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## It's Time to Focus on Volunteers' Results

By Evan Hochberg

Next week more than 60 network television shows will incorporate volunteerism as a central theme through scripted program segments and public-service announcements. When Steve Carell and his co-workers on *The Office* are touting volunteerism, it's fair to say we have reached a tipping point in the service movement.

And it's not just Hollywood. President Obama and his wife, Michelle, have been repeatedly making the point that in these hard economic times, it is more important than ever to volunteer.

This call to service is inspirational. It is compelling. But as the call for more volunteering gets louder and more pervasive, an image that comes to mind is a distressed thrift shop. After all, a thrift shop that has lots of excess inventory but no great plan to move the merchandise is really more like a junkyard.

Government, nonprofit, and business leaders must together help to solve this problem by applying basic principles of supply and demand to volunteering and service. With the renewed national emphasis on volunteerism, we must remember who the customers are. The customers in this case are the communities where we live and work. The charitable organizations that stand on the front lines and seek to solve the most pressing issues our communities face — hunger, homelessness, crime, and education gaps — are already focused on those customers, but they need help in putting everyone to work in productive ways.

While research has documented the personal and professional benefits of volunteering, we need to remember that more volunteering, in and of itself, is not the goal. It is a means to an end. The goal is to make things better. To be part of a solution. To help people who cannot help themselves. Volunteering is simply the pathway to making a positive contribution.

When it comes to service, we must all remember the importance of the customer and begin to reimagine volunteerism accordingly. Too often we have misunderstood the customers to be the volunteers themselves. The result is an impassioned plea to get people to care and to be motivated to give back. It's certainly part of what is needed. But even when successful, the result is a bunch of people who too often are not given tasks that will drive sustained change. We must collectively move past the idea that just showing up is somehow answering the call to service.

It's not enough anytime, but especially in tough times, we can't be satisfied with good intentions. We must be focused on results. The key is not just getting people to care but also helping them figure out how they can make the greatest difference given their time and their skills.

The military offers us a fine example of an effective call to service. As much as the military sells the opportunities and professional development that benefit recruits, it knows the trump card is about serving a higher purpose. The opportunity to defend our country and protect our values is the core of the message. Not only does it speak to the results of service but it is also the ultimate recruiting tool. People want to make a difference. If they are going to leave their families and risk their lives by going to disaster zones or other dangerous places, it's even more important to convince them that they are being called to accomplish something real, legitimate, and lasting.

But do nonprofit organizations "sell" community service in the same way? Do we focus on achieving critical results on issues as serious as poverty, education, and health care? Do we design volunteer efforts that can truly make an enduring difference and then recruit against that blueprint? Unfortunately, we typically fall short. Most often, we simply feel satisfied by increasing the numbers and hours of volunteers. Good intentions but limited results.

In addition to the TV programs that Americans will see from October 19 to 25, next week marks the debut of Reimagining Service, a coalition of leaders across the country focused on turning these good intentions into greater results. The agenda of this effort is the critical blocking and tackling that must be done if we are to place the right volunteer in the right situation where his or her contribution not only feels good but also makes a powerful difference.

Our country's current call to service is as powerful today as at any time in our nation's history. But a successful solution requires asking the right question. It is no longer enough to ask, "How do we get more people to serve?" We must ask ourselves, "What can service achieve and how can we mobilize volunteers to pull off those results?" Only then will we have our eyes on the customer and structure our service in a manner that drives real results for our communities.

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