

# Viewpoint\*

## “Commitment” In the Age of Free Agency

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*(The following article is based on a letter to a friend and fellow volunteer for the Schulich's Management Advisory Service (MAS), an organization which offers the services of skilled management volunteers to nonprofits. My friend had bemoaned what he perceived as a current lack of “commitment” among volunteers.)*

### Introduction

My friend was concerned about the lack of personal volunteer “commitment” available for organizations such as MAS to draw upon. What we have achieved at the MAS, he said, was due, not to technique, but to “a small group of persons with skills, time and, most important of all, “commitment”. Where, he went on to ask, “do we find others with commitment? Ah there’s the rub!”

I think, rather I know, that he has the problem well defined but I come at the answer from a somewhat different angle. I do not think there is much to be gained by a search for traditional commitment at the present time.

The mainstays of our volunteer organizations have, until lately, been a particular type of volunteer. They have had in abundance what could be called “commitment”. They come from a long tradition going back over many generations with attitudes that have moulded our society. They were driven by some sense of duty, of individual responsibility, of obligation to serve the community which stemmed from something deep within, like Horatius at the bridge, driven to defend “the ashes of his fathers and the temples of his gods”.

But these traditional volunteers are a dwindling and aging breed. I do not think that the idea, the concept of community responsibility, is wrong or dead – it is just out of fashion at the moment – so much out of fashion that there is just no

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use in trying to revive it. In due course, this situation will change; one day it will again be fashionable to be of service to others on a volunteer basis but that day lies beyond the horizon and I rather suspect that we will all be dead before the concept revives. In the interim, I am not prepared to wait around for that new dawn. We will wait a long time if Commitment is to be the password for entry into voluntary service.

### **Free Agency**

I am sure that the name Al Leiter means nothing to you but for me he symbolizes the current age. As a long-standing baseball fan, I recall Leiter as an ordinary young pitcher from whom much was expected in the early '90s. He was given a generous contract (over \$1 million per year) by the Toronto Blue Jays but before his talent had matured, his arm turned sour and he spent almost all of his first contract in rehab, testing in the minors, with repeated failures with the Blue Jays. But the team stuck by him, giving him access to all the help that money and science could furnish. Almost the whole of the baseball world had given up on this hasbeen (or never-was). The team got virtually nothing for their millions in that first contract and, in addition, spent untold sums with unbelievable patience and concern trying to rebuild Leiter's arm with skilled surgery, coaching and extra training.

And with some success. As his contract came up for renewal, Leiter began to show some hint of his former promise but before the Jays could earn a return on their investment, Al had gone to New York which was able to offer more money. He has pitched there over the last few years with distinction. There was no sense of obligation (commitment, you could say) to the Jays; no thought that the team deserved some return for its time, patience and money. Over the period of his rehab, Leiter had acquired the seniority to become a "free agent" as we now call them. Some say that it is the Al Leiters and the other free agents who have ruined baseball; however, we can't spend time deploring Leiter's behaviour or crying for the Jays. We have to accept that free agency is now the *modus operandi* and that is the way that baseball teams will be developed in future. I think it is morally wrong, economically misguided and in the long run, ruinous for the game but I must accept that that is the way it is.

### **General Free Agency**

In truth, sport only mimics society. Doctors trained, supported and generously paid by the state now "withdraw their services" or emigrate to achieve higher fees. Teachers go on an illegal strike to protest the advent of accountability in the classroom. Those less naive than I (such as my children) cynically take it for granted that government is mainly institutionalized corruption. Many

partners of the large legal firms now have such extravagant lifestyles that they can no longer afford the *pro bono* work that they and their firms used to undertake with such pride. Very ordinary bureaucrats now believe they are worth millions per annum just to manage banks which, in my opinion, must be the most easily replaceable function in Canadian business. I sit occasionally at a university watching a whole generation of academics flagrantly abuse the privileges provided to tenured faculty in such places. And how many of our MAS clients feel deeply and personally for those causes which they claim to serve or are they just low-paid salaried workers in rather undemanding nine-to-five jobs? I could go on and on.

I read a review the other day of a book with an intriguing title, "A Society of Free Agents". That seems to sum up the current dilemma.

### **The Volunteer Today**

Whole volumes have been written about today's volunteer. We all know that early retirement, a much longer and much more active lifespan, and an unprecedented level of affluence among those retired, has created a huge labour pool. This should, by any traditional measure, have spurred an enormous upsurge in volunteer activity, but everyone decries the absence of the volunteer. What has happened?

