

## **If You Can Manage an All-Volunteer Organization, You Can Manage Your Own**

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### **The Well of Success**

The speaker commonly refers to the volunteerism and business venture spirits as wells. These two wells are analogous to the water feature which sustains and refreshes a need for helping noble/worthy and mutually beneficial causes. These wells are not bottomless and can be depleted and/or contaminated if proper care and stewardship are not provided.

The speaker grew up in a family culture dedicated to helping others. His father was a career academic and ASSE Fellow, and his mother was highly involved in leadership and participation in her church, children's school, community, and political movements. His 31-year career in professional safety can also be looked at as both personally rewarding (keeping workers safe) and professionally rewarding (keeping businesses viable). This incipient-stage cultural value and/or spirit are what motivates almost all volunteers and is key element of this paper's proposition: This is the beginning and foundation of the well construction. Likewise understanding and creating these vested interests in business relationships is critical to organizational success. The leadership and management skills and techniques used to manage this resource of spiritually motivated people can be directly attributed to your own for-profit motivated organization. Specifically, what the speaker learned in 7 years of leadership with his ASSE chapter, industry professional organizations, and other non-work volunteer organizations directly benefited him in his dealings with his own organization and clients.

This paper and presentation will focus on three primary connections between leading and managing an all-volunteer organization and your business or your employer's business:

- First of all, volunteers are not an inexhaustible resource. Nurturing, care and a wide array of management/leadership professional tools are required to recruit and maintain the core.
- Second, inspiring and motivating people to perform outside of their routine lives and/or current commitments can be more of an art than a skill. This is particularly important as people's lives and livelihoods have compressed both away from and at work over the last decade.

- Last and most important may be that volunteer organizations are a great place to develop management tools and rehearse all skills. A tight or un-funded budget, project management, organizing and conducting meetings, and public speaking are normally key components of both volunteer and employer organizations, and from the speaker's point of view, it is much better to practice with a tougher public audience than with clients.

## Care for the Care Giver

Let's begin with discussing the "volunteer spirit" or "active caring." Everyone cares to a great degree for their livelihoods and community. Converting that to action can be the challenge. It is an in-grained American and generally accepted communal rite. Most people gladly volunteer and care when and where needed. There are causes that are near and dear to one's heart such as cancer organizations or protecting the environment, as well as professional networking and knowledge development organizations such as the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE). But there are leaders, followers, and on-call people, and these are important distinctions. There are many reasons people choose one or the other.

Most volunteer-spirited people are already self-motivated and driven when joining a group or organization, including even their employer. They are highly energetic and seeing their organization succeed is reward enough. But in many cases "no good deed goes unpunished" meaning that organizations will continue to take advantage of someone's involvement and energy until it burns out. In many cases the volunteer doesn't speak up until it's too late and their interest and commitment wanes or disappears altogether. The volunteer should constantly be provided feedback and emotional support in the worthiness of the cause.

A common mantra in business is, "What's measured and rewarded gets done!" This is true for volunteer organizations as well. When tasking a volunteer, make sure he/she understands what the commitment entails, monitor and provide constant feedback and encouragement, and then provide public praise or other formal recognition to the volunteer, their organization and their employer.

Finally, all work and no play can make even worthwhile causes tedious and volunteer's commitment tenuous. Get to know your volunteers and create relationships whenever possible. Don't be 100% business 100% of the time. Hold meetings on members' patios and in restaurants, and include meals or happy hours if possible.

Volunteerism is not inexhaustible. It must be constantly nurtured and replenished. Constant reminders of the mutual benefits of committing to a cause, publicly and sincerely praising the efforts, and recognition of the exertions to the volunteer, organization, and employers is a good investment in the long-term effectiveness and continuity of the organization. The volunteer spirit is usually in very high demand, and the volunteer has choices on where and how s/he expends it. In the new world order this has never been truer.

## Competing for People's Time

Speaking of the new-world order, more people are doing more for other than any other time in history except for wartime; ergo, benefits must outweigh burdens. In the last few years of the down economy, families demand more time and energy, employers are asking fewer people to do more with less, and the volunteer's time and commitments are compressed into a shrinking day. It is important for volunteer leaders to understand and appreciate this completely. It is probably safe to say that most do, already being volunteers themselves. The following are some simple considerations in assuring a successful organization.

