

Volunteer Paradigm Shift - A Four Stage Model

By: Lee George, Brain Injury Association of Minnesota

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A concise view of current volunteer trends and Baby Boomers which are the catalyst for a major volunteer paradigm shift.

Relatively recently, the aging of individuals born between 1946 and 1964 – Baby Boomers -- has been of great interest to many individuals and groups because of the impact they have on our communities. Baby Boomers impact our communities in many ways, one of which is philanthropy. “To attract Baby Boomers to volunteering, experts on aging agree that nonprofit groups and others must boldly rethink the types of opportunities they offer to “re-imagine” roles for older American volunteers that cater to Boomers’ skills and desire to make their mark in their own way” (*Keeping Boomers Volunteering p. 2*). There is an amazing group of individuals who are more educated than any generation before them, who desire to make an impact on their community and who are entrepreneurs. We have the opportunity to help provide opportunities for these individuals. Through volunteer leaders, passionate community members, members of government, non-profits, for-profits and others, how volunteerism is to be re-imagined can take shape.

The following outlines a way in which we can move from volunteerism which is shaped by the objectives of non-profits to volunteerism that is shaped by the passions and objectives of volunteers. This is the paradigm shift we can create to help organizations collaborate with Baby Boomers and generations who follow. This is the paradigm shift we can create to engage communities and help them find new and deep ways to impact their world. This is the paradigm shift we can create to continue collaborating with companies to support philanthropic endeavors. This is the paradigm shift we can create to let politicians know that we care about our world, our communities, and our neighborhoods. It is your task to figure out how you play a part in this paradigm shift. While it may seem overwhelming initially we must not forget that there are many different groups that are working towards creating a new type of volunteerism. It takes each of these entities to change the trends in volunteerism. There are four stages that need to be considered in order to accommodate Baby Boomers and quell the growing concern that the diminishing volunteer force of the Greatest and Silent generation will not be replaced. The four stage model is meant to give perspective on the direction of the volunteer paradigm shift, encourage those involved to continue their involvement in whichever niche they have found, and to encourage those not already involved to become engaged.

The four stages are:

1. **Discovery**; identifying the pillars of the new volunteer paradigm.
2. **Best Practices**; identifying what organization has already or is implementing best practices of each pillar of the new volunteer paradigm.
3. **Support**; identifying what support organizations need in order to continue implementing best practices.
4. **Initiation**; identifying what is missing and who will fill the void.

If non-profit, for-profit and independent community members collaborate to work through these four stages, the “re-imaging” of volunteerism can take shape.

Before we move on to dissect these four stages, let us clarify why time and effort should be put into changing the volunteer paradigm. The Baby Boomer population is a large and growing community. There seems to be a consensus within volunteerism that the trends and traditions in volunteerism do not currently appeal to Baby Boomers.

According to a study in *Reinventing Aging*, “Unless boomers perceive opportunities for service as being convenient and tailored to their particular individual interests, they may simply walk away from such activities in favor of something more appealing” (p. 33). Their civic engagement will be different from that of older generations because “first, Baby Boomers have higher education levels compared to older generations. Second, Baby Boomers in their 40s and 50s are more likely to have school-aged children at home than older generations did at the same age” (*Keeping Boomers Volunteering p. 2*).

Engagement increases with increased education. Individuals are also more likely to engage in community activities if there are individuals under the age of 18 residing in their home. Baby Boomers tend to want to leave a lasting impact on their community. “Their personal stake in social engagement has to be understood by them, and by society at large, as far more profound than amusement or diversion” (*Reinventing Aging p. 33*).

Boomers want to understand their role in a holistic way. Meaning, whatever opportunity they decide to participate in they want to know the reason for what they are doing and what kind of impact it will have. They are also a group of entrepreneurs. They want to have ownership and creative input into what they choose to spend their time on.

The traditional trend in volunteerism is that organizations dictate what kind of an impact volunteers will have. There are many tools volunteer administrators use to fit a volunteer with an opportunity that they are interested and passionate about but still the concept is that volunteers have to fit into a particular form. **The future trend is for volunteers to choose how they want to impact their community and for organizations to accommodate this interest and passion.**

All groups – whether non-profit, for-profit, governmental etc. – must empower individuals and allow a forum for them to make an impact and affect their communities. This model should not be limited to Baby Boomers specifically but should transcend demographics and be applied to all potential volunteers. If an environment can be created where individuals have creative input into how they make an impact, volunteerism will evolve in a positive way.

