



Cause Effective workshop participants sharing their fundraising war stories. Photos courtesy Cause Effective.

The Voluntary Shift

Responding to 30 Years of Shrinking Leisure Time

Judy Levine

FOR THREE DECADES, CAUSE EFFECTIVE has been helping nonprofits transform their fundraising, governance, and special events. As we look back over this time, we are struck by the changing nature of leisure time and the profound impact of this change on the nonprofit sector.

From furtive smartphone checking under the table to the impossibility of finding a meeting time for a committee whose members' work and family commitments have them doing double and triple shifts, the changing nexus between leisure time and work time is affecting volunteer-based fundraising and governance in multiple ways.

What are the impacts of these changes on nonprofits—and how can we adapt what we ask of people volunteering for social change, particularly around fundraising?

Sociologists have charted the squeeze on discretionary time over the past couple of decades. In the 1990s, Arlie Russell Hochschild wrote in *The Time Bind* about the blurring home-work distinction; and in *The Overworked American*, Juliet Schor noted the historic shrinkage of leisure time that came from both additional work commitments and a higher standard of care for children and the household. In the wake of the current economic upheaval, a Harris Poll found that Americans lost an average of 20 percent of their available leisure time from 2007 to 2008 alone.

But lately, and for nonprofit volunteerism especially, the situation seems to be getting worse. Board members are even

more distracted: those who still have jobs have often taken on additional assignments at work, and those who've lost their jobs are expending all their energy looking for new work; when they find it, they're absorbed in learning and succeeding in a new professional culture.

The result? Committees without leaders (*"I could do a task, but not take on the whole responsibility"*), opportunities left on the table (*"It's great that Ms. Connections agreed to be the honoree but we don't have anyone to chair the event"*), and the continuance of the political status quo (*"We just couldn't get enough people out to the community meeting to make a difference"*).

We recently assisted a nonprofit in an excruciating three-month search for a new board chair. A number of people were willing to accept a limited assignment (*"Sure, I'll write 20 thank-you letters"*) but not to take on a position they would need to take home and "own." With another nonprofit, we went through two months of failed attempts to nail down a meeting date—with the four committee members so overbooked that two meetings that were calendared fell through at the last moment (the group finally met by phone).

The ultimate symptom of these competing claims on board members' time is boards that pay attention on an episodic rather than a sustained basis—a board pattern that, at best, consists of putting out fires...then not responding...then springing back into action when more fires arise...then more unresponsiveness. Board members coming together to solve

THE ULTIMATE SYMPTOM OF THESE COMPETING CLAIMS ON BOARD MEMBERS' TIME IS BOARDS THAT PAY ATTENTION ON AN EPISODIC RATHER THAN A SUSTAINED BASIS.

a crisis, then reverting to ignoring emails once the emergency is over. Boards ending up reactive instead of generative, with fundraising committees that come together for specific events rather than looking after the organization's overall relationship-building ladder. Boards that are complacent rather than driving nonprofit fundraising and outreach.

You may have read about what's called the Second Shift—that stretch of housework and family responsibilities that await parents as they head home from work—and about the juggling that the electronic tether both enables and demands (come home from work, eat and put the kids to bed, back on the computer for a couple more hours of work). Not to mention the Third Shift—the time that women, in particular, spend as caregivers for family members outside the home.

But what about the Voluntary Shift—the time spent caregiving to heal the larger community, indeed the world?

In thirty years of energizing volunteers to participate in fundraising, we've been through lots of periods of economic ups and downs. During that time, government funding has increased, decreased, and even disappeared, pulling the rug out from nonprofit programming. Causes that were "hot" among foundations have lost their luster, with other theories of change taking their place. Corporations have swung from funding out of a sense of community responsibility to using corporate funds for flashier visibility purposes, and back again. But throughout the past three decades, we've always seen a steady increase in individual donations raised through the perseverance of dedicated volunteers.

Adapting to the New Reality

How can we reconcile the time-pressed nature of America in the second decade of the twenty-first century with our continued need for volunteer-based fundraising?

