

The Special Calling of the Organizational Volunteer: A Note of Gratitude and Encouragement

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Summertime soldiers need not apply.

When you accept a position on a board or governance committee you sanctify the communal space through your commitment, energy and good will. Indeed, to call you a volunteer does little justice to your role. You are a financially unremunerated professional and must hold yourself to the highest standards of the call to serve.

Always remember that you have entered into a contract whereby your services are given in consideration of the efforts of others and the knowledge of the communal good that will result.

Failure to deliver during your time of service brings negative consequences on multiple levels.

Certainly, your heart and your gut brought you in. However do not leave your brains and smarts at the door.

You are expected to bring to your efforts the same drive to succeed and the same ethical standards you adhere to in your family life and business or occupational pursuits. If the fit is there the organization and the cause will become a beloved piece of who you are.

Passion, honesty, truth telling and realism are the tools of your trade. A smile helps.

And the same enhanced rules of friendships and boundaries must always be honored.

You have the right to expect that those who share with you the communal table are motivated by a comparable commitment to make a difference.

In special moments you are a band of sisters and brothers happily bringing hope where there is despair and light in the face of darkness. In times of great challenge you never walk away.

The remunerated professionals you work with hold themselves to the same high standards of commitment and excellence. In a profound and important way you are each other's partners, guides and teachers.

All are collectively responsible for success and failure. All, in different ways, will be held accountable when things go south. The pro who motivates you to "do your job" is fulfilling their task. The pro who does your job for you has fallen short.

While the CEO of the organization holds a particular title and a special set of responsibilities, all in their employ are entitled to equality of respect. The notion that some in the room exist in technicolor while others are seen in black and white or not at all is anathema to the values we purport to hold.

Internalize the truth that while standards of organizational excellence are universal the bottom line in the voluntary sector are people not profits. Balance sheets are an indication of sustainability not success.

The client and the community has a voice. Listen and engage.

Lastly, we bring to our volunteer work all that is good and bad in our larger world. Competition and cooperation, sacrifice and ambition, the reach for power and altruism all exist in this space. Corral them, channel them to the good and be conscious of your powers, limitations and motives. Dignity is a virtue, work the room assiduously but keep your gun in its holster.

So be humble in your victories, gracious in your defeats and know and remember before whom you stand.

Bob Hyfler has spent nearly four decades on the paid professional side of the aisle. This Spring he accepted a position as a board member of the newly reconstituted Network of Jewish Human Services Agencies (NJHSA). He hopes he can live up to his own advice. He can be reached at bobhyfler@comcast.net