Has free agency extended to the ranks of volunteer? Has the prevailing ethos made selfish sybarites of us all? Does free agency sap all but the most basic of one's desires? Are we all on year-round vacations from responsibility?

Yes, I think that free agency plays a part in the current crises in volunteerism. With so many options combined with ample time, funds, and health, people can be much choosier about how they spend their time. They can now choose their own goals and many are choosing not to respond to cries for "commitment" to the goals of others.

But the current dilemma is not all attributable to free agency.

### **The So-Called "Voluntary" Sector**

As all of us at MAS know, there are now few volunteers in the volunteer sector and virtually none in any meaningful role. Hardly anyone calls the sector "voluntary" anymore. The argument is only whether it should be called "non-profit" or "not-for-profit". For example:

- You will no doubt have noted the sad item in the papers last year describing how the once vigorous and purposeful volunteer organization at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) had been altered. Its special projects (funds for acquisitions) had been downgraded in importance,

its separate organization has been disbanded with the volunteers “integrated” into operating departments “for better control” and its fundraising results had been incorporated into the general revenue flow. Not surprisingly, the volunteers were scattering.

- Many of us can remember how the Toronto Civic Garden Centre, a venerable and valuable initiative of the Toronto Garden Club, was taken over by a greatly enlarged “professional” staff who promptly displaced the several hundred volunteers of the Club from any meaningful role except fundraising, quickly dissipated a generous endowment, and in the end so frustrated the Garden Club that it virtually abandoned the enterprise and developed quite separate ventures (e.g., Canada Blooms) with other partners.
- Some of us remember a meeting some time ago with directors and others in the arts and cultural field when we, and MAS volunteers generally, were directly accused by the professional staff of these organizations of being “replacement workers” set on following some right-wing agenda.
- We have often been disappointed to discover that the “advocacy” roles proudly claimed by certain types of clients all too often turn out to be advocating little more than continued financial support for the salaries and overheads of management and staff. Seldom has thought been given to the use of volunteers in key roles.
- When the initial modest cutbacks were imposed on the sector several years ago agencies were forced to review for the first time the priorities of their various activities. It came as a surprise to many outsiders that the first action taken in many agencies was to reduce or eliminate the volunteer co-ordination function which had been allowed to evolve over time to an ineffective and superfluous operation.
- Even with my limited experience I can name five organizations, all within one mile of each other in central Toronto, all with quite different names and separately funded, but all doing essentially the same work. All are suffering from revenue shortfalls and to each of these I have suggested (quietly and tentatively), that perhaps some form of co-operation, co-ordination, sharing, etc., might result in more economical and effective operations. Always the reaction has been instant, vociferous and hostile: such a topic is not for discussion. By the way, in none of these organizations do volunteers play any useful role, except perhaps to sit on rubber-stamp boards.

From the viewpoint of the volunteers the sector is like a barbell. There is a place for volunteers at the top of the chart at the board level where the orientation is almost entirely external, responsible for fundraising but rubber-

stamping the decisions of the “real” players. And there is a place left for volunteers at the bottom of the chart, manning phones and reception desks and stuffing envelopes. But volunteers are seldom found in significant operational roles between these two extremes.

Is it any wonder that the sector is so devoid of volunteers, especially when there are so many other activities which, depending on preferences, can be rewarding to the individual who now enjoys sufficient time, affluence and health to pursue them?

### **A Future Without Volunteers?**

The not-for-profit sector is sorely stressed, as we all know. In the past, more liberal funding allowed the sector to evolve in a quite disorganized fashion. It is essentially operated without standards of performance so that too often it becomes ineffective. There are usually only vague, general goals and far too many organizations are poorly managed and hugely inefficient.

Now with funding reduced, the sector is being forced to change. This forced change is long overdue but, interestingly, none of the proposed solutions involves a return to its volunteer roots:

- The political left sees the clients of MAS as being essentially public services and would like to sweep them all into the public sector, professionalizing the services and unionizing the practitioners;
- The political right wants to privatize as much as possible, allowing the marketplace to take over what it can and persuading the others to be somehow “sustained” by commercial sponsors or alternatively, to disappear.

