THE NEW STORY OF VOLUNTEERISM:
America’s Invisible Workforce and Those Who Lead It

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This isn't the article I would have written on September 10th, 2001, the day before the world changed forever. I would have likely written about the workings of Shanti. After all, for the past twenty-seven years I've taken every possible opportunity to discuss our caregivers and clients, and what we've learned about the farther reaches of service delivery to those in need. I'm sure I would have described the Shanti model of compassionate presence — the single most important approach we have for serving our clients in a complex, interdependent world. Certainly I'd have mentioned our diverse programs which are described elsewhere in this website. Each one is a thoughtfully developed expression of our commitment to putting our caring into action.

Well, the events of September 11th radically changed my ideas for this article, just as it changed the world. I now believe—even more than I did before—that we need an entirely new paradigm for volunteerism and volunteer management. A "new story" that will allow America's invisible workforce to fulfill its potential in a society transforming before our eyes.

The New Paradigm
A recent survey from the Association for Volunteer Administration entitled "Positioning the Profession" opens with a major challenge facing volunteer managers and their organizations:

"Despite widespread agreement that involvement of the public as volunteers is essential for the health and well being of society and community life, volunteers and the people who engage them are still taken for granted."

This AVA publication proposes a "solution" amounting to "a major shift in focus":

1. A shift in identity, articulation and behavior.
2. A new vocabulary that emphasizes civic involvement, innovation and results.
3. A search for the heart of what we do and the use of words that express our conviction and convince others — words like "leadership", "impact", and "public engagement" rather than "management", "volunteer hours" and even "volunteer" itself.

These observations constitute a sea change, a transformation in our conception of volunteerism and volunteer management. They imply a profound redefinition of our work familiar to many leaders and managers of "America's invisible workforce", including those of us at Shanti and the Shanti National Training Institute.

Volunteer managers are beginning to realize the necessity of developing a radically new notion of "how things work," rethinking the very concept of the volunteer organization — its purpose, its structure, its operation, and its internal and external relationships. Collectively,
volunteer organizations can exert great influence and where that influence is further
humanized, lasting and significant improvements can occur to the very fabric of our society.

Volunteers and those who lead them are often tangible proof that society can be a more compassionately place. They are America's invisible workforce and an antidote to the pains of a society of haves and have-nots wherein more and more people are exploited by fewer and fewer people, more and more effectively. As we come face-to-face with the limitations of our "old story" ways, we can, by a shift in our thinking, well-conceived volunteer training, and a will to change, embrace a "new story" of volunteerism. A paradigm that rejects the normalization of "acceptable" levels of social casualties and contributes to the greater health of the nation, its communities and citizens.

The Greek word *paradigma* means "pattern." In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn defines this word in the sense that we use it, as "a constellation of concepts, values, perceptions, and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality, that is the basis of the way a community organizes itself."

More simply put, a paradigm is a story, or a set of stories, that we invent in order to make sense of the world around us. These stories provide us with a framework by which we create order out of chaos, a practical road map for making our way in the world. They enable us to sort out complexity, to comprehend, evaluate, and categorize the information rapidly and incessantly coming at us from all sides. Most of us are not conscious of the stories by which we operate, but they dictate our behavior nevertheless. In the volunteer sector, our stories — what we hold to be "true" about the world and its workings — dictate, among other things, which ethical standards we accept, how we structure our organizations, how we conduct ourselves as managers, how we treat volunteers, which people we promote, how much of our resources we devote to training, how we serve clients, and how involved we are with the community outside the organization.

A move toward partnership, service, and innovation which are central to the "new story" of volunteerism is gradually transforming the stories that have guided us in the past, the stories by which we have organized and operated our organizations throughout most of the twentieth century. What are those stories?

There are many, but three central stories stand out. The story of the organization as a finely tuned machine; the story of the pyramid as the primary structure of the organization; and the story of the lone pioneer, the rugged individualist, as the successful volunteer manager. Each of these stories was relevant to the time in which it was part of the lore. But all three have outlived their usefulness and are gradually being subsumed by a story that has greater explanatory and functional power in the current social environment. This is what Kuhn termed "a paradigm shift."

Stories come and go over time as new realities render a particular story less useful or completely obsolete. For example, it was useful and appropriate to believe that the earth was flat until the development of astronomy and navigation proved otherwise. Once a story becomes obsolete, it must be replaced by a newer story, with greater explanatory power,
one that incorporates the data and raw experience that the old story cannot explain. What we need as we move through the twenty-first century is not a resurrection of tried but no longer true strategies, or even the sincere application of new strategies within old structures and cultures. What we need is a new context for volunteerism and volunteer management, a more useful, more appropriate story to guide us into the future.

The new story of volunteerism acknowledges our interdependence and emphasizes the role of collaboration in achieving shared goals. In this new story, the volunteer organization is seen, not as an isolated, independent entity, but in its context as part of a complex, interconnected world. The new story recognizes the needs of a much broader population of "stakeholders" in the organization — volunteers, managers, staff, clients, the community, the environment, and any other constituents on which the organization has an effect and on which it depends for its continued existence. Acknowledging these needs has important implications for how we conduct our work. No longer do we view the organization as simply an instrument for serving clients. In the new story, we view client welfare as one significant goal alongside others, a goal that must be reconciled with a number of other responsibilities if it is to be achieved — from volunteer recruitment, training and retention to management development to environmental imperatives. What we've seen repeatedly over Shanti's twenty-seven year history is that it's not just wrong to treat volunteers as interchangeable work units, it's terribly shortsighted. Well-trained volunteers at our most successful organizations can help supervise themselves, maintain service quality through their own efforts, solve many problems before volunteer managers ever see them, and, produce hundreds of useful suggestions each year. The fallacy in ignoring the needs of volunteers until they burn out or leave due to underutilization is that you then have to try offering high-quality service to clients with burned-out or bored people.

