which he explains in terms of how social movements rise and then decline over time. I believe that the theory can be extended to the dynamics as they are felt between an organization and its community.

According to Vink, a combination of four key factors govern the growth of movements (and organizations):

1. **A compelling vision.** A growing movement typically emerges from a vision that articulates a need or opportunity with unusual clarity. This vision attracts others to the cause by challenging them to become part of something so significant that to say no is not an option. Generally led by a small leadership team or perhaps even one person, these emerging movements are usually short on organization and administration but long on passion and commitment.
2. **Constant communication.** In a growing movement, communication is maintained partly by the desire of all members to keep up with the latest news concerning progress toward achievement of the movement's objectives. Every day seems to bring encouraging feedback about new "beachheads." But leaders also make it a point to keep feeding stories of success to everyone—members or not—who will listen. Communication is carefully designed to keep the purpose of the movement front and center, and to maintain

the sense of momentum that is so important in keeping people motivated.

3. Willing workers. In a growing movement, there seems to be little difficulty in finding people willing to get involved. This may be due in part to the fact that those already involved tend to be excited about what they are doing, and speak positively about what they are accomplishing through their efforts. It is also typical for new workers to be given the opportunity to select the kinds of projects and roles in which they wish to become involved. And, the growth of the movement guarantees a constantly growing need for workers as well as an increasingly varied range of roles in which to serve.

4. Results-oriented structure. In a growing movement, the focus remains on the objectives—the “*raison d’être*” that led to the founding of the movement. All action is evaluated in relation to its potential impact on the accomplishment of those objectives rather than on the basis of other secondary factors, such as worker preferences or the latest trends. Furthermore, organizational structures are designed to channel resources—human and otherwise—efficiently toward the achievement of those objectives. And, excellent performance is rewarded with more responsibility and more resources—there is a clear bias for investment in the “make it happen” people, and little attention wasted on the resisters.

And, according to Vink, four key reasons movements decline are when:

- 1. Means become ends.** In a declining movement, people become more concerned with “doing things right” than with “doing the right things.” More and more energy is expended on polishing performance, with less concern for finding the most effective ways of accomplishing the mission. Furthermore, the heroes of the movement become those individuals who are most technically skilled rather than those who are most productive in achieving critical end objectives.
- 2. Roles become professionalized.** Where once it was deemed important to keep tasks

simple so that as many people as possible could be put to work, later it becomes more important to screen potential workers carefully, because only certain people are seen as capable of performing at a high enough level. Ultimately, some or most tasks become so demanding in their complexity that only “professional” workers can perform them adequately.

3. Methods become traditionalized. Whereas a growing movement is characterized by ongoing experimentation, with a view to discovering new ways to achieve its objectives, a declining movement is more likely to show evidence of a narrowing of acceptable approaches. Only certain strategies and methods are allowed, and new techniques are greeted with suspicion.

4. Leadership becomes maintenance-oriented. Instead of visionary, forward-looking leadership, with its characteristic “rough around the edges” management style, decaying movements are controlled by administrators, whose main focus is on keeping the structure and systems going rather than building momentum toward the accomplishment of the mission. Committees abound, and complicated, slow-moving decision-making processes become the norm. Anyone wanting to move out in a new direction finds him- or herself having to work around the existing structure rather than being able to use it as a channel through which to get the needful resources.

What all of this told us was that the success of volunteer mobilization was rooted in something deeper than strategy and methodology—it was dependent on an organization’s philosophy, values, and structures. More specifically, did leaders and staff at all levels see volunteer participation as crucial to their success? Did they value volunteers to the point of giving them freedom to serve and lead in ways that met volunteers’ goals and fit their circumstances? Did they build structures that truly empowered volunteers to do great things, and not simply support the efforts of professionals? In all of our identified exemplary programs, the answer was a resounding “Yes!”

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Here are just a few of the stories:

- **Jamaica:** Operating island-wide in every major town, the program in Jamaica had a 50:1 ratio of volunteers to full-time paid staff at the beginning of our study. Autonomous, volunteer-led local groups, supported by a small team of zone coordinators and national-office resource staff, made program and personnel decisions, raised their own funds, and continually recruited new volunteers. Interestingly, as a result of the study the groups became much better at sharing innovative program ideas with each other. And, as they became more open to new approaches, their volunteer participation rate moved closer to 100:1.
- **The Netherlands:** Vink’s home program was forced to adopt a new, volunteer-led model when the original organization went bankrupt. Their strategy was to relaunch their work as a series of volunteer-led “coffee bar” drop-in centers in towns and cities where there was sufficient volunteer interest. To avoid a repeat of the program’s earlier financial burnout, the small national coordinating team adopted a policy whereby a local group could not hire a staff person until it had at least fifty actively engaged volunteers. Volunteers were organized into “cells” of around eight people, and each cell was fully responsible for its own program planning, logistics, and ongoing recruitment.
- **Singapore:** Again, the story began with the need for renewal—this time of a program that had become stale and complacent, and whose volunteer numbers had been steadily declining for several years. Under new, visionary leadership, the program became a powerhouse of volunteer-based youth service, active in every school and housing district on the tiny island nation. When asked to explain the program’s phenomenal growth, one of the senior leaders summarized it this way: “Our success is the product of how we see our people. We see volunteers as a ‘gift’ that we must steward wisely, and our staff as ‘stewards’ whose role is to support volunteer engagement in fulfilling their vision of doing work that aligns with our overall purpose.”