In the world of free agency, society, it seems, has to choose between these two extremes neither of which requires anything like voluntary service or “commitment”. Is everything in the age of free agency to be based on payment for performance? Are all important functions and activities to depend upon only those who can benefit directly and personally from their involvement? Is there to be no role for the committed volunteer because this species has become extinct?

### **MAS: An Alternative Approach**

If all of this is so obvious and logical, if it points so definitely to a future where volunteerism is seen only as a nostalgic anachronism, how can we account for the success of MAS?

This is not the place to go at length into what has been accomplished by MAS in the last five years but, in brief, when everyone else is complaining about the

lack of volunteers, we have a roster of at least 120 people recruited simply by spreading the word only among friends and neighbours, with virtually no general publicity. With very little effort we could double the roster. Although I think we all agree that would be a mistake, the very fact that we could, belies the notion that there are no volunteers. What does this say about the availability of these “free agents”?

We do not have an unblemished record of satisfied consultants. There has been turnover, but there are many now who have stayed the course for a period of years and have found the experience rewarding. How did this happen?

- The key is that we have maintained a wholly volunteer operation. There are no vested interests or job security concerns which can often gnaw away at morale.
- We have been lucky in being able to fit the consultant to the task – sometimes square pegs in round holes but usually to an acceptable level of compatibility.
- We have avoided over-the-shoulder supervision and left the control of assignments with the individual consultant on the job.
- We have virtually no hierarchy, no organization chart nor any decision chain and we have kept bureaucracy and red tape to a minimum. As much as possible, volunteers are able to spend their time with the clients and their problems without enervating administration.
- We have given talented individuals an opportunity to exercise their talents and to generate their own satisfactions.

In short: MAS gives individual volunteers the opportunity of doing work which they like doing; working directly with those who want help without intermediaries, and doing it in an environment without artificial distractions and controls and with clearly defined goals which allow the volunteer consultant the satisfaction of seeing success when it arrives.

And increasingly we have seen success: MAS works. We have dealt with quite a large number of clients and, of course, not all of them have been satisfied. In too many situations our work did not achieve any real change, but the level of client satisfaction has been such that we now see an increasing number of return engagements. We must be doing something right and MAS has demonstrated that it can operate in the climate of free agency. It could be argued that it is easier to achieve such success because a consulting activity is very adaptable to a free-agent environment but I would be surprised if there were not many other operations within the not-for-profit sector that would be

benefitted, if not transformed, by adopting some of the operating techniques of MAS.

In essence, I think we will have to change some basic ideas about operating in the volunteer sector. The standard operating model was copied from industry many years ago and the sector does not always appreciate that business has been developing new forms. If we are to avoid the hard, and for me unacceptable, choices of the unionization of the political left or the marketplace of the political right, we must change the environment that has chased volunteers out of the sector.

We must accept that the old model just will not attract the free agents. Perhaps we have to throw away the old organization charts with boxes representing functions and single positions with authority. This may have been necessary in the old factory model of the traditional business schools but it may be too stifling for the kind of work that will be acceptable to free-agent volunteers. We may have to rethink what we mean by “control” and not let meaningless decision-making privileges get in the way of effective operation. And certainly we have to be far more flexible about timing, schedules and job sharing.

Finally, we must accept that “commitment” has no relevance today. What is now important is personal satisfaction and we know that there are many competing opportunities for satisfaction. I believe that the voluntary sector can be made to generate much personal satisfaction. The trick will be rearrange the organization, the work allocation and responsibilities so that people can see their contributions and be recognized for them. Those who are not being paid or otherwise remunerated must be able to earn the satisfaction of having done something “meaningful”, they must be made to feel that they have “made a difference”. I believe that will be a real attraction for free agents.

The task before us is to convince our client organizations that these basic operating realities are the road to survival and to show them how to achieve it.

### **The Easy Part**

The easy part is the traditional “care and feeding” routines that are common to most successful volunteer organizations. At MAS we try for the following as a minimum:

#### *Vigorous and Unending Recruiting Campaigns*

- If extensive effort is a thing of the past then we must depend upon a larger number of volunteers.

- Goals for roster size and volunteer utilization should be among the priority objectives written into the strategic plan.
- I would be inclined to establish some benchmarks so that, for example, spending on volunteers should always be a fixed per cent of the general promotion budget.

