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# Learn Grow Change

## Adapting Service Organizations to a Changing World

**A groundbreaking conference pinpoints changes that service organizations—and all nonprofits—need to make.**

BY PETER COOLSEN & LEIGH WINTZ

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**n**ational service organizations have been an important part of our society for more than a century. Community leaders began banding into groups to solve community problems in the late 19th century. Such service organizations as Rotary, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, Lions, Kiwanis, and Soroptimist have a distinguished record of accomplishment. They have made tremendous contributions toward eradicating polio, helping the blind, contributing to medical research, improving the status of women, advocating for children, and building the capacity of communities to resolve local problems.

The seeds of volunteerism planted in North America took root and quickly spread around the globe. Service organizations now have over five million members in 150 countries.

But the shocking fact is that while organized volunteering through service clubs is increasing outside North America, it is shrinking in the United States. Why has it become so difficult to recruit and retain club members in the United States? Is there still a need for such clubs? Is there a new model for participating in community life? Must national service organizations change the way they conduct business?

To explore these questions, 40 participants from 17 national service organizations gathered at Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. They confronted challenges faced not only by national service organizations but by all nonprofits. Their discussions pinpointed changes that all nonprofits must make.

## What Trends Affect Volunteer Organizations?

We are living in what Peter Drucker has called the “age of social transformation.”<sup>1</sup> It's a time in which old rules are being turned upside down and a new social order is being created. This is certainly true for service organizations.

As Robert Putnam, professor of international affairs at Harvard University, notes, “There is striking evidence that the vibrancy of American civil society has notably declined over the past several decades.”<sup>2</sup> Putnam cites a National Opinion Research Center poll which indicates a 25% drop in *all group membership* in the U.S. over the past 20 years.

There is mixed evidence of this decline when we look specifically at service organizations. For example, Putnam points out that membership in the General Federation of Women's Clubs is down by more than half over the past 30 years. This is not true, however, of all service organizations. Kiwanis International had an increase in U.S. membership of 5.4%, and Soroptimist International of the Americas had an increase of 13% during the past 20 years.

Another analyst, Robert Samuelson, argues that Putnam is exaggerating the picture. Looking at raw participation rates, he finds that service clubs actually had a slight gain of 1.1% over the past 20 years.<sup>3</sup> This long view is a bit misleading, however, as most of these gains took place in the 1970s and early 1980s.

If we focus on the last five years, we find clear evidence of a declining trend in U.S. service-club membership. Kiwanis International reports a 4% decrease in U.S. membership from 1990 through 1994; Optimist International an 11% decrease; and Soroptimist International of the Americas a 13% decline.

When we look at changes taking place in U.S. society, we can see why maintaining membership is an ever-greater challenge. Susan Ellis explains that the *idea of community service*, once the domain of national service organizations, has been adopted by many other movements.<sup>4</sup> As a result, traditional service clubs are competing with other groups for community-service volunteers.

In 1994, for example, Congress established the Corporation for National and Community Service. This federally-sponsored program created Americorps and various state commissions on community service. These organizations give many people a chance to volunteer directly within their communities.

Schools have also appropriated the community-service idea. Through “service learning,” colleges, high schools, and even grade schools now require students to work on community projects.

Another community-service adaptation is corporate volunteerism. When the Des Plaines river overflowed a few years ago, for instance, employees at Chicago's Allstate Insurance Company volunteered to help flood victims. They brought in durable goods and donated other items for neighbors evacuated by the flooding. This kind of employer-based community service is being replicated in workplaces throughout the country.

Other social trends have implications for national service organizations, too. Susan Ellis points out that volunteering does not exist in a vacuum. It reflects society, with both positive and negative implications.<sup>5</sup> Social changes affecting volunteerism include the increase of women in the workforce, enormous technological changes, a high divorce rate, greater workplace demands which leave families little time for themselves, an aging population, and increasing ethnic and cultural diversity. All these changes influence people's lives, and nonprofits must consider them when crafting volunteer opportunities.

Despite these societal changes and declining membership in service clubs, community service is flourishing. The Points of Light Foundation reports that U.S. volunteers donate 20 billion hours a year.<sup>6</sup> There is evidence of a resurgence of community service, particularly among younger people, in new organizations such as



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Public Allies, Do Something, and City Cares America. These organizations require virtually no long-term commitment. Instead, they let people volunteer on a one-time or short-term basis. Immediate rewards and self-limiting time demands make these organizations particularly attractive to “baby boomers.”

## What Are The Four Steps To Success?

What does research teach us about successful volunteer organizations? What must service organizations do to be effective in a changing world?

