The Value of Volunteerism in Communities

With a quick search on my smart phone I find the definition of volunteerism is: the policy or practice of volunteering (giving) of one’s time or talents for charitable, educational, or other worthwhile activities, especially in one’s community.

In a more applied sense, there are many ways to describe volunteerism. We can look at it from a time perspective where the traditional volunteer often “signed-on” to a cause or organization and served in that role for years. We can likely all think of that individual that fits that description and was important in our lives. In today’s busy world, we often contrast that with the episodic volunteer who signs up for a short-term, very specific job, task, or role and then moves on once that is completed.

So much in our communities rely on the efforts of volunteers for any chance of success. In this sense, we need to look at the types or purpose of volunteerism. There are probably numerous ways to classify volunteer work but I really like the following:

Philanthropy – dispensing funds for humanitarian purpose
Service Learning – a combination of meeting community needs and while achieving learning objectives and reflecting upon what has been learned
Community Service – giving of time to help others whether it be directly (delivering meals), indirectly (planning a service project to be carried out by others), research (collecting information for the public welfare), or advocacy (lending voice to an issue of public interest or for those who cannot advocate for themselves.).

For those of us that rely heavily on volunteers to carry out our mission it is vital that we have identified and can readily describe both the long-term and episodic volunteer opportunities we offer. Within that, we need to be able to readily relay the purpose of that role whether it be to raise money for scholarships or deliver meals to elderly shut-ins.

In addition, organizations are most successful when intentional in the volunteer efforts. There are a number of models out there but my go to model is always the ISOTURE model where each letter in the acronym is a specific, intentional effort we use as we manage volunteers. In this model we Identify individuals, groups, and skill sets that will fit our volunteer needs. We then have some sort of Selection process to bring these volunteers into the organization. Orientation is critical so that the volunteers know their purpose and the philosophy of the organization allowing them to truly represent the mission and vision in their efforts. Successful organizations Train volunteers so they know their duties, resources, and parameters. Utilization of volunteer talents is critical. If you ask someone to volunteer, make sure that their time is valued and well spent for their sake and for the good of the organization Everyone likes a pat on the back and so Recognition is a critical component of a successful volunteer program. These can take a number of forms but never underestimate the effectiveness of a thoughtful, handwritten note. Finally, one of the most important components is Evaluation. As an organization, this is that long, hard look in the mirror where we ask ourselves what we did well and what we need to do differently.

As we shift gears to the individual role, it seems that in today’s busy lifestyle we have somewhat lost that sense of community and with it has come a change in volunteerism. Although
volunteerism is still high, it has shifted from long-term to more episodic and short-term efforts. So I encourage all of our readers to consider volunteering in some form. For an elderly person, that once volunteered long-term but is no longer physically able, there may be a short-term role out there that helps keep the mind active and provide much needed social contact and physical activity. For young people, that episodic volunteer effort may work for you but it may not sustain your community where you like and work. Therefore, I urge you to consider carefully selecting a volunteer role where you can give of your time and talents for the long-term good in addition to your short-term efforts.

All things considered, business and industry are the economic engine for the community but it is our volunteer efforts that make our communities places where we want to live, work and raise young people to be positive, contributing members of society.

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