

Charlatans and Other Silliness: Knowing and Caring Enough To Measure the Actual Value of Volunteering

Linda L. Graff

A short while ago I received an email from a woman who'd read an extract on calculating the value of volunteering from my book, *Best of All*. The question she posed was:

In the extract I read, you were pointing out the disadvantages of the wage replacement method, which I wholeheartedly agree with. However, the extract didn't go on to suggest a more robust method. Is there a methodology you can suggest, or can you point me to the right place in the literature?

I took a few minutes to respond to this inquiry and on considering my response thought it might be worth sharing since there is so much interest these days in calculating the value of volunteering. So here's my thinking.

Value in Outcomes

I think that *value* lies in what the work accomplishes – for the recipient, the organization, the community and so on – and also in what it gives back to the volunteer as well. We often forget that latter part of the equation. Volunteering is a two way relationship and benefits flow in both directions.

I think the real promise in understanding the value of volunteering lies in attempts to measure impact, outcomes, difference. What has the volunteer work actually accomplished?

When we have identified outcomes, then we need to decide whether they are worth what it cost us to generate them. That is, we have to decide whether that “value” has been worth the investment.

Let me offer an illustration. If I sit at the bedside of a dying child, giving comfort to the child and respite to the parents, surely attaching a fictitious wage to my hours does not, in any meaningful way, capture the value of my work. I would argue, in fact, that it overly simplifies the work, demeans the worker, and is just a lazy way of hastily arriving at a number for the sake of a number. The wage replacement approach is usually promoted by authors and academics who have no personal or substantive understanding of what volunteering is all about. If you truly understood what volunteering is about you'd never pursue let alone promote such a nonsensical and foolish methodology. And if you cared about volunteering you'd realize how demeaning the approach actually is.

So what's the alternative? Well it's not as simple ... or simplistic. But it's certainly more meaningful, respectful, honest, and valid.

It's my contention that to calculate the value of volunteering we need to ask: What did my time with the child mean to the child? What did it mean to the child's parents? To the nurses on the ward who could find just a little bit of relief knowing that there was someone with the child while the parents grasped a few minutes to have a shower and a bite to eat? What has the experience meant in my life? How might it have changed the public's view of a hospital that is sufficiently caring to ensure that a volunteer is there in this kind of tragedy?

Dollar Amount Not Always Necessary To Assess "Value"

Now we don't have to actually attach a dollar value to any of the answers to the above questions. (We could, by the way if it was really important to do so, but it would be complex, and I'd argue it is not necessary to go down that road.) I think what we should do is, rather organically, consider what we can *describe* of the answers to these questions. In the illustration in question, we'd consider how important it was to the end of days quality of life of the child that a caring person took the time of her own free will to offer comfort? Did it ease that child's passing in any way? What did it mean to the parents to get a few minutes respite from the tragedy haunting their days and nights? And to know that there would be someone there constantly with their child in their short absence? What did it mean to the morale on the ward, the job satisfaction, the genuine caring of the nurses who are too busy to give that caring themselves? Does it ease their anxiety to know that the volunteer will call if the child needs help? Injecting personal caring back into an institutionalized health care system ravaged by cutbacks can make a huge difference to both the quality of care and the image of the hospital ... and ultimately to the extent to which the hospital's supporters choose to support it.

When we have explored the results of volunteer work in all of their many dimension we are getting very close to an accurate portrayal of the real value of volunteering. Then we ask ourselves is this a good thing to be doing? Does it represent a good investment? Is it what we're trying to do? Does it further our mission?

Cost-Benefit Analysis

If we want to go further, we might pursue a cost-benefit analysis. So, for example, we might discover that it cost \$40 or \$100 (or whatever), to put that volunteer at that bedside for x hours (and we can do that if we add up all the costs involved in volunteer participation). When we understand the value - benefits, results, outcomes - that flow from the volunteer activity, would we judge the input costs to be a good investment? Are they returning valuable benefits? Do the benefits justify the investment? Might there be other volunteer work that would offer more return to our clients, our community our mission?

In my mind we don't have to know what an hour beside the bed is "worth" in dollar terms (even if we could actually assign a meaningful monetary value to such a thing) to decide whether this program is worth funding. The bottom line, value can be described and estimated and understood without attaching money to it. And good planning decisions can be made without

attaching a dollar amount to an hour of work. And surely decisions based on a thoughtful assessment of the true value of the work would be more meaningful than grasping an artificial paid wage equivalent and saying that's what the work is worth.

The Wage Replacement Approach Is Silly

As I've said many times, the wage-replacement approach to estimating the value of volunteering is downright silly! It has absolutely nothing to do with the value of volunteer work. All it does is (inaccurately) describe what we have *not* paid to have the work done. And since we probably wouldn't ever pay to have that work done anyway, it is usually a meaningless and misleading exercise.

Trying to reduce volunteering to a dimension of our Gross Domestic Product is dismissive and misguided. Suggesting that all volunteering is worth the same always rather arbitrarily constructed hourly wage is flat-out insulting.

Estimating true value, understanding what volunteers really accomplish - that's where I think we need to go. It means pulling apart each volunteer action and understanding deeply what that action generates in value. It means caring enough and honouring volunteer work enough to actually make an effort to understand it. Sure it takes more work, but if it's important to understand the value of volunteering, then that's where we have to go. It also means uncovering the wage-replacement approach for the folly it is and saying "shame on you" to those who promote it. The wage-replacement advocates should be revealed as the charlatans they are and made to admit that their methods, while admittedly convenient in their simplicity, are worthless at best and at worst, damaging to the very phenomenon they purport to value.