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## RETHINKING VOLUNTEERISM – SHOULD IT BE A PRIORITY?

Martha Parker

PETER O'DONNELL, PRESIDENT OF HEALTHY FUTURES GROUP, RECENTLY ASKED, "Do today's nonprofits really want volunteers/an engaged community?" (O'Donnell, 2011, para. 1). For a number of years, I have been asking the same question, but not so succinctly or so directly. Like O'Donnell, I believe it to be a truly important question. He goes on to comment that most nonprofits have anaemic volunteer strategies. I think he is being kind; I am beginning to think that in many instances we are missing the boat altogether.

In my presentation at the 2008 Summit hosted by the Association of Fundraising Professionals, Imagine Canada, and Volunteer Canada, I said:

Citizen engagement, building social capital, creating a sense of belonging and connectiveness in our communities, and engaging others to help in solving tough community issues – is this not our most important work? Boundary spanning between organizations, coalition building, creating alliances... these are things we say we are good at. In the Canadian Policy Research Networks' Leadership Summit 2008 Report, Peter MacLeod is quoted as saying: 'Democracy is the world's greatest experiment and citizenship its most radical idea' [2008, p. 5]. Our sector has built its reputation on being the best that democracy offers in that we provide a place for citizens to engage in building the communities we want. But do we really? The world has changed and the new volunteer keeps trying to engage. We – the sector – are not making it easy for them to do so. As Pogo says – 'I've seen the enemy and it is us.'

Three years later do I still believe this to be true? Absolutely! And I continue to reflect on why we keep reading and hearing about a perceived decline in volunteers when citizen engagement is supposed to be part of our DNA. Is it ridiculous of me to believe that nonprofit organizations should include engaging community as one of their primary values and strategies? Or have volunteers merely become a means to an end, i.e., cheap (perceived free) labour to get the work done? Might volunteers be more of a nuisance than an asset? After all, we know how tough human resource management is; part-timers like our volunteers are even tougher to manage, particularly in a technology-based culture where more and more of us really do not like the idea of being "managed". Then there is the whole issue of individual accountability – how on earth do we deal with that?

I am fully cognizant of the fact that the day-to-day expectations and volume of work in the nonprofit sector leaves little time for reflection. We are often so busy doing that

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we do not stop to think about questioning the relevancy of how we do our work. We struggle constantly with how to effectively and innovatively engage and mobilize our paid staff. We work with a continuously changing funding model, a lack of sustainable funds, and an ever-increasing demand for service. When is there ever time or a reason to spend any collective energy on our unpaid staff – our volunteers? That's the job of the manager/director of volunteers. Isn't it?

Add to all of these challenges the push to adopt bottom-line business models and often unrealistic accountability expectations. Both have further encouraged the nonprofit sector (as well as the business sector, through employer-supported volunteer initiatives) to tabulate the contributions of volunteers in monetary terms, which – in my mind – further reduces the true value that engaged citizens bring to any community organization or cause. Have volunteers become just another metric – an output rather than an outcome? As I age and as I continue to be actively involved in my community, do I want my contributions to be presented as simply another number on a report? Does measuring my contribution against an established average service wage rather than against the difference I hope to make by sharing my skills and my passion keep me engaged? Do I want to be seen as just a means to an end? Speaking for myself, I do not want to be remembered as just a number or for having saved the nonprofit sector a few thousand dollars.

Because these are issues I care deeply about, I have been engaged in a number of initiatives over the past three years that are focused on a new vision of community engagement. I have done a lot of reading and reflection. The gift of time truly is a treasure and I have gained much from this work. As a volunteer with Volunteer Canada and its Corporate Council on Volunteering during the past two years, I have had the privilege of working on the creation of a spectrum of community engagement with a handful of volunteer centres and corporate council members as well as a number of nonprofit organizations across the country (see Appendix A). All voluntary effort, whether formal or informal, is important – thus a spectrum instead of a continuum. The spectrum is focused on formal community engagement options. It includes a brief description of direct service, episodic, group, service learning, leadership, and pro bono/skills-based opportunities and options. In developing the spectrum, we focused on trying to agree on some common language around “community engagement” and to differentiate between those “community engagement opportunities that utilize extra hands (traditional/direct service volunteering) as well as extra minds (knowledge philanthropy/organizational change [initiatives]).” It is a one-page document that deliberately uses the word volunteer only once. Why?

