

Reinventing, Re-imagining Voluntarism and the Voluntary Sector  
(Published in The Nonprofit Times, June 1, 2008)

By Irv Katz, President & CEO  
National Human Services Assembly

Volunteering and the voluntary sector have begun to diverge on some levels and that may well be a good thing. Voluntarism, a term that encompasses both the sector and the acts of individuals, is a bit, well, dated. It has fallen out of fashion, replaced with “nonprofit,” “third” or “independent” for the sector and volunteerism for the acts of individuals.

The shift from voluntary to nonprofit (and other variations for the sector) reflects the evolution of the sector but it does not go far enough.

A couple of important facts: first, it is more about auspices that define the million-plus nonprofit organizations in the U.S. than a reliance on volunteers or charity. All three are closely associated with our notions of the sector, but, as readers of The Nonprofit Times well know, there are sets of organizations in the sector that rely substantially on volunteers and on charitable donations and perform charitable acts and there are those that are primarily operated by paid individuals, receive few or no charitable donations, and operate primarily for the benefit of members, an industry or an institution rather than to perform charitable acts.

Second, let's face it, the language we use is, well, language we use; the language of the sector and the sector itself are not understood by the public at large. We have all had experiences where others have expressed surprise that (*select all of the following that apply*): people in the sector are paid, there are hundreds of thousands of nonprofit organizations, there are *skilled* people in the leadership of these organizations who are paid commensurate with the scope of their responsibilities, many nonprofit organizations are complex and sophisticated, nonprofit organizations do not operate primarily on charitable donations.

And why should the public understand the sector? We enable the confusion by failing to articulate and educate about what is truly unique about our organizations (i.e., “community” ownership), by allowing our sector to be defined by what it is not rather than what it is and what it contributes that is essential to our way of life, by enabling misconceptions of the role of charity and volunteering in our work.

Many organizations and many good, even essential, works of the sector rely on charitable donations of time and money. Yet, would it hurt for the public to understand that nonprofits require a large cadre of paid staff as well as volunteers and that government funding, third-party payments, and earned

income eclipse charitable donations by a very, very wide margin? Or would it hurt for the public to understand that while, yes, the sector is distinct from the other two, there is also a significant interdependence with the public and profit sectors, particularly with respect to financial and human resources?

Clearly, I have tipped my hand: I believe it would help for people to know these things; in fact, I believe it is essential to the viability of the sector going forward. So, why does it matter that the public understands the sector as it is and as it is evolving? Historically, it did not matter particularly; we could fly just fine below the radar. Today, there are some very compelling reasons:

- Public funding for human services and programs that enhance quality of life, services provided in large measure by third-sector organizations, is eroding. Many domestic programs are so little valued that they are categorized as *discretionary*, even though they are essential to the functioning of many Americans.
- Demographically driven workforce and leadership deficits loom over the sector, not enough entry-level workers, baby-boomers in management preparing to retire. The other two sectors face the same challenges, with the result that the nonprofit sector is competing for talent with the for-profit and public sectors as never before. The competition could be particularly acute for minority talent.
- Volunteerism remains essential to the sector but research and experience suggest that the sector faces huge challenges: the rate of volunteering remains relatively flat, many nonprofits lack the capacity and know-how to recruit and effectively engage volunteers, and we tend to be a sector of one-size-fits-all volunteerism when it is increasingly clear that different generations have differing expectations and needs.
- The number of nonprofit organizations continues to grow while the rate of charitable giving is essentially flat (note: the number of dollars may increase from year to year but the percentage of GDP and household income contributed remains relatively flat). Combining this factor with looming reductions in public funding, there could be fewer dollars spread over more organizations, with the potential of more limited and diffuse impact. (Some predict there will be organizational failures and consolidations in light of these factors but that remains to be seen.)

Bottom line: as a sector, we must compete and we must have the understanding, appreciation and support of the public not only to compete but also because we need their engagement and good will to do the work of community. We are ill served by allowing fuzzy notions of the sector to exist. We are ill served by not helping people in all demographic categories appreciate the sector as a world of enterprise as complex, challenging and gratifying as any

other—perhaps more important to the third sector than the other two since we depend on both paid and unpaid human resources.

It is here that I should state, there are no simple answers, and yet proceed to offer some. Let me just say, here are some steps we might all consider on the road to reinventing and better positioning the sector:

- Adopt more descriptive, precise common language. I know it is like herding cats to get everyone on the same page, but terms like nonprofit enterprise and civic sector *could* become better understood through common usage than the terms we now use for the sector and its organizations. Civic sector is more about what we contribute to than what we are not. And the surprising use of the term, enterprise, is one way of communicating that this work is every bit as complex and important as any other kind of enterprise.
- As we adopt such language, stop using the word, charity, especially when it does not especially apply. I suspect many lay people assume that a charity collects resources and redistributes them to those in need. Well, many of our very finest “charities” do nothing of the kind. They provide research and education and engage in many other kinds of actions to achieve their goals. Let’s elevate the common denominator among the public.
- Weave together the strands of effort in which many of us are engaged in our organizations to attract and develop talent. Human resources, volunteer development, training, diversity and inclusion are not separate streams; they are part of the greater whole of talent development in a competitive and diverse marketplace.
- Strive collectively to re-frame and re-introduce the civic sector and civic enterprise as integral to peoples’ lives—as citizens and potentially as a career focus, both for young people and for people seeking encore careers. Remember civics and social studies in school? Where they do not exist and/or fail to depict the civic sector effectively, let’s make them relevant through all the grades and let’s export this knowledge to settings that reach other populations, whether out of school youth or future retirees or second careerists.
- Grow the pool of talent for your field and for the sector. Strive diligently to meet the talent challenges of your organization but join in collective efforts, recognizing that: increasing the esteem in which the larger sector is held will benefit your organization as well; and that career paths are more often across organizations than within them.