Our first piece of advice is to adapt—not to fight. In uncertain economic times like the present, it is helpful to return to Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs (see Cause Effective's

5/3/10 blog post for a fuller exploration of this pyramid's relevance to fundraising).



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

What the pyramid tells us, in essence, is that people can't pay attention to the Voluntary Shift (which is part of self-actualization) until they're satisfied they've met their needs that fall lower on the pyramid. In other words, if someone is hungry (physiological needs), or doesn't know where their kids are going to sleep (safety needs), they can't concentrate on pursuing friendship (social needs), gaining social status (esteem needs), or striving for justice (self-actualization). No matter how much they might like to, they can't focus on volunteering if they're at a lower point on the pyramid at this moment in their life. The answer in that case is to keep the door open while letting them off the hook—for now.

For others who are stressed but somewhere in the middle of this framework, here are some tips from 30 years in the trenches that we've found particularly useful in supporting volunteer fundraisers now.

Make it easy. In a practical sense, this means not insisting on an in-person meeting if you can't get it—or at the least, offering childcare that seems like a plus, not simply low-quality daycare.

This holds true for fundraising activities as well—one Cause Effective client just sold out a previously languishing wine-tasting series to parents because they offered a pizza party and creative arts workshop to the kids at the same time.

Consider making the most of new technology for video chats, document sharing, and the like, so that people can work for you in their own time and space.

Chunk it up. We've found that assignments we used to be able to give out whole ("Thanks for taking on this year's annual appeal, here's the timeline and a template from last year") need to be "chunked" into smaller pieces and divided up. While this strategy can be successful at spreading the tasks across several people who may each be able to do a part, it

organizations now offer subscriptions with maximum options and minimal commitment, we need to ask for voluntary time in ways that volunteers can fit into their lives and their priorities. Also, try a little psychology borrowed from child-rearing—if you offer people a choice they are more likely to choose one of the options and feel in control of the one they choose (and empowered volunteers ultimately feel more obligated to see the task through).

Respect people's time. Run meetings well so people feel their time is used well for deliberation—that it was important that they showed up. And start on time, no matter how many people aren't there—they'll get the message after one or two sessions.

Build the team. Don't expect a small board to manage all the

WE NEED TO ASK FOR VOLUNTARY TIME IN WAYS THAT VOLUNTEERS CAN FIT INTO THEIR LIVES AND THEIR PRIORITIES.

requires much clearer instructions and more work up front—if something's not in the timeline and someone only has part of the job, they're less likely to notice and the forgotten piece is less likely to get done ("Whoops! Getting stamps wasn't in anyone's job"). It means rethinking the order and even the shape of a voluntary assignment.

Ask for something specific and small. We've seen that asking for a bounded amount of time—say, an evening—is likely to be more successful than giving a take-home assignment with an open-ended time frame. For example, an assignment of 10 follow-up calls is much likelier to get accomplished if the request is for "Next Wednesday evening from 7-9 and then you can go home and leave it behind" than if it's an ask to "Take this list of 10 donors and call them to remind them about this year's annual appeal."

Give end times. One reason special events are so successful at rallying boards to fundraising (even though they take an incredible amount of time) is that volunteers can see the light at the end of the tunnel. "Once it's over I can clean the house"—or take the kids to the zoo, or even spend a day at the beach—goes the volunteer's thinking. The chunk-it-up theory works here too—even if a project is long, lasting a year or more, divide it into smaller pieces so there's always a goal-line in view. Volunteers can sprint, but not forever.

Offer flexibility. In the same way that performing arts

responsibilities of governing and fundraising if you don't have enough people to form viable committees. With clearly stated expectations in hand, continually be on the lookout to recruit more folks who care about your mission and can also find the time to help. Assign partners when parsing out volunteer responsibilities—it's harder to let a person down than an organization, and it's more fun to work with others.

You can also entice non-board members into serving on board committees—that's one way to enlist someone with a special skill or a focused amount of time without their having to sign on to the full package of board service. To that end, recruit volunteers with clear expectations so that people excited about the mission don't commit beyond their time or capacity.