In testing the concept of a spectrum with a variety of different groupings, as soon as the words volunteer or volunteerism hit the table, the conversations and/or the strategies to engage almost exclusively focused on traditional direct service volunteering. Direct service activities (extra hands) tend to be transactional in nature. They are generally designed around a deliberate position description targeted to supporting service delivery or fundraising and are co-ordinated by a manager or a director of volunteers, often with help from either special events or fundraising staff. The conversations then all too frequently tended to move to the free labour construct rather than to either a reciprocity or personal responsibility construct. Rarely did we get to discussions of relationship building or diversified options that could advance the overall impact of the services being

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offered or the challenges of the organization or cause. Both the direct service and free labour constructs tend to reinforce the old charity model (hands offering help to “the needy”) rather than a community building model (hands, heads, and hearts creating strong resilient organizations and communities). Frankly, this work was an awakening for me with regards to how much baggage and entrenched thinking the words volunteer and volunteerism carry with them.

Again, I have to ask, am I too idealistic in thinking that we had moved somewhat beyond the charity model? Are organizations in the sector interested in and supportive of innovative strategies to engage community on a variety of levels or are we stuck in trying to do same-old, same-old – in a world that rarely is about same-old, same-old? Over the years, most organizations have been deliberate and intentional about diversifying their fund development strategies. Why do we seem to have so much trouble realizing that we need to diversify our community engagement/volunteer strategies? If we are, in fact, seeing a real decline in volunteers, are the people who are not volunteering the problem or are we as a sector stuck in status quo thinking, dedicated to preserving an old model of engagement? Have we so professionalized the sector that we have not recognized that innovative practices and shifts in organizational culture and thinking should be top of mind if we want to recruit the talent we need both internally and externally to effectively deliver on our missions?

What else have I learned from my volunteer work over the past few years?

- Most sector organizations have siloed managers/directors of volunteers in positions that focus on service delivery. Organizations tend to hire “co-ordinators” of volunteers and not “strategists in community engagement.” In most cases, those employed are not positioned nor do they have the authority to proactively engage skills-based volunteers or leverage pro bono contributions that could enhance organizational change or growth initiatives.
- More and more corporations and businesses are moving toward strategic employer-supported community engagement programs. Many still focus on short-term, episodic, and/or group projects that are meant to support community while also serving as team-building initiatives. There is, however, increased interest in community capacity building through skills-based and/or pro bono engagement opportunities. Employer-supported community engagement strategies are definitely looking for more strategic ways to leverage their community investment dollars through the talents of their workforce.
- Current research done by Volunteer Canada with support from Manulife Financial (2010) assessed four different volunteer groupings – youth, boomers, employer-supported volunteers, and families. The research indicates that significant change is needed in how we engage and retain volunteers in the areas of job design, in organizational culture, and in how we match volunteer skills to the needs of organizations.
- Social media will inevitably continue to have significant impact on community engagement strategies.

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- Organizations, if they so choose, have a tremendous opportunity to leverage their resources through proactive community engagement strategies.

Additional volunteer work over the last two years with Volunteer Canada, Volunteer Calgary (and a number of their nonprofit members), Volunteer Alberta, and Vantage Point (Vancouver) produced lots of additional opportunities to explore volunteerism as we know it and volunteerism as we might like it to be:

- Volunteer Calgary's work in testing the use of the spectrum and its commitment to work with and promote a new proactive continuum of corporate/non-profit sector engagement has been exceptional.
- Vantage Point's focus on "getting the right people on the bus" through their people lens work – combining good governance with a culture of planning and a strategic people focus – is both challenging and innovative. It encourages a new sense of the role of organizations in engaging and involving talent, both paid and unpaid, in delivering on their missions.
- Volunteer Alberta's work in encouraging new thinking about community engagement, its focus on reducing barriers to volunteerism, and its dedication to diffusing knowledge offered me many wonderful opportunities to take part in new discussions.