This background information and the conclusion that this movement must transcend demographics are essential to understanding and implementing the four stages.

First Stage: Discovery

Discovery involves identifying the pillars of the new volunteer paradigm. These pillars represent the areas that are most important to the success of the new volunteer paradigm.

These pillars are individuals, organizations (for-profit, non-profit and government), infrastructure and policy. (See Diagram 1, page 5)

First Pillar:

Individuals: Independent community members need to be mobilized in order to continue providing diverse services to their communities. These individuals must be empowered to know they can make an impact and also be given innovative ways to do this which harnesses the concept of ownership and entrepreneurialism. A forum must be created to give these individuals the basic resources to introduce new volunteer services into their communities and organizations. If these individuals can be motivated to volunteer, then organizations which use volunteers will change to accommodate them.

Even if they do not choose to participate in an organization's volunteer program, this group may still create social impact in their neighborhoods or immediate communities by advocating for and providing services to many of the same individuals as our organizations. In this way, volunteering can transition from a non-profit activity to a way of life.

In the first pillar, volunteering will not necessarily be defined by organizations. It will incorporate services that people are already participating in like raking a neighbor's lawn or going to the grocery store for them. One of the issues of the current volunteer paradigm is that the word "volunteer" has a lot of baggage attached to it. When we look at service to our neighbors or even our own family members and friends we do not define it as volunteer work but the impact it has is just as powerful and sometimes greater.

Second Pillar:

Non-profit, for-profit and governmental organizations must continue to be involved in creating an environment for individuals to impact their community. Non-profit organizations represent a structured forum in which volunteerism has occurred for a long time. There has been change and evolution within this entity and thus has created certain trends within volunteerism. Most notably is, an organization dictates how individuals impact their community based on the mission and vision of the organization. This type of structure has given very little power to the volunteers to actually have creative input in the services, support and impact they have on their community. Organizations must be influenced in order to create a new way for volunteers to be involved in the mission and vision of the organization. This might not be a change in the opportunities that are presented because the work current volunteers are doing still needs to be done, but it might mean a different approach to the formation of opportunities and the type of management of volunteers. This means volunteer administrators and staff must find ways to involve volunteers in the creative process. Volunteers must have a way to impact the community the way they would like to and this begins with how volunteer opportunities are created which traditionally is solely by the volunteer administrator and then how volunteer opportunities are presented which usually means the organization posts a position description. Volunteers can be integrated into the creation of a position through direct involvement with the volunteer administrator or by posting a project concept or the skills they would like to utilize while volunteering and then a volunteer administrator would create an opportunity for them.

For-profit companies are also an essential part to the movement and paradigm shift. There have been an increasing number of companies who put value on social engagement and have even created forums for their employees to engage in activities that are meaningful to them. The support of major financial entities that influence our economy will be vital to the continuation of volunteerism because they will offer financial support for non-profits and incentives for individuals to engage in volunteerism. "The benefits for business are many. It improves their reputation, internal culture, productivity and long-term sustainable future in the community. For employees, it improves their professional development, leadership opportunities and morale" (<http://www.cvctc.org/about.asp>).

Many community members volunteer through government programs like in our city and county parks by maintaining trails, planting trees, removing invasive species, giving tours and many more. This is a very viable way to volunteer and is important because it helps to reinforce that we can participate in our government without having to hold public office. By volunteering in government initiated opportunities we tell our political representatives what is important to us.

Third Pillar:

Infrastructure is made up of organizations which focus not only on volunteerism within their organization but volunteerism on a larger scale; city, state or national. These entities help individual organizations by creating volunteer management standards, training volunteer leaders in best practices, mobilizing individuals, creating a forum to recruit volunteers, research and help keep the momentum through continual improvement of volunteerism. Volunteerism would be considerably weaker if these entities did not exist. There would be few if any avenues for individuals and organizations to network with each other and learn and influence what volunteering looks like.

Fourth Pillar:

Policy will have to be seriously looked at if we are to consider a new paradigm in volunteerism. Tax breaks for gas mileage spent on volunteering is one incentive along with stipends after completion of AmeriCorps and Peace Corps. California has recently elevated Volunteer Management to a Cabinet level position, but in Minnesota the Office of Citizenship and Volunteer Services was closed by past Governor Jesse Ventura. Despite contradictions between states on how the government plays a role in volunteerism “83.9 million American adults volunteer, representing the equivalent of over 9 million full-time employees at a value of \$239 billion” (*Independent Sector*). With the mention of volunteerism in recent presidential speeches it is evident that more thought needs to be put into how we encourage volunteerism through policy and legislation.

