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By Barry Nickelsberg



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Americans have always prided themselves on being generous people, giving both their time and money to worthy charitable causes. So when shortages of volunteers began to emerge in recent times, the not-for-profit sector was shocked.

**V**olunteers who sit on governing boards, who help to carry out some of the work of the organisation have been crucial to the success of most organisations. When this pool of supporters begins to dwindle, the work of charities could suffer.

Several reasons can be cited for the decline of available volunteers. First, for generations women had been the stalwarts of many charities, ranging from the American Red Cross and the American Cancer Society to major museums, symphony orchestras, and historic preservation societies. But one of the major shifts in American life has reduced this source of volunteers. At least 60 per cent of American women now work outside the home, and do not have much time to volunteer.

Second, men heading major businesses and corporations who once would have been willing to sit on boards now say business takes up all their time and the prestige of board membership is not as important to them as it once was.

## In search of the lesser spotted volunteer

Third, the increase in the number of not-for-profit organisations in the USA has created a demand for more and more volunteers. Between 1977 and 1987, the number of organisations classified as charities by the Internal Revenue Service grew from 276,000 to 422,000. So the competition for trustees is fierce.

As a result, many charities in the USA are trying new approaches to recruiting members of governing boards and workers. Some techniques that are proving effective include:

- Executive search firms have been helping to recruit board members, often at no expense.
- Some charities are also using the research being conducted to identify potential donors to pinpoint prospects for boards.
- Middle echelon young executives are being wooed onto boards by the prospect of not only helping the organisation, but also of gaining new management skills and making new contacts.
- Individuals who have retired early have time and interest to help charities.
- Strong training programmes are being provided for new board members to help them understand their

responsibilities and ways to carry out those duties.

Also, smaller charities are discovering that they may be in a better position to recruit enthusiastic volunteers than larger and more established organisations. The member of a seven-person board has the opportunity to participate in a wider variety of activities and have a more direct influence on the path the organisation follows than the member of a 35-person board. So interested, committed individuals often seek out smaller charities where they can work hard and see results sooner.

Finally, the realisation is growing that all board members have more responsibility than just setting policies, budgets, and hiring the chief staff officers. Board members must financially support their charities themselves, and then help solicit financial support from others. Until we train our board members on how to successfully request money, we cannot expect them to participate or even be comfortable with the idea.

*Barry Nickelsberg is the executive director of The Funding Center and chairperson of the World Congress of Philanthropy.*