To answer these questions, conference participants focused on four action steps. In “Changing the Paradigm,” the Points of Light Foundation<sup>7</sup> identified these four steps as the essential ingredients in successful nonprofits:

### 1. Lay a Foundation through Mission and Vision.

Virginia Austin of the Points of Light Foundation summarized this step well during the conference.<sup>8</sup> To inspire action, she noted, volunteer organizations must have a clear mission, open systems, collegial relationships, and an environment in which personal and organizational visions intersect.

## ORGANIZATIONS AT THE WINGSPREAD CONFERENCE

AMBUCS

Association of Junior Leagues International

Church Women United

Civitan International

Delta Sigma Theta

General Federation of Women's Clubs

Kinsmen and Kinette Clubs of Canada

Kiwanis International

Lions Clubs International

Optimist Clubs International

Pilot International, Inc.

Points of Light Foundation

Quota International, Inc.

Rotary International

Society for Nonprofit Organizations

Soroptimist International of the Americas

Women In Community Service, Inc.

Co-sponsored by Soroptimist International of the Americas and the Johnson Foundation, the Wingspread Conference confronted challenges facing national service organizations—and all nonprofits.

In one sense, service organizations' mission—to provide members with community service opportunities—has remained constant over the years. In a recent survey, Soroptimist International of the Americas asked members why they joined the organization. The overwhelming majority listed “community service” as their main reason for joining. Secondary reasons were “developing friendships” and “personal growth and learning.”

The mission of providing community service opportunities is still relevant. The question is: Are the opportunities to provide service through traditional clubs still appropriate, given a dramatically changed society?

### 2. Combine Inspiring Leadership with Effective Management.

It is vital for service organizations to concentrate on this step, conference participants acknowledged. Service organizations need to update their rules to address members' needs. They need to redesign outmoded board structures.<sup>9</sup> They must make leadership opportunities available to members early in their involvement. They must put less emphasis on tradition and more on organizational flexibility to match the changing social environment.

### 3. Build Understanding and Collaboration.

To be successful in this step, the organization's leaders must do three things:

1. They must respect paid staff and give them the authority to participate in planning, decision-making, and management related to volunteer involvement.
2. They must make an effort to reduce boundaries and increase teamwork between paid and volunteer staff.
3. They must share stories of volunteers' contributions.

### 4. Learn, Grow and Change.

This is the pivotal step underlying future success for national service organizations. Each organization must assess its learning capacity, its openness to diversity, and its willingness to embrace innovation. It must be open to change and eager to improve performance.

## How Can We Change Our Image?

Using these four action steps as a guide, conference participants concluded that they must make a radical change in the way they recruit members, train leaders, and conduct business. They committed themselves to making the following changes:

1. Give people more options in their volunteer activities.
2. Remove barriers to diversity. Find ways to create a truly diverse membership.

3. Create more flexible policies and structure.
4. Make it easy and convenient to participate in the organization.
5. Use technology more effectively.
6. Offer more results-oriented work on critical community issues.
7. Give volunteers more opportunities for learning.
8. Involve family members in volunteer projects.
9. Change meeting frequency and times to fit the needs of today's busy professional.
10. Keep volunteer projects relevant and satisfying.

Conference participants concurred that there is a paucity of research about volunteer organizations, including service clubs. The little research that exists isn't always shared. There is a critical need for joint research among service organizations to learn more about members' needs. Service organizations must create what Peter Senge calls *learning organizations*. Such organizations are "skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge." They are also adept at changing their behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.<sup>10</sup>

Participants noted that most people have a false image of national service organizations and their mission. They have the erroneous idea that service club members are exclusively white, older professionals, usually all the same gender. They feel that service clubs' projects are time-consuming and planning-intensive. Volunteering through such clubs is what parents or grandparents did. Service organizations must overcome such misconceptions if they are to recruit and retain members.

All participants stressed that they want a more diverse membership. Many have made progress in the area of gender. While Rotary International did not include women till 1987, the 91-year-old Rotary Club of Chicago, the first Rotary club, has elected its first woman president. Despite the progress concerning gender, participants felt that service clubs still have much to do to achieve real diversity, especially ethnic and cultural diversity.

The Association of Junior Leagues International has taken a long-term approach to diversity.<sup>11</sup> Its board established a policy on multi-culturalism and changed its by-laws to reach out to all races and ethnic groups. The League has used such structures as diversity networks, diversity institutes, and dialogues on diversity to explore how the boundaries of race and class affect us all.

Finally, the conference participants emphasized that they need to reach out to the public. They must let people know about the changes they are making and the volunteer opportunities they offer.

