

Give More Than Money, Get More Than Thanks

Christine Jacobs 22 October 2012

Introduction

Conventional discussions about philanthropy focus on financial donations, financial incentives and subsequent returns on investment. In this article, Christine Jacobs focuses on linking her time and her talents with her money to advance the causes and organizations of her choice. Her career as an operations executive was not only financially fruitful but also provided her with strong leadership skills and a joy in working with individuals at all organizational levels. Earning money was a personal process for her; this money is now her entrée into a new phase of life. She feels that donors should understand their own skills and what they can offer to organizations. Similarly the organizations may need to open themselves up to the support and leadership that these new donors can provide.

There is a confluence of movements today that should lead nonprofit organizations to reexamine the role of volunteers and supporters. It is not clear that the organizations are ready to take advantage of important trends.

The Traditional View

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Traditionally nonprofit organizations have relied on paid staff to do the real work of the organizations in terms of leadership, financial management, program administration and other services. Volunteers were predominantly used to provide support as “hands” or people who came in to do a task—working the soup kitchen, handing out promotional information, ushering, enrolling participants and a thousand other necessary duties. But these were not jobs that required much training and were almost always done under the direction of a few regular employees. This kind of support serves as an important contribution to the organization’s work and appealed to those who wanted to volunteer without commitment to training or full-time support.

Members of the community could develop a long-term relationship with one organization or contribute their time and energy through organizations such as **Philadelphia Cares** (www.philacares.com), which serves as a clearinghouse for matching organizations that need workers with people who want to volunteer.

When an individual’s passion is more focused on international work, many volunteers go on support trips with religious groups or through **Cross Cultural Solutions** (www.crossculturalsolutions.org), which

provides workers for 1-12 weeks to **CARE** supported hospitals, schools and other organizations in 12 countries. Here again, good work can be accomplished by an individual on a drop-in basis, without a long-term commitment or extensive training.

The other major need of organizations has been for fundraising, and every nonprofit has made the "Donate Here" button bigger and redder on its website. Some of the efforts described above were directed towards fundraising. It is common to use board positions to entice and reward both large individual and foundation gifts as well as solicit corporate funds. Board meetings included components of organizational oversight and direction as well as good governance but most boards include heavy requirements around development and *friend-raising*.

The 21st Century Volunteer Pool

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Baby boomers are thinking about retirement in record numbers. An estimated 10,000 of us turn 65 every day (Cohn 2010) and across the U.S. many are leaving full-time work either by choice or circumstance. With the end of many defined benefit retirement plans, many need to work for money longer than their parents, but others are asking, "What is Next?" This group of retirees and potential retirees can resemble their parents' generation in a desire to sit back, play golf, move to Florida, play with

grandchildren and reflect on a life well lived.

But we can also include men and women who passionately loved working, developing personal skills and learning about their community or the world. We include many women who served PTAs, soccer leagues and scouting organizations who are ready to do something else. We went to college and graduate schools in record numbers and accept getting older but do not accept that this means obsolescence. We have read the studies that say we need to *use it or lose it* and if we just sit back we will rot.

After many years of working hard to make money or raise children or care for older parents, this is a generation that wants to contribute time and energy. We have developed business and social skills, and want to contribute to our communities and to the world. Many talk altruistically about *giving back and others* just want to contribute to making the world a better place. Some just want to get that same sense of accomplishment that has come in other stages of their lives. Others are looking to keep skills current. And we all want a sense of community from friends and co-workers.

But whatever the goal, this is a growing resource that can be tapped by smart and adaptable organizations.

The 21st Century Organization

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There are unprecedented strains on our nonprofit organizations. In the last two years (2010-2011 v. 2012-2013 budgets) the Pennsylvania state budget for classroom education has declined 10 percent and community and economic development, including support of the arts, has declined 19 percent (Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center 2012). Individual giving has also declined as family budgets have been strained by the recession.

But organizations need more money, owing to salary increases and inflation, even before considering the rapid growth in social service needs caused by high unemployment and underemployment. Cuts in Federal SNAP (Food Stamps) as well as NEA grants and other human and community investments are only making the situation worse.

What do these organizations need? Yes, they need money and more money. But they must also need to be extremely efficient with that money and with the time and energy of their supporters. One way of accomplishing more is by developing new relationships with volunteers. Use volunteers for positions and roles that were traditionally held by paid staff or paid consultants. Make use of the skills that have served baby boomers well in their careers. This will free up dollars to be spent in other areas and bring in necessary talent. Further, these super-volunteers

will bring their commitment to your cause, which can bring benefits in personal connections and networking with other people and organizations and perhaps more money.

A Personal Journal

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This seems like a natural fit for cash-strapped organizations and talent-rich retirees and almost retirees. But it is clearly easier said than done. I have been on this personal quest for several years and I have learned a good deal.

Many organizations are ready for me to bring my checkbook but are tied to conventional models of what is employee work and what is volunteer work. I ran large operations with thousands of employees. But several organizations have offered me opportunities to fill in forms or arrange cookies at volunteer events and other things that I *will and can* do but that do not take advantage of my skills to move the mission forward.

Political campaigns and causes are a branch of philanthropy that interests me as, for example, rather than help the homeless by giving out spare change, I like to help elect politicians who will work to eliminate homelessness in a way consistent with my beliefs. Most campaigns are happy to get volunteer phone callers and, of course, checks. I have joined the board of the national

Women's Campaign Fund to help get more women elected to public office, and this is an active board with use for my leadership skills.

But I am persistent and a good networker and I like the opportunities that I have found. I urge organizations to rethink their use of volunteers. Perhaps they just need to bring in volunteers with strong facilitation skills from the private sector to get them there.

Conclusion

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The time is right for organizations to rethink their use of volunteers. There are many who want to give of themselves—their time and expertise—as well as their money. And never has the need been so great.

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References

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