

From the Eyes of a Volunteer

Dear *BoardForward*:

Last year I retired and sold my company with the intention of spending more time with my family and volunteering with several organizations in the community. To this end, I have offered my time, treasure and talent to three different organizations, and it has been very gratifying.

After 14 months in the volunteer ranks I feel I can offer a perspective about the effectiveness of non-profit organizations. Perhaps my comments would prove helpful to those of your readers that are development professionals.

There are so many good organizations out there that do make a difference in the lives of so many people less fortunate than ourselves. The charitable sector in this country really does provide something that government cannot - compassion and vital human services. My experience working at the local soup kitchen has taught me to appreciate more than ever, everything I have, and most importantly, that by giving of myself I can make a difference.

I get a warm feeling by volunteering my time, particularly at my alma mater's alumni office. This is further enhanced by seeing staff executives at every function, working evenings and weekends. Those of you that do this are a source of strength and inspiration to your volunteers.

Non-profit executives stretch a dollar further than anyone. I am impressed with your ability to do more with less. Some of us in the for-profit corporate world could take a lesson from you. Securing gifts-in-kind, tough negotiating on purchases and using smart financial sense are the attributes of most successful non-profit managers. Perhaps you could develop a seminar to give to professional sales people on how to decrease their monthly expense accounts. I could have paid you to do this, and still saved my company money!

I am impressed with the commitment to strategic planning that has undoubtedly been ongoing for several years. It is a pleasure to work for an organization that knows where it is going and how it wants to get there! Congratulations on implementing and guiding this important management function, and most importantly for taking the time to explain your mission and vision to your employees, your volunteers, and your constituency.

Sinclair, Townes & Company • 670 Village Trace, Building 19 • Atlanta, GA 30067
(770) 988-8111 • (770) 988-8665 FAX • www.sinclairtownes.com • info@sinclairtownes.com

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OK, I know you are chomping at the bit to ask me how I would improve your operation. After 30 years in the management consulting business I thought you would never ask! Very humbly I offer the following tips you may wish to consider to make your job, and particularly mine easier:

1. Do not bite off more than you can chew. Your ideas are great, but we lack the resources and staff and volunteer network to complete them. I would rather see us focus on one or two key projects and do those well, rather than shortchanging all projects. In other words, let's decide not to complete a specific special event or direct mail piece. Perhaps we could eliminate several overlapping and administratively time-consuming committees?

Or, maybe some of our projects do not need to be canceled, but merely postponed until later in the year or into the next fiscal year, particularly those where finances are a concern.

2. Come to Board meetings with all the facts and a recommendation regarding specific projects or tasks. If your ideas and proposals are based on sound information and judgment, Board members will probably concur and accept your recommendations. For example, expanding the size of the church sanctuary sounds like a great idea, but have you done your homework with regard to financial projections? Making available preliminary facts and figures will allow Board members to make intelligent decisions, including the possibility of hiring a fundraising consulting firm to perform a feasibility study for a potential capital campaign.
3. Get outside consul to help with our direct mail campaign. I know you are overburdened with work, and have a minimal staff - it shows in the creativity displayed in our annual fund letters. We hired you to be the CEO and as such you are an excellent administrator for our organization. We did not expect you to win awards for writing the best annual fund letters. Hire an outside consultant to help, and you can then apply your managerial prowess to manage the entire annual fund process. In fact, consider out-sourcing as much as possible. This allows us to stay lean and at the same time make cost-effective use of experts.
4. Use your volunteers more and expect more from them. I know some of us can be cranky and demanding, however, occasionally we may have a great idea or comment that will help you do your job better and thereby be of benefit to the organization.
5. Always evaluate and consider the possibility of changing the way we do things. Turning the organization upside down and implementing new ways of doing things could improve our ability to serve the community. Never sit still. Challenge your employees to be on the lookout for creative ideas to improve the operation. In fact, offer them cash incentives for the best ideas.

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6. Promote us more! You and I know we do tremendous good for the community, however many people do not know this. Concentrate on press releases and on mailing more updates to board members and committee members. Make all of us feel good about the work we are doing for the organization, and this should only improve the motivation we all have to be volunteers. Perhaps it would make sense to retain a professional writer to produce brochures and newsletters? This could be done cost-effectively on a contract basis.
7. Segment our donor base so that we can be more effective fundraisers. I should be calling on people like me who can give at least \$10,000. It is a waste of my time to be soliciting people for \$100, and most importantly it appears that some donors who have the capability to make large gifts are getting away from us.
8. Where is our Planned Giving program? Other organizations with which I am involved are marketing a program such as this, and are achieving results. An established planned giving program could be your lasting legacy to the organization, and it would certainly provide us with endowment for the future. I am sure you know many tax attorneys knowledgeable in this area that could offer assistance.
9. Feed me during your meetings. It does not have to be much, but certainly cookies and soft drinks are appropriate for an afternoon meeting, particularly if it goes past 6:00pm. Definitely provide sandwiches for our lunch meetings. Remember that I am giving of my time, and this is the least you can do for any of your volunteers. The cost will be minuscule, and in fact, many volunteers will probably increase their contributions knowing that you are feeding them.
10. Look at updating our computer hardware and software so that we can become more efficient. It is much more cost-effective to purchase equipment loaded with the latest fundraising and data base management software than it is to add staff members. Then, make sure that the employees you have are well trained on the system. You will be surprised how much this can enhance productivity and make your employees feel that they are an important cog in the wheel. Make use of the technology that is out there and bring us into the 20th century. Perhaps an outside computer consultant could assist?
11. Consider hosting a training session for new board members, and quite frankly ongoing training sessions for older board members. It would have been helpful if I was able to review all the information necessary to be a good board member in one concise packet. Most importantly, a training session would let me know immediately what your expectations are of me.

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Well, there you have it: more comments than you could possibly have wanted! Keep in mind I love volunteering my time and offering financial support to further the organization's mission. My thoughts are meant to be constructive and for the greater good of the community. Thank you for what you do on behalf of the homeless, the sick, the confused, the battered and abused, etc. Thank you for devoting your career to the most important part of our economy - the non-profit sector.

I look forward to seeing you Thursday at the Fall cleanup!

Sincerely,

Name withheld on request.