

Entrepreneurs in the Volunteer Corps: Building Capacity as Nonprofit Organizations Answer the Call to Serve

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Three years of grim economic news has been coupled with an extraordinary influx of volunteers into nonprofits. Though deeply impacted by the recession, our clients continue to report significant "upturns" in their volunteer numbers and, better, in the skills and experience those volunteers bring and are willing to share. Along with reduced budgets and increased demand for services, nonprofits have been facing the unexpected challenge of responding to this incoming tide of volunteers. To us, this convergence of economic constraints and abundant volunteers is an unprecedented opportunity to transform the place of volunteers across the nonprofit sector. Progressive organizations and leaders will gain the most from this trend - now and in a brighter economy - by integrating and supporting entrepreneurial volunteers.

When First Lady Michelle Obama addressed this very issue at the National Conference on Volunteering and Service towards the beginning of the recession, she said, **"[Volunteers] are eager to be part of this nation's recovery and renewal...As hard examples, applications to AmeriCorps have quadrupled. In the Peace Corps last year, there were three applications for every available position. 35,000 young people applied for just 4,000 spots in Teach for America...People across this country are ready to answer the call to serve. We just need to issue that call and provide them with the opportunities that are meaningful."**

Record breaking application numbers have continued into 2011. Our experience and our clients tell us that, if not welcomed and meaningfully engaged, these volunteers walk away, taking their skills, interests, and money with them. Successfully engaging them-as entrepreneurs, leaders and members of self-directed teams, and sources of innovation-means inviting them to play a role in creating the structures, systems, and roles that will move an organization or cause's work forward.

A critical piece of entrepreneurial engagement is having volunteers lead other volunteers in important projects and in mobilizing additional resources to fulfill strategic organizational needs. A traditional volunteer corps is typically well stocked with entry level volunteers and volunteers for Board positions, but has cultivated few between those ends of the continuum. In flush times, staff hiring fills that void; in this economy, hiring is rarely an option. Volunteers with extensive work experience, management skills, and leadership abilities can take ideas from inception through completion with minimal staff guidance and can not only lead other volunteers; they can also lead entire initiatives, increasing the nonprofit's capacity to grow its services and relevance.

Over recent years, we've guided hospitals, faith-based organizations, and volunteer centers as they embrace this entrepreneurial volunteer engagement. In the case of

one library, volunteers supplied the ideas, the expertise, the energy, the community connections, and ultimately fully realized new programs - and then things really started cooking. At the beginning, one staff member provided guidance and support: turning barriers into obstacles and clearing them away, letting go of control to discover that stewardship trumped directing.

The Case

Convening

Library Director Jennifer Baker calls a group of six volunteers together; she needs actionable ideas for regular adult and youth programs. As a California public librarian, she knows hiring additional staff is not an option. After an hour of conversation, she steps out of the planning meeting. She refills her coffee mug, worried this new task force won't coalesce - that she made a mistake pleading for her small, rural library to be included in a high profile statewide push to redefine the very nature of library volunteer engagement. Reentering the small conference room, she finds the group huddled over the planning worksheet, scribbling plans to make the library, "an arts and culture destination." Now she has a new concern: she does not consider herself in any way artistic... How will she be accountable for this initiative given her lack of expertise?

Welcoming Entrepreneurs

Upon signing the [Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act \(H.R. 1388\)](#) President Barack Obama said, "I'm not going to tell you what your role should be; that's for you to discover." He knows what Jennifer Baker found out that afternoon: the volunteers she'd assembled didn't need staff leadership to tell them how to pursue the initiative; they needed to know the rules and foul lines; they needed a permission slip and some tools. Traditional volunteer management models teach volunteers to be dependent on staff, just as they teach staff to direct volunteers. Dependency and direction rarely yield breakthrough innovations, nor do they meaningfully engage the skills, talents, and passions of the volunteers.

The perception of volunteerism as "position centered"[i] has meant that traditional volunteer *management* works largely by prescription: staff members have a list of things that need to get done. They match volunteers' skills, interests, and availability to these prescribed (and typically low level) positions. One problem with this approach is that, too often, one or two staff members direct hundreds or thousands of volunteers. In the corporate world, no organizational chart would show one person with hundreds (or thousands!) of direct reports. The result of this common structure in the nonprofit world is that paid staff members don't have the bandwidth to cultivate volunteer leaders, uncover talents hidden in their volunteer pool, and launch innovative initiatives that leverage the skills of their constituents and meet emerging and changing needs.

