

BUILT ^{TO} LAST

Ten Keys to a Long-Lived Organization



Here are the secrets to an organization that survives and thrives.

BY CHRISTINE RENZ

It's the turn of the century. The populations of cities are booming. There isn't enough affordable housing. Children aren't getting enough food or care. Traditional family supports have broken down. It's 1896, and Christian social reformers Ballington and Maud Booth are providing help and hope through their new missionary organization, Volunteers of America.

It's the turn of another century. Its 1999, people are facing the same problems—plus a few more—and Volunteers of America has grown to be one of the largest and most comprehensive charitable nonprofit human services organizations in the country with services for abused and neglected children, youth at risk, the frail elderly, the mentally and physically disabled, homeless individuals and families, and many others.



VOA volunteers often stay involved for 20 or 30 years.

Volunteers of America has survived and thrived through 103 years of service by embracing a few important constants. There are always people in need; there are always people who feel called to help; and—the most reliable constant of all—things *do* change. From the beginning, Volunteers of America has welcomed change and innovation as warmly as they welcome the men, women, and children who serve and are served.

Constant change is the oxymoron for any forward-thinking enterprise to live by in the 21st century. Volunteers of America's greatest strengths rely on constancy and change, either alone or in combination. The following keys to the organization's success can serve as a model to any nonprofit group.

1. Focus on the Community.

Part of the heritage of Volunteers of America, and one of its major strengths, says Charles Gould, national president of Volunteers of America, is that it assesses what each community needs, rather than entering a community with a preconceived notion of what it needs or how to meet a need. There are no cookie-cutter programs.

The approach encourages new ideas, as well. Dr. Donald A. Webb, board member at Volunteers of America North Louisiana says, "Instead of being directed from a distant place, each local officer is required to have initiative, to find out what the needs are in his or her community. So, vision is built into the task."

2. Light a Fire.

Managers searching for a way to light a fire under their workers may well envy the passionate fire built into this organization, founded on a Christian devotion to service. From the beginning, those working for Volunteers of America became better than they thought they could and got real joy from their work.

3. Foster Participation.

From the top down, from the bottom up, Volunteers of America has always been a participatory organization, one in which clients, employees, and volunteers really invest. National board members come mainly from affiliate boards or staff. People who volunteer may stay involved for 20 or 30 years, sometimes moving to staff positions. Jim White, manager of community affairs at Volunteers of America Colorado Branch, says, "There isn't a day that I come in that I don't have the opportunity, if I need to, to go out and sit and visit with one of these people who are receiving a meal, and to realize, 'Yeah, this is exactly what I need to be doing.' And that's very, very important to me."

4. Commit to a Mission.

Mike Weber, president and CEO of Volunteers of America of Minnesota, believes that consistency and commitment to mission is a major factor in long-term success. People involved with Volunteers of America quote the first line of its mission statement often and make sure it's printed on every publication they produce: *Volunteers of America is a movement organized to reach and uplift all people.*



VOA's greatest strength is its ability to change.

"Keeping our eyes on the same goal through the years has kept the organization on track," says Weber.

5. Be Ready to Adapt.

Equally as important, and, ironically, as constant, is the ability to adapt to changing situations and changing needs. In 1923, Maud Booth, a pioneer in prison reform, discovered the power of radio, in conjunction with loud-speaker systems, as a useful educational tool in prisons. She wrote about the possibilities and even offered to buy

equipment for 22 state and federal prisons. All but two declined, claiming the idea was impractical or a threat to prison discipline. Years later, no prison was without such essential technology. The story illustrates Volunteers of America's constant focus on new and creative solutions to social problems—and the tendency of less far-sighted organizations to stubbornly resist innovation.

Twenty-seven years ago, Volunteers of America opened Maplewood Care Center, a nursing home in St. Paul, Minnesota. Today, Maplewood Care Center is still operating, but the needs of older Americans are different. In response, Volunteers of America built an adjacent and complementary program—the Homestead at Maplewood, an assisted living facility designed as an alternative to nursing homes. Residents have private apartments, with their own kitchens and baths, and plenty of shared space for social gatherings. Help is available 24 hours a day from an on-site home health agency, but residents direct how and when assistance is delivered.

6. Have a Flexible Structure.

Volunteers of America is ideally structured to offer a full continuum of solutions to society's challenges. The organization provides 120 types of services through more than 40 local affiliates and the National Services office, which focuses on housing and healthcare facilities. The National Office supports affiliates with services at a national level, such as public policy, development, and communications, and helps to maintain the consistency and commitment to mission so integral to success.