Second Stage: Best Practices

There might be organizations which have already established best practices in each of the pillars. In each community whether or not there is in fact an organization who is establishing best practices in each pillar must be examined and identified. Of course an individual or entity does not necessarily have to take on the responsibility of an entire pillar. There are many ways that individuals can be mobilized, there are many ways organizations can encourage volunteerism, there are many ways in which infrastructure can be initiated and there are many ways in which policy can be implemented in order to encourage volunteerism. The main purpose for this stage is to set up the third and fourth stages which are support and initiation. By examining what already exists we will be better able to support the changing volunteer paradigm through initiating best practices which have not yet been implemented. Also by examining what already has been initiated we can be encouraged that we ourselves do not have to take on the paradigm shift in its entirety. We must however take on part of the shift and give it adequate attention and resources.

Third Stage: Support

The first two stages have to do with identifying the initial foundation of the volunteer paradigm shift. This four stage model is not one that can only be implemented in Minnesota but can also be implemented in states all across America. So the first two stages should be the same no matter where you are. The third stage is where the coalition will be initiated. The coalition will help to maintain the direction of the volunteer paradigm shift by encouraging or supplementing time and resources that other organizations have not already started. Ideally this group is not an organization unto itself but is a group of individuals who are representatives from the four areas individuals, organizations, infrastructure and policy. This third party will conduct discussions which help to keep a cohesive momentum going towards a volunteer paradigm shift. In times when there is not a group that is representing any of the four pillars than it is this groups charge to initiate a group who will take on a pillar and initiate a program or opportunity. Or, for a time the coalition itself will participate in establishing a pillar. Once it has helped to

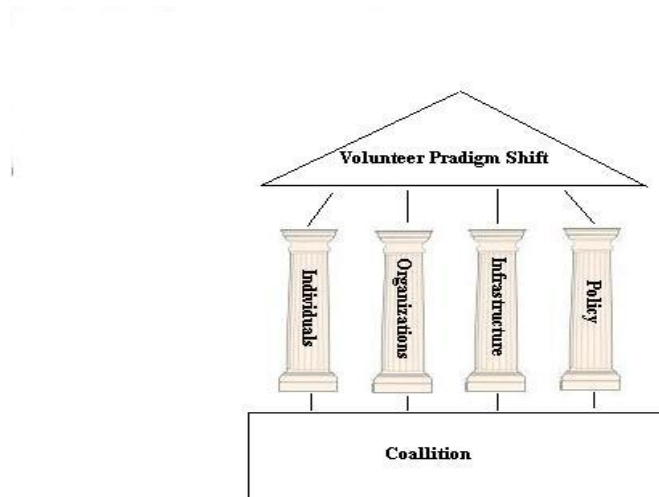
initiate the missing area then it must back away in order to fulfill its role. Each city or state that is looking at implementing the four stages will find different areas which need support.

Fourth Stage: Initiation

The fourth stage is identifying what is missing and fill the void. In identifying the pillars it is essential that each pillar has multiple entities which help to keep it standing. For instance, individuals should not only be mobilized through one or two ways but must be empowered and mobilized diverse ways. Organizations must also adapt in a variety of ways contingent upon the mission and size of the organization. Filling the void may be the most difficult aspect of implementing the four stage model. Many organizations are not capable of establishing more than one of the pillars, so the question then is how and who establishes the missing pillar? This is why it is important that a coalition is formed in order to fill the voids.

The four stages of **discovery, best practices, support and initiation** must be completed if volunteerism is to be “re-imaged” and take shape. It is equally important that each of the four pillars **individuals, organizations, infrastructure and policy** be established and the responsibility of each respective pillar be taken on by an independent group, individual or organization. Finally there must be a third party made up of representatives of each pillar. By acknowledging the four stage model we identify that there must be an active change in volunteering if services, advocacy and support of current volunteers is going to continue. The four stage model also tells us that there must be a multifaceted approach to the change and it would be extremely difficult for any one entity to establish a best practice in each pillar. By acknowledging this we independently establish best practices in which ever pillar best fits our interests, passions and resources. By identifying our boundaries we find freedom in our ability to help change what volunteerism looks like. If these things can be accomplished a new future of volunteerism will exist wherein individuals are empowered to impact their communities on their own, feel empowered to create change through a structured organization and are able to continue the services and supports that the Greatest and Silent generation were an integral part of.

Diagram 1:



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