In the years since leaving this international organization, I have continued to observe volunteer mobilization in the nonprofit sector in North America. What I see, to my disappointment, are too many signs of declining movements—once-vital volunteer-conceived and volunteer-led service innovations that have steadily become “monuments to their past glory,” as Vink would describe them. Over time, I have come to describe the process like this: When movements begin, their primary focus is the work, which moves forward through the spontaneous, natural growth of a committed workforce, and is supported by small, nimble “workings” that exist primarily to channel resources to the front lines. When they decline, the workings increasingly become the focus, the workforce is seen less as an asset and more as a cost center, and the work shrinks down to fit the confines of the funders’ expectations.

Still, there is always hope, and I’ve been heartened by the fact that one can always identify exemplary programs that have avoided this path (or, in some cases, found their way back from an unfortunate one). Some Canadian examples with which I’m most familiar include:

- **Pathways to Education:** Perhaps the most effective high school dropout prevention program in North America, this volunteer-based initiative reduced the dropout rate from 56 percent to 10 percent in one of the poorest communities in Canada. The program is now being planted, through community ownership and volunteer commitment, in a number of other Canadian cities.
- **Frontier College:** Canada’s oldest literacy organization, which began its work by recruiting volunteer “laborer-teachers” during the railroad-building and gold rush days, now recruits thousands of college and university students to do literacy and learning-skills training with children in impoverished neighborhoods.
- **Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition:** Like virtually all Healthy Cities initiatives around the world, this organization supports local volunteers, through a small team of “community animators,” to do community capacity building in their own towns around the province. An even smaller central office provides

resource and communication support, ensuring that stories of success quickly find their way to all of the network nodes.

These are just a few examples, but it is evident that there is something of a renaissance of community building currently underway. A clear message is being sent, not only to individual citizens and community groups but also to the organizations that exist to serve them. That message is, it's time to rebuild community ownership of the means of community building. We must rediscover volunteerism, but we must also adjust the form in which we do much of our work of program and service delivery. This is not just an economic imperative in today's world of shrinking finances—it is also a community imperative.

Fortunately, as I see it, it has never been easier to do this. The big advantage we have now, twenty-five years down the road from my first awakening to the potential of large-scale volunteer mobilization, is that we are all connected. As Seth Godin points out in his recent book *Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us*, we are all members of these groups. Some, like our families, are defined for us, but others—religious groups, community groups, interest groups, teams, work-based groups—are the result of our choices. Godin has articulated an updated perspective on the whole idea of social movements. His concept of a “tribe” is a group of people connected to an idea (or cause), a leader, and one another. They are, in his words, “simply a few keystrokes away from you on the Net,” which means they're that close to any organization that can support them in making the kind of difference they want in the world.

To be sure, a lot of organizations are trying to develop strategies to use social networking tools to attract volunteers, donors, and other supporters. Perhaps, though, we need a different frame of reference. Why not focus on finding individuals and groups who already care about the work you are doing, and invite them to educate you on how to support their involvement in meaningful ways that fit their circumstances?

One way to reframe volunteerism in today's already-connected world is to think of it as “crowdsourcing” social change. Today's young adults are increasingly looking for “tribes that



make a difference”—they want something more than just to belong to a “happy gang.” The challenge for nonprofit organizations is to trust these young people to take the opportunities and support we provide and, in their own perhaps messy but passionate way, do great things for their neighborhoods, their countries, the world.

The starting point is to ask the question, “What do I believe about the people I’m trying to recruit?” The truth is, you either believe they will do great things, or you don’t. Either way, they’ll know how you feel, and that determines whether or not volunteers believe in what you’re doing. Let’s not wait until the organization needs to be “saved”—it’s time to take a chance and see how volunteers can lead our work in creative new directions.

Maybe it’s time to tweet an invitation: “Is anyone interested in a community-service flash mob? We’re meeting in the park this Saturday, at 2 P.M.”

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