

## Elements of Successful Public School Foundations

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Successful volunteer-led organizations are rooted in their communities. They are rooted there for a very important reason: volunteerism is based on relationships, neighbors/friends/associates helping one another. More than any other element in a foundation's success, these relationships and the ties of mutual obligation that accompany them are the core to successful foundations. As the saying goes in fundraising, "People give to people, not to things."

Volunteer organizations are also at the root of what George Soros likes to call the "civil society." It is based on informal relationships that act as glue, binding people together in a multiplicity of mutually reinforcing associations. These associations form networks that are a necessary counterbalance to the imperial power of government as well as the engine of business that can be so successful in producing things, yet whose core mission is not focused on quality of life issues.

School foundations, as with all other voluntary associations, are thus rooted in activities that allow people a sense of control and success over matters critical to their quality of life and the well being of their families and community. When a voluntary association loses the ability to provide the volunteer with that level of satisfaction, the volunteer leaves. As Robert Johnson, the noted psychotherapist wrote in his seminal trilogy, *He, She, and We*, the capacity of a church/religion to grow is dependent on its providing space for the "ecstatic moment of inspiration." Once a church/religion loses that capacity, members will leave, looking to find or, if necessary, create another church/religion that leaves space for the ecstatic experience.

It is the same for voluntary associations, as volunteerism is rooted in the ecstatic experience of love for family, nurturing relationships with friends, and pride in community. Understanding this is at the heart of creating and building successful voluntary organizations, i.e. educational foundations, no matter what their avowed goals. Staying focused on this key concept is critical to making the right decisions about how to run any educational foundation, because it lies at the heart of the energy and power that comes from volunteers.

There are many "how to do it" books focused on creating successful non-profit foundations; one in particular is James J. Muro's *Creating and Funding Educational Foundations-a Guide for Local School Districts* (Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1995), especially suited to public school foundations. For anyone involved with or contemplating the establishment of a public school foundation, this is a fine reference. Yet, as comprehensive as this book is, there is an essential ingredient missing that is at the heart of voluntary organizations. That element is the human stories of success and failure, as well as the struggle to find time for volunteer activities amidst many competing home, work and community commitments.

Stories are constructs created to pass on to the next generation the myths and ideals of a society. We continually strive to create a body of literature that teaches the next generation how to successfully build upon the successes of the past. Valuing what has come before us is important for it provides continuity, proven procedures and an understanding of our present situation couched within its heritage. However, many times a fixation on the past comes into conflict with new ways of seeing things (paradigms), new information, new needs and changing community values.

The importance of voluntary associations with informal networks of knowledge-sharing is that we have the opportunity to reflect on new paradigms, beginning with informal stories shared amongst friends and colleagues. The more we can create organizations open to this informal information network, the greater the chance we have to stay fresh and in harmony with changing community expectations and circumstances.

An open organization leaves room for just such flexibility whereas a professional, fully organized one, many times restricts itself to inward-looking thinking, actions that could leave it devoid of the fundamental energies that gave it life in the first place. How do we create the possibilities for ongoing change and growth in an organization? From my study of public school foundations and the case of Schoolpower, I found the following elements that led to success:

- 1) *Limited board tenure.* Continuous recruitment of new board members with time-limited tenure insures new energy, new ideas, and a continuous community feedback reflecting changing needs and times.
- 2) *The centrality of the volunteer.* There must be clear recognition that the core strength of a voluntary organization is in its non-paid members. Paid staff is there to serve the volunteer, not the other way around. When staff becomes paramount, their needs begin to supplant those of the organization, with overhead costs ballooning way out of proportion to the net income generated by the organization.
- 3) *Non-political nature of the organization.* The core mission of an education foundation is to raise money for the schools. How that money is spent is another matter, one that needs careful attention to the sensibilities of administrators, teachers, unions and different parent groups.
- 4) *Continuous inspiration.* A common refrain from parents is that they can never do enough for their children's education. As a result of this feeling and perception, the goals of the foundation are always expanding. This leaves room for new ideas and creative input from members, teachers, school administrators, staff and community, a combination sure to continuously advance the excitement and energy ever present in the air.
- 5) *Tension between organization and the volunteer.* A dynamic tension exists between the organization's need for tried and true systems and the many inefficiencies that come with the naive volunteer struggling to learn quickly before a critical fundraising event, many times disorganized, yet full of energy, excitement and overflowing with new ideas.
- 6) *Continuous organizational re-invention.* With an openness to volunteer help and leadership comes continuous organizational re-invention. How do you manage an organization and at the same time stay open to a continuous input of new ideas on how things should be run? What happens when the volunteers make all the substantive decisions and expect staff to support them? How do you create a quality working environment for staff, full of interest and opportunities for professional growth, while at the same time recognizing the overwhelming importance of volunteer leadership?
- 7) *Positive reinforcement of volunteer activity.* Open discussions, clear consensus, allowance for error, and continuous positive reinforcement are most important to the satisfaction level of the volunteer. They should be encouraged to feel successful in the act of volunteering. That act, the sharing of time, talent and treasure, is self-reinforcing and should not be held up for criticism as being too little, too late, or not good enough. No matter what the objective outcome compared to prior years, volunteers will look for the silver lining; they should not be deprived of this.
- 8) *Good public relations.* People want to be part of an organization seen as doing good for the community. Encouraging members to tell their stories to others and ensuring that the organization's story is shared as widely as possible are critical to community- wide support.

Volunteers are the heart and soul of educational foundations. It is their inspiration and excitement that fuel the organization and continue to keep it vital, current, and in tune with the community's needs and wishes. They seize the moment, taking the chance on acquiring a new program in advance of raising the funds, pledging to raise the money for a new building when no clear strategy has been clearly defined, or introducing a new fundraising idea to supplant an old tried and true one.

Harnessing that energy, helping to guide it from the side while valuing the excitement that comes with new members' ideas and new perspective, is a challenge. This challenge is one not only for the professional but also for the experienced volunteer. The old hands that have "been there and done that" need to allow room for the possibility that, as successful as a past event may be, it's time to change, to stay ahead of the curve, to keep things fresh and exciting.

We continuously challenge ourselves in our daily lives, or at least aspire to do so. Let's also bring this quality to our volunteer activities and the school foundations we care so much about.

Note: Michael Pinto's doctoral dissertation, *Private Fundraising for Public Schools: an Appreciative Inquiry into The Laguna Beach Education Foundation, Schoolpower*, can be obtained from UMI press. Call (800) 521-0600 and ask for UMI number 9633908.

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