

Why We Volunteer

To volunteer: to perform a service willingly and without pay

Kim is 43 years old. Her professional incarnation was as an attorney, but she found herself drawn to work with children on the margins of society. She ran an inner-city after-school program for ten years and then, stretching even further, she left for Haiti. Under the auspices of Beyond Borders, she is living with a rural family of subsistence farmers, learning Creole and preparing for ongoing work in Haiti. Volunteer pursuits don't need to be, and typically aren't, as challenging as this, but Kim's journey to live at the peak of her potential is an inspiration to me.

Being a volunteer is almost a way of life in America. Volunteers come in all shapes and sizes. The extremes range from those who have so much money they could personally fund the annual budget of the organization for which they volunteer, to the droves of pro bono attorneys whose frustration with measuring their days in 6 minute intervals and often meaningless legalese forces them to find ways to make sense of their profession. Whatever our circumstances, we volunteer in our quest for understanding, purpose and meaning. We volunteer because we want more in our lives than we have found in other settings. For many of us, the opportunity to serve others is the primary attraction.

When I ran a small nonprofit organization, I found managing volunteers to be frustrating and challenging. They weren't accountable in the same way as employees and their unique skill sets weren't always a perfect match for my organization's needs, or so I thought. For my sanity, and for the sake of those who loved the organization and wanted to volunteer, I learned the secrets of an excellent volunteer experience, where a volunteer both makes a valuable contribution and derives genuine meaning.

As with finding a good relationship, finding an organization in which to volunteer - one that values what we bring to the table and recognizes our contribution as vital to its wellbeing - can be a challenge. Most importantly, we want an organization with a large vision. Goethe said "Dream no small dreams for they have no power to move the hearts of men." Part of Kim's work will be to end child exploitation in Haiti, an enormous task and greater than any one individual's capacity to complete it.

Once we find an organization that suits us, meaningful volunteer experiences are determined by the work we do. Does it stretch us and do we have responsibility for something important? My biggest stretch as a volunteer was for an entry-level job placement agency where applicants who lost their jobs or were fired from their jobs came to the Quit and Fired group, which I ran. I had to learn the language of the streets. I was outside my comfort zone where I discovered an expanded sense of community, and my comfort level increased accordingly. Too often volunteers are seen as unreliable and so not to be trusted with significant roles. This is a mistake. The more that is asked of a volunteer, within reason, the more they will feel integral to the work and the more they will give. It's a win-win situation.

Goethe also recognized that “every person above the ordinary has a certain mission that they are called to fulfill.” Our volunteer work may be this work. When it is, it will feel right, in some way completing us. We may choose it because of something broken in our past, and it may lead to our healing. It will engage us at multiple levels: intellectual, spiritual and emotional. While other things come and go, this work captures our attention in a persistent way. Kim’s concern for children has been a constant in her life.

In case this all sounds like too much effort, the hallmarks of a good volunteer experience are joy, energy and passion. While others affirm what we do – our friends respect us and the organizations where we volunteer thank us regularly - we’d do it anyway for the sheer pleasure of it and the enormous gift it gives us as we become more fully human in the process. Along the way an expanded circle of like-minded colleagues enriches our lives.

To volunteer as a form of giving is an essential element of being human. To find the right volunteer niche can be a challenge, so test something and see if it fits. If not, keep looking. As with any employment position, review it and ask for changes to make it work better for you. Then give yourself to it and you may be surprised by what you receive in return.

Takeaways for the corporate sector:

- Articulate your business mission clearly and make sure your employees can do the same. If your goals are not worthy ones, it’s time to change direction.
 - Appreciate your employees as people with capacity, able to make a genuine contribution to the corporation. This is parallel to living in abundance.
 - Give your employees something significant and meaningful to do.
 - Give them opportunities to stretch to new levels of capacity.
 - Recognize results...many times. Appreciation goes a long way.
 - Build morale and camaraderie.
 - Collegiality sustains the human dimension vital to all successful enterprise.
 - Encourage reflection on the meaning and experience of work. Learn from this and act on it to help your employees find a larger sense of purpose through their work.
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