This structure gives Volunteers of America the ability to serve on any level necessary, from national to personal. Affiliates can take advantage of local opportunities; groups of affiliates can work together on regional projects; and the entire organization can cooperate at a national level.

"Keeping our eyes on the same goal through the years has kept the organization on track."

7. Find What Isn't Being Done.

In one Sherlock Holmes story, the most important clue was the fact that a dog didn't bark. In a Picasso painting, the blank space is as important to the composition as the main subject. It takes talent and acuity to see what's missing, a need that is unfilled, in order to provide truly effective programs.

The absence of self-esteem, a common malady among people in need, has been the impetus for a number of pro-

grams. Laura Vergano is an art therapy volunteer at the Charles Gay Homeless Shelter in New York City operated by Volunteers of America of Greater New York. Her work with homeless men, she says, is about "finding what they have to express and who they can be. That essence, that core of who you are, is strong and wonderful, and can be expressed through artwork."

As the director of corrections at Volunteers of America of Minnesota, Bill Nelson oversees the first women's jail in America run by a nonprofit organization. He looked past the crimes the women have committed—the brutal reds and blacks of the prisoners' lives to find the missing element—good parenting. He identified a need that was not being filled, and developed a rehabilitation program to fill it. A farmer by avocation, Nelson says, "You have to care for and nurture the soil, and you have to care for and nurture all the people in the jail facility." The women are learning to love themselves so that they can nurture their children and break the cycle of bad parenting.



VOA volunteers' secret is the joy they get from their work.

8. Take a Risk.

Every new program involves risks, and Volunteers of America is willing to take them. Even in the face of naysayers pointing out, “It’s never been done this way, so it won’t work,” this organization has the courage to try.

Before Maud Booth began her prison work, there was no parole system and no support for ex-offenders hoping to rejoin and contribute to their communities. The stigma attached to ex-convicts was nearly insurmountable. Volunteers of America took a big chance and invested hard-won resources on the brand new concepts of halfway houses and employment assistance.

That courage to innovate continues in programs such as the women’s jail in Minnesota. Kathleen Reilly, facility manager, proudly points out, “This facility is run by women. We’re breaking all the rules. We’re women in corrections. . . . We’re trying to enhance their lives and respect them.”

“That core of who you are is strong and wonderful.”

9. Build in Diversity.

Volunteers of America is a diverse organization, not by accident or in compliance with external obligations, but as a result of deliberate planning and a sincere belief that diversity improves its effectiveness in understanding and meeting unmet needs. People of different races, genders, ages, cultures, physical capabilities, and expertise provide the broadest range of life experiences and creative thinking—an invaluable resource for any organization that is astute enough to use it. According to Charles Gould, “Volunteers of America has a healthy respect for different approaches. There is seldom only one way to do things.” People from all walks of life, be they corporate board members or 10-year-olds in a homeless shelter, can offer creative and effective ideas.

10. Learn the Joy of Partnering.

Partnering is built into Volunteers of America’s mission statement, providing another path to success. Part of that mission is to create “opportunities for people to experience the joy of serving others.” Volunteers of America seeks opportunities for corporations, government agencies, churches, and other nonprofit groups to work together on projects as large as low-cost housing and as small as an un-birthday party for homeless children (with all the trappings of a birthday party and presents for everyone).



There’s passion built into this 103-year-old organization, founded on devotion to service.

Gentlemen’s Quarterly (GQ) sought out Volunteers of America to create its first annual *GQ* Clothing Collective in 1991. The fact that the organization already had established partnerships with church and community groups in cities across the country made for an ideal collaboration with *GQ*.

In the housing area, Volunteers of America works in partnership with two other large nonprofit housing providers—National Church Residences and Retirement Housing Foundation—in a joint venture called the National Affordable Housing Trust, to develop affordable housing, primarily using low-income tax credits.

The Bottom Line

These are the tools Volunteers of America uses to maintain a healthy financial bottom line, as well. Never an organization to stand still, resting on past accomplishments, Volunteers of America is innovating fundraising techniques, forging new partnerships with corporate foundations, and developing alternative revenue streams.

The real bottom line for Volunteers of America is measured in positive changes in the lives of the individuals and communities it serves. By building on its strengths, Volunteers of America will become known to all Americans as the best provider of solutions to today’s most pressing social problems—and those that await us in the century to come. ■

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