In entrepreneurial volunteer *engagement*, the paid professionals invest more time cultivating and supporting volunteer leaders, and those leaders take on most of the responsibility for managing teams of volunteers, many of whom the volunteer leaders recruit themselves. Ideas emerge and staff and volunteers collaborate to choose which initiatives to pursue, ensure alignment with broader organizational objectives, and develop work plans and measurable outcomes. This model is one that Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials find much more intriguing and appealing.

Initial Results

Within two months of that initial meeting, Jennifer's volunteers had launched a new series of weekly programs for adults. By the end of the first year, the program had been expanded to twice a week, and new programs for children and teens were being fleshed out. The programs have become a core library service, engaging members of the greater community through fun, educational opportunities to meet new people and learn new things.

A film series, run largely by volunteers on the adult programming team, became so popular that the local movie theater began to complain that the series was taking away business. Not to be deterred, the library turned this bit of opposition into a new opportunity to collaborate and bring in new volunteers. People who enjoy going to the movie theater are now encouraged to come up with library program ideas that will promote ticket sales at the movie theater—a win/win! The library now offers a minimum of ten programs a month with a full marketing team behind the series in addition to the actual program implementation. More than 80% is accomplished solely by volunteer effort. Staff are involved only in giving approval and providing direction. By embracing a fuller and more sophisticated model of volunteer engagement, the library has a different buzz and results that reflect its strategic goals: improved visibility and more opportunity to continue its vision of being an arts and culture destination, offering valued programs for the community.

Continuing to Say Yes

One reason the volunteer program at the St. Helena Public Library works is that, from the very beginning, volunteers are given an equal say in how the events for which they are responsible are developed and implemented. Volunteers come up with the ideas; volunteers track their expenses and overall program budget; they report and evaluate results; and they work with other volunteers and staff with the same authority, tools, and resources as any paid staff person. The entire system is so well established that when Jennifer (the only staff person with official authority over the volunteers) went on six months' of maternity leave (two and a half months earlier than expected, no less!) the weekly programs and marketing machine became a 100% volunteer operation. Everything worked smoothly for the entire six months and when Jennifer came back to work she discovered that many things she had always done herself could now be permanently turned over to volunteers. The library's volunteer

program provides a means for adults to have a fun, energetic experience while they spend their time, contribute their skills, learn new ones and see real results.

TIP: Cultivate at least one entrepreneurial volunteer in your organization to be a leader. Volunteers can lead teams comprised of paid staff and volunteers... especially if the team leader has a title other than "volunteer."

TIP: Increase a volunteer's responsibility and customize meaningful work to the volunteer's passions and skills. When you do, you'll build your organizational capacity beyond what staff alone can accomplish and you will take the first step in creating a sustainable culture of entrepreneurial volunteer engagement.

The Entrepreneurial Style

Injecting a layer of non-traditional volunteer leadership into an organization means keeping an eye out for entrepreneurs - and inviting them to join you. According to the Stanford Social Innovation Review, entrepreneurship "... connotes a special, innate ability to sense and act on an opportunity, combining out-of-the-box thinking with a unique brand of determination to create or bring about something new to the world...."^[ii] The Ashoka Foundation adds that, "**Every leading social entrepreneur is a mass recruiter of local change makers - a role model proving that citizens who channel their passion into action can do almost anything.**"^[iii]

We have found that entrepreneurial volunteers possess four key traits. They are:

- **Integrationist:** They weave seemingly unconnected threads from across their personal and professional experience, the result of which is a novel approach, perspective, or idea.
- **Passionate:** They absolutely believe that the world must know, and will be much better for, their innovation; they will go to extraordinary lengths (long hours, personal investment, etc.) in service to this new entity.
- **Achievement Oriented:** Driven by accomplishment, they constantly evaluate, tweak, and acknowledge work and results; they're much less likely to evaluate the person and may find a spotlight on themselves (rather than on the results) embarrassing.
- **Confident:** They trust their perception and gut; in seeing what's possible beyond "what is," they are willing to let go of closed or overly centralized systems.

Entrepreneurs seek the success of the venture, and they are committed to taking whatever actions are required to get there. They also stay disciplined: consistent in message, tone, and temperament. That predictability and steadiness allows volunteers on their teams to also take risks without the worry of being blindsided, off-message, or not supported. That greater unity and resulting success build trust among a larger group of staff members, creating more champions of volunteer engagement.

