

## **Building Capacity for Your Volunteer Program: A Call to Action for Nonprofit Leaders:**

In the non-profit sector, we are quick to point to our volunteers as a resource fundamental to our success. “We couldn’t do this without our volunteers” is a mantra we hear repeated often. According to the 2004 study, *Volunteer Management Capacity in America’s Charities and Congregations*, Four in Five nonprofits use volunteers and nine in ten report that their organization benefits from volunteer involvement. An estimated 174,000 of 215,000 nonprofits used volunteers in 2004.

Indeed, the investment of human capital does fuel a lot of the infrastructure that keeps nonprofit doors open. There is a generative value that volunteers bring to our organizations that transcends a simple tally of hours of time donated. Volunteers bring not only time, but a passion for mission and an infusion of skills and money.

This generative potential of volunteers is even more pronounced in today’s volunteer climate. Corporate volunteerism is on the rise, bringing with it a potential infusion of highly skilled volunteers and an expectation of professionalism. Boomer volunteers bring with them a demand for more flexibility in hours, an expectation for shorter term projects and a desire for more leadership opportunities. Generation X expects options, social opportunities and a range of commitment levels. And Millennials, the most civically engaged generation since the Greatest Generation, bring with them optimism and passion for social change. They will expect skills to be fully utilized and to have access to opportunities that reward them with personal growth and enhance their work/life balance.

The generative power of volunteers does not come from volunteers alone, however. Volunteering rarely “just happens”. Effectively harnessing the full potential of volunteers requires skilled, knowledgeable and professional volunteers managers- individuals that can provide the “*creative, inspirational and motivational leadership of volunteers, the management of a diverse range of people and strategic planning of volunteer service* (Anita Bain, ‘*Promote Volunteer Managers and You Promote Volunteers*’, Charity Channel, Wednesday, June 7, 2006)

What is the current reality for volunteer programs in the nonprofit sector? The *Volunteer Management Capacity* study found that only three out of five charities reported having paid staff that devote time to volunteer management and half of those spend less than 30% of their time on volunteer management. A significant number of those managing volunteers have received little to no training in volunteer management, few nonprofits have adopted practices identified as best practices in the volunteer management sector and even fewer nonprofits actually measure the impact of their volunteers. The most effective volunteer programs were those with paid staff who dedicate a substantial portion of their time to volunteer management. The study found that investing more staff time for volunteer management produced a greater level of reported benefits derived from volunteers. The conclusion: the greater the investment in volunteer management, the greater the benefit derived from volunteers.

So here is the big question: As nonprofit leaders, how do we build capacity for our volunteer programs? How do we make the investment necessary to harness the full potential of the volunteers in our organizations? In her article, *12 Key Actions of Volunteer Program Champions*,

Betty Stallings identifies the 12 key activities demonstrated by CEOs that effectively invest and support their volunteer programs:

1. These CEOs express a strong personal, positive philosophy of volunteer engagement and often volunteer themselves.
2. They act on the belief that volunteers are essential to accomplishing the mission and that their support of the volunteer program is essential to the program's success
3. They hire and support a skilled manager of volunteers and understand that the central role of the volunteer manager is to empower the organization to successfully engage volunteers
4. They place the manager of volunteers in a leadership position within the organization.
5. They contribute a strong written philosophy/value statement on the organization's engagement of volunteers
6. They understand that volunteer programs require resources and that costs associated with the management of volunteer resources are reflected in the organizations budget.
7. They provide clear expectations to staff regarding volunteer engagement and ensure that all staff receive training, recognition and evaluation for their work with volunteers.
8. They believe that volunteers should be involved in all levels of the organization and they model good volunteer supervision with their Boards and other volunteers.
9. They integrate the volunteer program into other key components of the organization, such as development, community outreach, advocacy and personnel and encourage team efforts between these components.
10. They involve their Board of Directors in key issues that impact the organization's volunteer program.
11. They see the value of the volunteer program beyond just "saving money" to extending services, strengthening the donor base, etc.
12. They effectively attract financial resources to support the volunteer program.

If building capacity for our volunteer programs were an easy task, we wouldn't be reading this article. Our programs would truly be all they could be. Betty Stallings recognized the challenges and obstacles faced by nonprofit leaders including funding volunteer programs, knowing how to hire the right manager of volunteers and locating resources helpful nonprofit leaders in supporting volunteer programs. Acknowledging the need to promote the stature of our volunteer programs is the first step. Taking steps to address the challenges and obstacles to building the capacity of our programs is our call to action.

Resources:

*From Research to Action: A Unified National Response to the 2004 Volunteer Management Capacity Study*, prepared by Katherine H. Campbell, CVA, The National Human Service Assembly ([www.nassembly.org](http://www.nassembly.org)), Washington D.C., 2004

*Promote Volunteers Managers and You Promote Volunteers*, Ann Bain, Charity Channel (<http://charitychannel.com>), Wednesday, June 7, 2006

*12 Key Actions of Volunteer Program Champions, CEOs Who Lead the Way*, Betty Stallings, Energize, Inc ([www.energize.com](http://www.energize.com)) Philadelphia, PA, 2005