- Eat the elephant one bite at a time. This means break down the larger efforts into more easily addressed tasks. It is important to consider that each volunteer or individual you are attempting to engage has other demands. A family, employer's, personal interests, prior commitments in that order usually come first. Engaging them along those priorities will help motivate them to participate with you. Being a better professional (ASSE) helps their family and their employer.
- Spread these simpler tasks among individuals and/or teams according to experience and/or interests. It is fairly obvious why this is important for both efficiency and flexibility.
- Knowing and promoting the end-goal's value is important in keeping people's eye on the prize. Many times in the crunch many people can't see the forest through the trees. In project management terms: Where are we going? How do we get there? Where are we now? How do we know when we have arrived?
- Keeping it social and fun appeals to most people by itself, but this is something that needs to be fed often when asking people to go the extra miles. Sometimes it's just good to get out of the office and/or rut. Holding meetings at people's homes or restaurants, and mixing meeting times up between breakfast, lunch and dinner has been found to be helpful. The Colorado ASSE Chapter's executive meetings did this one year when they rotated their monthly meetings to member's homes and patios, and it was thought that this helped connect everyone to the effort.
- Keeping it professional in cases like ASSE chapter activities or business endeavors is expected. Don't sacrifice quality for just getting it done. There should be clear agendas with stated objectives provided for any meeting request. Cancellations or re-scheduling commitments should be done grudgingly. Task assignments should be clear and volunteers or others should understand completely what the expectation is. Documentation and communication should be performed in the most professional manner possible. Again, volunteer organizations such as ASSE are a good place to learn and practice.
- Leadership requires extra time and devotion. Some people are born leaders and some are followers; some are both or can be either as the effort demands. These are important distinctions when engaging people to work with you. This is where this paper's opening discussion comes into play. Going too often to the same leader or follower who is time-tested true and dependable will burn out this resource. There is common saying in this regard that "no good deed will go unpunished," which fully exemplifies this. Born leaders appear to be inexhaustible but also need some care for the care giver. Leaders are good at comprehending the expectations and balancing the priorities.

- Is it working? “People vote with their feet.” If people aren’t attending meetings or volunteering or responding to your assistance or request for help, it can be assumed that your style is not working. One of the first things the author attempted to accomplish when he became the ASSE chapter president, after being a long-serving follower and then board member, was to look globally at everything the chapter was doing for its “value-added.” In the leadership position, he was able to streamline or stop doing several activities, thus making it easier for everyone to do their tasks.

## Everybody Wins

When effective volunteer or organization leadership is in place and maintained everyone will benefit.

The volunteer benefits because his or her time is valued and their family, employer, industry and community benefits. The heightened senses of learning, accomplishment, job and family security, and the feeling that their endeavors lead to a greater personal and professional community are all worthy of people’s efforts. In the author’s experience, his time with his professional society and neighborhood association provided lasting skills and knowledge that helps him to be a better employee and citizen. The biggest value to the employee is honing professional skills prior to needing them with employers and customers. It’s worth mentioning that the skills that the author gained by leading his ASSE chapter organization are listed below.

- How to lead, inspire and motivate people who don’t work for you.
- How to account for money that doesn’t belong to you.
- How to speak effectively in front of large groups.
- How to simplify larger efforts into smaller tasks.
- How to set-up, organize, and run effective meetings or training programs.
- How to manage time regarding personal and professional commitments and conflicts; especially the last-minute, worst-possible timing conflicts.
- How to be creative and find joy and satisfaction in your work and life.

When reading the bullet list above, it is obvious that the employer benefits by having a more effective employee who builds better and longer-term relationships with clients, internal team-work and job satisfaction improves, and both of these items helps maintain current customers and can generate new business.

An all-volunteer organization benefits by making a more effective and rewarding participation proposition to the volunteer. This in turn helps keep the membership actively engaged as well attracting new people. The “base” for the organization benefits from the volunteer’s expertise, skills and commitment.

## **In Conclusion, Remember These Three Points:**

- Provide Care for the Caregivers. Volunteers are not an inexhaustible resource. Make every attempt to keep the organization social and fun and the tasks and responsibilities short and doable. Provide constant feedback on benefits and praise. Always provide recognition for efforts to the volunteer, the organization, and his/her boss/employer.
- You are competing for volunteers. Never forget that in this day and age fewer people are attempting to do more with less. Your organization as well as their families and employers are competing for the volunteer's time and energy. Break down desired activities into manageable tasks, monitor status closely, and make adjustments readily.
- Everybody Wins. If you can make your organization's needs personally and professionally beneficial to your volunteer, this will in turn energize the volunteer to put their full efforts into the cause. Any benefit to one side will certainly benefit the other.