Results

Entrepreneurial engagement leads to innovations that make sense because an engaged entrepreneurial volunteer is doing meaningful work, and often:

- Brings friends, family, and professional colleagues to the organization
- Forms a relationship-based bond with the organization-its mission and purpose
- Is willing to do what's necessary in service to the larger vision
- Gives financially... if not now, in the future
- Supports, sustains, defends and advocates for you-across your community, in good and in difficult times

Continuing to Say Yes

The short term goal of entrepreneurial volunteer engagement is for this new cadre of volunteers to show up, find meaningful opportunities, and enjoy how they're treated, whether motivated by the call to service, the need for a job reference, or a desire to find community in difficult times. If they don't have a positive experience, they are unlikely to return. The long term goal is that they continue to be a source of ideas, qualified volunteer leaders, and capacity to meet emergent, strategically important organizational needs. The key is meeting volunteers where they are - not expecting the volunteer to meet the organization where *it* is. It involves important conversations about how the volunteer's skills might align with strategic priorities. The person you turn away today is unlikely to ever become a financial supporter. Say yes and you get time, money, and access to everyone they know.

So when one of Jennifer's volunteers, Robyn, said she wanted to have a library event that involved food and wine, Jennifer thought, sure. When she mentioned she'd like Chef Keller from Napa Valley's five-star restaurant, The French Laundry, to lead the event, Jennifer let go and said yes. All she had to do was introduce him the night of the event. Robyn hand delivered an invitation, worked with Chef's Public Relations staff, recruited her own volunteer crew to create flyers, move tables and chairs, and, as it turned out, dismantle and reassemble bookshelves and computer stations to accommodate the record breaking crowd that attended. Chef Keller came, with his own staff, served wine and appetizers, and signed books. Robyn's goal now is to have a "Top Chef" at the library at least once a year. This spring: Cindy Pawlcyn. This is just one example of how library staff members have changed their use and approach to interacting with volunteers.

TIP: Integrate innovative thinkers from your volunteer corps into your organizational and departmental strategic planning processes.

TIP: Explain - to the volunteer or team - the results you want, how they connect to the organization's strategic plan, and why you think a particular team is a good fit to carry out the initiative. Avoid telling them how to do it.

"Once one or two people get it, all you have to do is get out of their way."

All of this began in December 2008. It is now March 2011. By July 2009 a virtual volunteer was writing the weekly library newsletter, saving Jennifer three hours each week, and three graphic artists were working virtually. Adult programming went from non-existent (no staff, no money, and no space) to once and then twice each week - such dramatic and successful growth that Jennifer and her volunteers co-presented their models to their state association that fall. The new poetry program went from annual to monthly and by mid-2009 was overseen by the County's Poet Laureate. The city employee who was contracted to work for two hours each week on the library's technology and information systems began volunteering an additional eight... When he asked if he could record the Chef Keller event, Robyn checked with Chef's public relations staff and they agreed. Other volunteers are managing the library's web presence by creating and maintaining the website and the library's postings to online calendars and social sites.

In addition to the quote at the top of this section, Jennifer would tell you that the initial pilot proved that volunteers can be trusted to come through on high impact, highly visible assignments-and the pilot prepared staff to be more receptive to new ideas, as well as more willing to say yes and empower volunteers to take control of the projects that excite them. Because volunteers build and lead their own teams, this small library can keep up with growth. In fact much of the growth in terms of community outreach, new programs and services and marketing has not only been the work of volunteers, but also the original ideas of volunteers who are then are given the permission, support, and tools to make them happen.

TIP: Highlight the changes high-level volunteers make, rather than simply how many hours they volunteer.

TIP: Train volunteer leaders and paid staff to work effectively with entrepreneurial volunteers and demonstrate an organizational commitment to the effort by widely communicating the successes and encouraging others to innovate and collaborate.

Conclusion

Volunteers will show up today, tomorrow, and the next day with ideas, hope, skills, and a personal network of valuable connections. When you learn to use entrepreneurial volunteers and to empower self-directed teams, you will gain new perspectives and have resources to pilot new structures and initiatives. Rather than reducing programs and services in the face of a challenging economy, focus on bringing more skills, talent, energy, and other resources into your world and apply them where you most need them. Engage your community members and start small: point them toward something with a high chance of success and build momentum from there. Volunteers are not merely a nice (and ultimately dispensable) program. Supporting the volunteer asset is a key strategic business decision: welcoming

entrepreneurial volunteers - and the innovations and teams they bring - brings sustainable abundance to the organization, in good times and bad.

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