Diversify the pool. Think about recruiting younger people who don't yet have families, or young "professional-board" folks. Like attracts like, so you may want to create a "Young Supporters" group to throw bar parties and the like for your organization.

Create a learning culture. Don't assume that because someone agreed to be on your board ten years ago or even two years ago, they're still filled with the excitement of the mission. Re-cultivate your board members to keep them motivated. For example, ask board members to give out certificates of completion at the youth advocates training—then hold a board meeting right after.

In addition, consider providing some form of professional development or training to board members so they feel they are learning for their own futures. Give your board frequent opportunities to learn about the issues that surround your mission and work. Involve them in thinking together with you about what's best for the organization.

Make activities do double duty. Organize volunteering to serve social as well as social justice aims. It's well known that volunteering is a great way to meet people with similar interests. Highlight that advantage by building in collegiality (sharing food at meetings is a quick way to do so). Make sure board members party/eat/socialize together at least once a year, even at the cost of time on organizational business—that bonding is priceless. Add going out to dinner together to one board meeting a year.

Involve kids. Don't assume people can turn off (or hand over) the rest of their lives (see "Make it easy" above). There are so few occasions for family togetherness—make volunteering a win-win by offering this opportunity!

The common denominator to all these tips is that when volunteers can see how to fit the work within their time constraints, they're happy to help.

Here are two more important strategies that make volunteering rewarding enough to raise it above the fray of competing priorities.

Say thank you. Make sure people feel good about their volunteer service with you and that they see the gains their dedication has engendered. Let them know you value their efforts—and make a special attempt to praise them in front of their peers. Create a climate of appreciation.

Recognize small victories. People gravitate toward success. Just as in organizing, we need to call out the incremental wins—and every effort counts. "You made two phone calls—terrific!" It's more important that people are successful at fundraising—and start to view themselves as successful at fundraising—than that they attempt a giant effort and fail. In the midst of the stresses of daily life, voluntary fundraising for our causes needs to be made deeply satisfying for those who engage in it.

Don't Forget Yourself

Finally, the shrinking nature of leisure time has an impact on those of us who work in nonprofits as well.

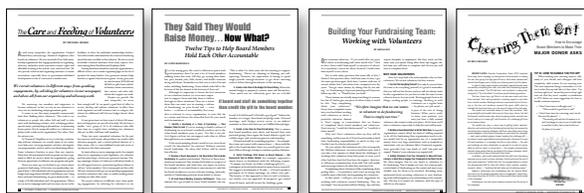
"If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution" is a quote commonly attributed to Emma Goldman. Whether or not she actually said it, the attitude remains valid. Those of us working for social change need to recognize the toll that the relentless pace of today's plugged-in environment takes on all of

us (Cause Effective's 6/7/11 blog post addresses this), and work to keep it at bay.

Turn it off—at least one day a week. Renew and refresh. Read a novel, go swimming, get on a bike—whatever your passion. Do something with your leisure time that allows you to come back to work reinvigorated and ready to change the world again, one action at a time. ■

Judy Levine is executive director of Cause Effective (causeeffective.org), a nonprofit that for three decades has been helping people transform their passion for mission into an enduring ability to raise funds. She writes a blog on fundraising at CauseEffectivePerspective.net.

Want to read more articles on working with volunteers and boards? Visit the *Journal* archive at grassrootsfundraising.org/archive to find articles like:



"Cheering Them On: How to Encourage Board Members to Make their Major Donor Asks" (v27 n5)

"Building Your Fundraising Team: Working with Volunteers" (v27 n4)

"They Said They Would Raise Money--Now What?" (v27 n4)

"The Care and Feeding of Volunteers" (v24 n5)

If you're already a Journal subscriber and you don't have your password to read these articles for free, please email jennifer@grassrootsfundraising.org to retrieve it.

If you don't already subscribe, just visit grassrootsfundraising.org/subscribe or call 888-458-8588 X306 to start your subscription and gain free, unlimited access to over 350 grassroots fundraising articles 24/7, 365 days a year!