

Leadership Development Through Volunteer Activities

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Volunteering is an opportunity to develop new skills and experiences one would not necessarily have in a work situation.

I have volunteered my time to many organizations throughout my life. But I made a serious effort searching for volunteer activities in 2008 after retiring from my first career; my goal was to investigate possible career paths in statistics. From 2008-2012, I volunteered at:

1. American Association for the Advancement of Science-On-Call Scientists analyzing program and client data for a human rights organization in Washington, DC.
2. US Geological Survey- analyzed on-line software use data for a botanical on-line program.
3. American University as a research assistant to a former professor developing maps in GIS for an article
4. StatAid, a non-profit human rights organization, where I programmed and analyzed collected survey data.
5. Statistics Without Borders. I agreed to help Justin Fisher, then New Projects Chair, organize SWB projects.

It is important to note I volunteered with a variety of organizations but one area of interest stood out for me—human rights.

I did not plan to become so involved with Statistics Without Borders Experience when I volunteered six years ago. Positions I have, do, and will hold:

New Projects Chair 2012-2014

Chair 2014-2016

Chair (re-elected) 2016-2018

Past Chair 2018-2020

Statistics Without Borders is an out-reach committee of the American Statistical Association. All work completed by officers, committee members, and project members is pro-bono. Volunteer situations like this have both advantages and disadvantages. Volunteer opportunities also provide a unique opportunity to develop and expand one's leadership skills. I will explain how I have developed, and am still developing leadership skills, through my volunteer experiences, and end by making suggestions on how to decide which volunteer activities to try.

There are many advantages to volunteering:

1. You usually work on a team.
2. Many times you are given a chance to work on skill areas not assigned to you at work.
3. There is usually an opportunity to work with experienced individuals.

4. Success breeds opportunities— people ask successful people for help and involvement
5. Networking— the opportunity to talk with a variety of people in other careers and organizations

There are also some of difficulties one may encounter when volunteering:

1. Working on a team, you will interact with people who have varying degrees of skills, time, access software, consistent internet connection, and communication technology.
2. There is an opportunity to learn but sometimes the time is not there to learn as much as is needed for the project.
3. Just as with a job, sometimes people's lives take their time away from the tasks required.
4. A more relaxed atmosphere can also increase the "lack of responsibility" to a project— from both SWB volunteers and from the organizations requesting assistance.
5. Some of the communication difficulties can be due to cultural differences, lack of internet connection, different time zones, gender role expectations.
6. Volunteering is a COMMITMENT to the client, SWB Team Members, and to SWB. Some people – SWB volunteers and clients -- do not respect this level of commitment.

The development of leadership skills occurred because I was willing to take on tasks and challenges other individuals were not interested in. Some of the skills I have developed over the past six years:

1. Leadership is about seeing the possibilities and then working with people to achieve those goals.
2. A strong leader understands one person does not have all the answers but searches for talented and committed individuals who want to work on the goals you have expressed.
3. Planning is everything—I have planned projects for work but being Chair was different. It took working with people who had the same goals I did, to talk through how to achieve the goals, and then to develop a group of individuals who would work together to achieve these goals.
4. All leaders make mistakes along the way. It is important to learn from one's mistakes and do better over time.
5. It is just as important to work on personal goals as it is to work on leadership skills (e.g., listening to others, acknowledging weaknesses but also having the confidence to achieve both personal and organizational goals).
6. Goals will change overtime. Be open to change. I have been told many times, change can only occur as fast as others on the team can manage.
7. Listen to others. You may not agree with what is being said and it may be difficult to hear, but at least listen. Take the time to think about what has been said.
8. I can do so much more than I thought I could. Having grit, perseverance, and determination goes a long way.
9. Leadership is a "skill in the making". I have placed a copy of Desiderata by my desk.

Note, leadership is not management. And there are many styles of leadership. I view my style of leadership as forming an organization to be the best it can be at that moment in time but also working with people to develop their skills so new leaders can take over (i.e., a leadership pipeline).

I have had the privilege of having many mentors:

1. Mary Gray encouraged me and introduced me to many people and many organizations: AAAS, StatAid, and SWB.
2. Fritz Scheuren connected me with organizations to pursue SWB projects and partnerships. He has always encouraged me to follow my professional passions.
3. Anna Nevius encouraged me to run for SWB Chair.
4. Gary Shapiro helped me “learn the ropes” of being Chair, and he has always there to bounce ideas off of.
5. Steve Pierson helped me “learn the ropes” of working with ASA and AAAS as both New Projects Committee Chair and SWB Chair. He has always there to bounce ideas off of.
6. Michiko Wolcott helped me understand organizational structure, how to create a network of people to work together for the benefit of the organization, and worked with me on communication skills. She has always there to bounce ideas off of.
7. Nancy Geller gave me advise on public speaking and communication skills.

My strategic goals for statistics without borders

1. To make SWB the best organization that it can be at this moment in time
2. To make SWB a sustainable organization– review the mission statement, job descriptions, and definitions of committees. Distribute the tasks and responsibilities to involve more people.
3. Develop a “leadership” pathway. (i.e, ask people who have shown leadership skills on SWB projects to take on more responsible roles in the organization.)
4. Increase projects, with a special focus on humanitarian issues, human rights, and as an out-reach ASA Committee.
5. Increase international participation both in projects and leadership..

Suggestions for volunteering

1. Know yourself:
 - A. How much time do you have?
 - B. How will you balance work/school/personal responsibilities?
 - C. What skills do you have?
 - D. What skills do you want to gain?
 - E. Remote volunteering or travel volunteering?
 - F. What area(s) of statistics appeal to you?
 - G. Have you looked at working on committees?
2. Be open to trying a variety of volunteer organizations and opportunities
 - A. Take on a task you “are slightly uncomfortable with”. This gives the opportunity to be challenged and to grow.
 - B. Take on additional opportunities but complete each task on time and in a professional manner.
 - C. After you have volunteered, are your skills and attributes being used and enhanced?