## What Is Our Role As Community Builder?

Across our country, people are lamenting the deterioration of community. David Broder, columnist for the *Washington Post*, has deplored our "waning civic spirit," evidenced by fewer Americans working on shared civic enterprises.<sup>12</sup> Robert Putnam, in "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," uses the decline of bowling leagues as a metaphor for shrinking participation in all voluntary associations.<sup>13</sup>

This theme is underscored by John Gardner, co-founder of Independent Sector, who states: "Today, communities are being continuously undermined and we can not be optimistic about the outcome unless we take deliberate measures to abet the regenerative processes and slow the destructive processes. What is needed is the active nurturing and rebuilding of community—in a spirit that honors both continuity and

renewal."<sup>14</sup>

One's view of community spirit, however, is a variation of the proverbial half-empty or half-full glass. John McKnight, director of Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, argues that communal life (what he calls the "informal sector" or "associational sector") is doing well. If we look at community assets, not just deficits or problems, he says, we find an incredible infrastructure of associative life. For example, when he studied Chicago's Grand Boulevard area, the city's second poorest neighborhood, he found over 300 volunteer associations. McKnight sees this willingness to work on common problems, even in the most decimated neighborhoods, as "the most hopeful data that you will find in the United States of America about its future."<sup>15</sup>

National service organizations and their network of local clubs can play a central role in community building. As McKnight says, service organizations and other volunteer associations are the "unique American invention, the center of power building, economy building and care giving and . . . represent the kind of organization that America's future depends on."<sup>16</sup>



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The challenge for service organizations is to form relationships with other community groups. Only then can they begin solving community problems together.

## How Can We Collaborate To Make Change Happen?

Wingspread participants agreed to take the following steps to collaborate with other nonprofit organizations:

1. Share convention planning information.
2. Hold joint conventions.
3. Pool resources for teleconferencing, training, and insurance.
4. Establish a common volunteer certification program.
5. Share training and leadership development tools.
6. Develop joint staff training projects.
7. Swap board members.
8. Conduct joint leadership training around emerging leadership topics.
9. Apply for a collaborative grant for data collection.
10. Establish a clearinghouse for service club collaboration at the local level.
11. Invite delegations from other organizations to conventions.
12. Establish a formal mechanism to share models and knowledge.
13. Form partnerships in publicity and advertising.
14. Work together to identify what the external world thinks of national service organizations and to shape that image.

Conference participants concluded that collaboration is crucial for service organizations—and all nonprofits. Collaboration will provide the resources they need to learn, grow, and change in tomorrow's world. ■

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Drucker, Peter, "The Age of Social Transformation," *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1994.

<sup>2</sup>Putnam, Robert, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, January 1995.

<sup>3</sup>Samuelson, Robert, "Join the Club," *Washington Post*, April 15, 1996.

<sup>4</sup>Ellis, Susan, "How You Can Benefit From the Latest Volunteer Trends," *Nonprofit World*, September-October, 1995.

<sup>5</sup>Ellis, Susan, "National Trends In Volunteerism," Wingspread Conference, *National Service Organizations in the 21st Century*, January 13-15, 1996.

<sup>6</sup>Points of Light Foundation, Washington, D.C., 1996.

<sup>7</sup>In this 1993 project, the Points of Light Foundation examined 20 nonprofits in five communities across the country to identify characteristics of organizations that were "highly effective" in involving volunteers. Note that these four characteristics are compatible with the six keys to strong volunteer networks identified at an earlier Wingspread Conference: (1) Have clear, commonly held values. (2) Have clear volunteer and paid-staff roles. (3) Develop constructive relationships between a national organization and its local affiliates. (4) Embrace inclusiveness and diversity. (5) Empower volunteers as agents of change. (6) Form collaborations and partnerships. See Peter Coolsen's "Six Keys to Strong Volunteer Networks," *Nonprofit World*, November-December 1992.

<sup>8</sup>Austin, Virginia, "Characteristics of Successful Volunteer Organizations," Wingspread Conference, *National Service Organizations in the 21st*

*Century*, January 13-15, 1996.

<sup>9</sup>For an account of how one service organization (Soroptimist International of the Americas) transformed its board, see "Changing Direction: How to Restructure a Nonprofit," *Nonprofit World*, January-February 1995.

<sup>10</sup>Garvin, David A., "Building Learning Organizations," *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 1993.

<sup>11</sup>For details on how Junior League diversified its membership, see "Meeting the Challenge of Diversity: Steps to Enrich Your Organization," *Nonprofit World*, July-August 1992.

<sup>12</sup>Broder, David, "In Pursuit of Waning Civic Spirit," *Washington Post*, January 4, 1996.

<sup>13</sup>See Footnote 2.

<sup>14</sup>Gardner, John, *Building Community*, Independent Sector, September 1991.

<sup>15</sup>McKnight, John L., "The Contribution of Service Organizations to Community Building," Wingspread Conference, *National Service Organizations in the 21st Century*, January 13-15, 1996.

<sup>16</sup>See Footnote 15.

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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