#### *Volunteer Utility (and satisfaction) Must Be Emphasized*

- Volunteers must be carefully introduced to the organization. The entry interview cannot be delegated to junior staff.
- The objectives of the organization must be explained, the roles available for volunteers must be detailed. Volunteers should be encouraged to choose specific projects that command their interest.
- As soon as possible participation options should be offered.
- Training and the opportunity for self improvement should be a regular and continuing feature of the volunteer experience.

#### *Continual Contact Must Be Maintained*

- Records must be kept for each volunteer and should include preferences, availability, etc., which the volunteer should be asked to update at regular intervals. Such information is essential for effective matching of talent to available task.
- Newsletters are important but there must also be regular contact on a personal basis.
- There should be regular information sessions to which all volunteers are invited. At MAS, regular (about three times a year) “Shareholder Meetings” are carefully promoted and usually well attended.

#### *The Social Aspects*

- We should never lose sight of the need to provide a socially pleasing environment. We don’t pay volunteers with money so pleasure is an essential substitute. At MAS we like to think of ourselves as a club and our consultants as fellow members.

I have called the above “The Easy Part” because it covers the traditional care and feeding routines for volunteers. I repeat them here because I suspect that they are still more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

#### **The Real Challenge**

In the commercial world “re-engineering” has been very much in vogue as companies develop better ways to meet the insistent demands of customers



and to refocus the corporate emphasis on competitive advantages and essential capabilities. We have not heard so much about “re-engineering” in the not-for-profit world. But re-engineering, if it were used to entice volunteers back to this sector, could yield substantial benefits.

I am well aware that re-engineering (and the accompanying downsizing) has been blamed (rightly) for much of our current economic and social dislocation; it has become a dirty word with strong political overtones. However, what we call re-engineering was, in fact, a very necessary and long overdue readaptation of commercial organizations to a new market reality. There is no denying that management was to blame for not having foreseen the need for changes earlier so that the appropriate response could have been more evolutionary than revolutionary. Also, in too many cases, the implementation by management was heavy handed with the cost falling on the least fortunate and least able to adapt. We have been through a very unfortunate adjustment.

But the need for change in our commercial organizations cannot be denied and the same sort of change is required in the not-for-profit sector. It is not an exaggeration to call for a re-engineering.

Re-engineering should not be confused with that other buzz word of the '90s, “downsizing”. The fact is that the resources available to the voluntary or not-for-profit sector have been declining for several years. The entire sector has been downsized without the benefits of re-engineering and it is now starved for resources. Perhaps re-engineering in this context can become a route to survival and lead to a desperately needed increase in capability and service.

In truth, re-engineering is just the current word for a thorough review of every aspect of an organization. We know that, except in rare instances, further funding will not be available. Why not accept the premise that our last untapped resource is the volunteer talent, the cost/benefit and the enthusiasm of our volunteer base? Why not base our re-engineering review on the question: how can we restructure our activities in such a way as to get maximum benefit from this resource of volunteers?

I would like to see organizations review the whole span of their activities top to bottom. The key question would not be, “What jobs can we assign to volunteers?” but rather “*How can we restructure each of our activities so as to make them attractive to free-agent volunteers?*”

I have no doubt that this will entail a great deal of rethinking of the conventional wisdom. For example:

- The abandonment or drastic reworking of the conventional organization chart with its one job / one person boxes.
- The development of creative worksharing schemes.
- A redistribution of organizational decision-making. "Empowerment" is very much a current buzzword. It should have a special resonance in voluntary organizations. We should push this concept as far as we can, getting responsibilities and decision-making with their corresponding satisfactions, down from the hierarchy to as many in the organization as possible.
- This rethinking of volunteer work arrangements must acknowledge the new communication devices and take advantage of the attractions of the at-home office.

Of course all this will put new demands on management, especially on its co-ordination skills, so as to allow for much greater diversity of work habits and preferences. But how realistic is this? *Can you honestly say that something as radical as this would be considered worthwhile in your organization?* In my opinion only those who answer with a resounding "yes" will survive and thrive in the new world of the free-agent volunteer.

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### **Correction**

Sandra L. Bozzo, Research Assistant at the Canadian Centre of Philanthropy, was a member of the partnership between the Centre and the Canadian Policy Research Network which prepared a report for Human Resources Development Canada. Ms Bozzo was incorrectly identified in footnote 1 of "Work in the Nonprofit Sector: The Knowledge Gap" (1998), 14 *Philanthrop.* No.3, p. 45.