There is a tragic irony in the recognition that the volunteer workforce that has been largely taken for granted, the caregivers and others whose initiative, drive, and creativity we have too often stifled in the service of the organizational machine, now holds the key to our future success. The suppression of human potential is the most serious negative consequence of our devotion to the machine view of the organization that sees volunteers as disposable work units and clients as units of service.

The Reorganization of the Pyramid

With ongoing innovation as a major ingredient in a service agency's success, the pyramid structure of the organization has increasingly lost its purpose and effectiveness. Decisions now have to be made both at the front line and in the manager's office. Information has to move quickly and people have to be given the freedom to function in flexible configurations. In the new story, volunteers and their managers must be equipped and empowered to make what amount to strategic decisions concerning clients on a daily basis. This requires flexibility and the rapid flow of information.

However, pyramids are inherently rigid and inflexible, bound in time-consuming bureaucracy. Information needed by managers and their volunteers cannot move quickly through the official channels of the pyramid. The flexibility required to serve clients creatively often cannot be achieved within the confines of the pyramid. This rigid structure,
with its pre-assigned departments and predetermined functions, cannot easily accommodate a society in which continuous flux is the norm. The pyramid may be adequate for delivering invariant cookie-cutter services. It is increasingly inadequate for dealing with today's changing environment that demands innovation in meeting the changing needs of our clients.

Innovation requires, above all, the liberation of creativity within the organization. But the pyramid, with its emphasis on rules and regulations, divisions and power struggles, often stifles creativity and eliminates the spontaneity that gives birth to innovation. Alvin Toffler writes in *Powershift:* "Bureaucracies, with all their cubbyholes and channels prespecified, suppress spontaneous discovery and innovation. In contrast, the new systems, by permitting intuitive as well as systematic searching, open the door to precisely the *serendipity needed for innovation."

Democracy is essential in organizations that rely on the creativity of volunteers and their managers to deliver service innovation. Innovation requires democratic processes: the sharing of information across departments, functions, and organizational levels; team decision making; conflict resolution; and deference to the person with the best idea rather than the most senior title.

One additional point requires particular emphasis. Now and in the near future, quantum leaps in technology, particularly in microcomputer capabilities, will make the inevitability of organizational democracy clearer than ever before. With a PC, laptop, or palm pilot linking volunteers and their managers in a seamless service network, everyone can have the organization's knowledge at their fingertips. With information and feedback more accessible to every manager and volunteer, the process of democratization can be encouraged.

**The Fully Participating Partner**

In an era that demands partnership, a time when our emphasis must shift toward cooperative efforts, the individual manager and volunteer paradoxically take on far greater importance. We can no longer afford to operate organizations in which masses of "tired hands" are chronically underutilized while a few "heads" at the top do all the thinking. Serving clients well in an era that demands service innovation requires us to harness the creativity and intelligence of every individual in the organization.

The new story of volunteerism requires a radical redefinition of the role of the volunteer manager. We can no longer look to the rugged individualist as an effective model for leadership. Neither can we tolerate the organization person who obediently adheres to rules and regulations imposed from above — and which no one in the organization has ever evaluated thoughtfully. The model individual in the new story of volunteerism, whether leading or led, managing or managed, will be the *fully participating partner.* The person who is respected as a capable and worthwhile peer regardless of their official position in the organization.

**The New Story Volunteer Manager:**
**Six Core Competencies**

**GENERATIVE LEADERSHIP:** Challenge the prevailing wisdom by leading in a way that enhances your capacity to create and sustain resilient, service-oriented programs carried out by well-trained, motivated volunteers. Recognize leadership and management training as strategic assets.

**EXEMPLARY SERVICE TO CLIENTS:** Recognize your organization as a chain of service in which your effectiveness in serving your clients will be no better than your effectiveness in serving your volunteers. Service is a caring act, given freely in the spirit of mutuality to another person.

**EMBRACE DIVERSITY AND COOPERATIVE VARIETY:** Reject homogeneity and consistently overvaluing people who are carbon copies of yourself. Monocultures are inherently unstable while variety is the spice of life. Attempting to level our differences or to limit the expression of diverse viewpoints endangers our organizations just as surely as reducing variety endangers an ecosystem.

**VALUE INNOVATION AS A UNIVERSAL CAPACITY:** Lead by asking yourself and others: "What are our clients and our community calling us to be and to do?" Create an environment of innovation by giving volunteers latitude to experiment with new ideas as long as these mesh with the overall goals of the organization. Recognize service innovation as the product of knowing client needs and volunteer empowerment, the combination of autonomy and responsibility.

**LEAD THROUGH THE SPIRIT OF PARTNERSHIP:** Connect in a chain of collaboration with internal partners (volunteers, staff, and board) and external partners (clients, other organizations, community constituencies) to enhance service to clients and support of volunteers.

**ARTICULATE AND COMMUNICATE A COMPELLING MISSION:** Lead by constantly reinforcing the greater purpose of the organization and its programs in ways that appeal to the higher aspirations of volunteers and others. Recognize, reward, and celebrate accomplishments that further the organization's mission.

These competencies matter even more today than they did on September 10th. Before the day the world changed forever, many of us hoped that someday our volunteer organizations would be able to fully realize their potential in service to our clients. The heroic work done by volunteers and volunteer managers at "Ground Zero", the shattered remains of the World Trade Center in New York, demonstrated unequivocally that a transformation in our conceptions of America's invisible workforce has become not only a moral imperative but an operational necessity. A volunteer workforce whose caring and service are expressions of values that Shanti has long prized, and which surged to the surface of our shared consciousness on September 11th.

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