I am grateful to all of these organizations for letting me play in their respective sandboxes and for contributing to my personal learning on the topic of community engagement. I am hopeful that there are lots of other volunteer centres and businesses and nonprofit organizations that are also looking at creative community engagement strategies and that these conversations will soon be the norm rather than the exception.

There may in fact be a decline in current volunteer numbers. That, to me, is not the real issue. The real issue is why and, more importantly, who needs to own the why? Reading news articles or listening to newscasts that focus on the struggles of nonprofit organizations to recruit volunteers, one would think that it is the fault of an apathetic public. Is that really the case? Isn't it up to us to adapt to societal shifts if we want engaged citizens working with and within our organizations?

- Lack of time is still the reason given by most people for not engaging in formal volunteer activity. Do nonprofit sector organizations have the desire or the capacity to significantly diversify our community engagement strategies? Can we build capacity to look at short-term projects and skills-based or pro bono contracts that, in addition to being meaningful to the person offering their time and talent, have the potential to impact organizational change in significant ways? What resources and shifts in thinking are needed to do this work?
- Most of us perceive fund development as primarily a focus on financial resources. Should a shift or a broadening of the role be considered to include resource development strategies that integrate new community engagement strategies? Would that necessitate a good look at shared leadership models and/or adapting staff/volunteer functions that are currently siloed?

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- Engaging community in the work of any organization requires a culture that believes that talent, from whatever source, is critical to the success of the organization or cause. That means that boards of directors and paid staff have to be intentional and deliberate in enabling and modelling the engagement of others in delivering on the mission of their organization. Does that entail looking more at integrated human resource strategies or, as the Vancouver Olympics did, in creating a “one workforce” plan? Does that mean looking at the paid staff we hire differently?
  - Can we develop new methodologies and evaluative processes that enhance learning as well as teach us more effective ways to tell the stories we need to tell about the contributions and impacts of an engaged citizenry?

The agenda for the Imagine Canada National Summit planned for late November itemizes four priorities that were determined after identifying seven drivers for change and after many provincial and territorial consultations. Two of the four are focused on engaging and retaining human resources – one deals with paid staffing and the other with unpaid staffing. I find it more than interesting (which means it bothers me) that these two priorities will be discussed in separate sessions. I strongly believe that doing this will continue to silo both priorities when, in fact, the discussion might be more productive if it focused on how best to challenge the status quo in terms of mobilizing talent through integration of our human resource strategies.

O’Donnell (2011) writes, “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. 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’s also a community imperative” (para. 23).

I couldn’t say it any better. Think about it!

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APPENDIX A\*

**VOLUNTEER CANADA – COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

This is a spectrum of community engagement opportunities that utilize extra hands (traditional volunteerism/direct service) as well as extra minds (knowledge philanthropy/organizational change). Each opportunity has its own definitional context and process and requires organizational resources to effectively implement.

**Direct Service**

Activities performed on behalf of a community based organization and generally defined through a position description requiring a specific time commitment, i.e., coaching, mentoring, counselling, co-ordinating, repairing, fundraising, delivering meals, etc.

**Episodic Opportunities**

Activities that are performed by individuals or groups that are short term, transactional and usually done in a day or less, i.e., building playgrounds, clean up projects, painting projects, United Way Days of Caring, etc.

**Group Opportunities**

Activities that are organized by or for a group of individuals that can be either short or long term and focused on team building, social networking, and/or building communities of interest, i.e., family volunteering, employee volunteerism, school/community partnerships, youth projects, etc.

**Community Engaged/Service Learning**

Experiential/intentional learning activities that are generally facilitated through community based partnerships aimed at engaging individuals or groups in linking experience, reflection, and action, i.e., practicums, field placements, internships, youth placements/projects, etc.

**Leadership Options**

Activities that require a commitment to leading, supervising and/or mentoring at an organizational level, i.e., Boards of Directors, Advisory Groups/Committees, Committee/ Project Chairs, etc.

**Pro Bono/Skills Based Options**

Individual or group projects that require specific and generally specialized skills. These opportunities are outsourced as projects with defined deliverables, outcomes and project objectives and are focused on skills such as legal, financial, communication, human resources, information technology, i.e., loaned representatives, secondments, project teams, etc.

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