

Why Community Service Matters: A Personal Leadership Journey

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The following address was delivered on May 6, 2009 at my local Toastmasters International club.

We are living in a society that has become more inward-looking. We live busy lives – raising children, building careers, tending to ageing parents, enrolling in adult education, travelling to exotic locations - and trying to stay fit and healthy. We face rapid technological change, falling for the latest gizmos and then struggling to figure out how they operate.

The recent economic and financial events have exerted enormous stresses on individuals and organizations. What we are starting to realize - and fear - is that we will **not** be returning to what was. But what will be the *new normal*? We're increasingly a more mobile population. Our society has become more polarized economically as income distribution has been skewed towards a smaller share of high income earners.

These trends and issues are steadily reshaping Canadian society. And what may fall in the cracks along the way is a critically important aspect of what has helped define Canadians as caring and compassionate people: service to our communities.

My proposition to you is that community service matters: that it plays a vital role in helping create strong, vibrant and inclusive communities. And at the level of the individual, it can contribute enormously to one's leadership growth.

During the next 20 minutes, I'll share with you some of my diverse experiences in community volunteer work, what it has meant to me, and how it helped me along my personal leadership journey. And I will leave you with a call to action to stimulate your own reflection on community service.

My volunteer community service work was never done by design. That's to say, I didn't have a grand plan in mind when I began volunteering my time to various groups, or even as I proceeded along. I simply seized opportunities as they arose. But when I look back, I do feel a sense of pride and accomplishment – that I have made a positive difference in the communities where I lived and touched the lives of people.

This reminds me of a quotation from Deepak Chopra. Keep Chopra's words in the back of your mind as I share my experiences with you:

I embrace the unknown because it allows me to see new aspects of myself.

Chopra's message is an invaluable tool with which *to keep us open to outcome and not attached to it.*

Let's begin. Before I moved to Ottawa several years ago, I lived in Fredericton (and surrounding area) where Sue and I raised four kids. I've never quite understood what propelled me into doing volunteer work shortly after I graduated from university. My parents certainly never did much in the way of volunteer work. So I didn't have them as role models. But my earlier efforts included serving on the boards of directors of a credit union and, later on, cooperative housing. However, I realized after a few years that I didn't particularly enjoy the politics that underlay much of this volunteer work. I had to deal with enough of that at work. I decided, as a result, to direct my attention to what I'll call frontline community service work.

That opportunity came when my son Michael, now 26, was five years old. As a former Cub and Scout in Montreal (where I grew up), I urged Michael to get involved in Beavers (5-7). I became a Beaver Leader, and for the next eight years followed Michael along the Scouts Canada program until he was 14. There were many work nights when I felt too drained, after wolfing down a quick supper, to head off to Beavers, Cubs or Scouts with Michael. But I can tell you that within a few minutes upon arriving that my battery was recharged. Engaging with the other leaders and leading the kids through their program was a lot of fun – and rewarding.

Taking the boys on hikes and camping trips was especially rewarding as you watched them put onto practice what we had taught them at our weekly meetings. Of course, there were times when one's patience as a leader was tested. And there were some weird experiences with the boys. For example, I took our small Scout troop on a camping trip to Fundy National Park. It rained a lot and everyone was getting pretty squishy, and I instructed the boys to change their socks regularly.

On the third day, some of the Scouts started complaining about sore feet. One of the Scouts was in quite a bit of pain. Upon inspecting his feet they looked like swollen prunes. He was in the early stage of developing trench foot, a malady common with soldiers during the WW1 who spent a lot of time in wet trenches. My solution was for the boys to air out their feet for an afternoon, while drying out their footwear. A lesson learned for the Scouts! But it meant delaying activities while we dealt with the problem.

My years in Scouting produced one very pleasant surprise many years later. By sheer coincidence, the fiancé of my oldest daughter's best friend turns out to be one of my former Beavers. Robert is now 27, and a fine young man who works in Ottawa. I still vividly remember his grinning face as a six year old, who was a good sport and team player with the other boys. After a two-decade gap, it wasn't just a surprise to meet him again but it was wonderful to see how he had matured and become a contributing member to society. One of the rewards of leading youth.

Parallel to my Scouting adventures, I became actively involved with the United Way through my work in a federal regional office. I started out as a canvasser during the fall campaigns, moving up to coordinating it for my dept. in Fredericton. During that very busy period, I began to understand much better the positive impact that organizations like United Way have on local communities. This especially came into focus when people who benefitted from UW programs came to speak to canvassers and coordinators about how they were helped (eg, disabilities, health problems). In particular, it instilled in me how fortunate I was as an individual, as well as my children.

After a few years with the United Way, I shifted my volunteer efforts to the Red Cross. One of the activities I became heavily involved in was delivering first aid/CPR training. While there was some remuneration for this (albeit paltry), much of the training I gave was done voluntarily, such as to those in Scouting, both leaders and youth.

Being a Red Cross trainer over several years was a wonderful learning experience from several perspectives. First, knowing that you were helping equip people to respond effectively to first aid emergencies was very satisfying. And this was reinforced when it involved training youth.

Second, it certainly helped strengthen my speaking skills, and especially how to plan and deliver training sessions. The courses were typically done on weekends involving 16 hours of instruction. By Sunday night I was bagged, but feeling very satisfied that I had done something constructive for my community.

And third, because I am a big supporter of the Red Cross, delivering first aid training helped create awareness of the organization and its programs.

Tied to my Red Cross work was another aspect, and which would eventually lead to my involvement in the most meaningful volunteer work I have ever done. But first some context...

In addition to being a first aid trainer, I was also a member of the Fredericton Disaster Response Team. This comprised a large group of people who responded to small and large-scale disasters (e.g., house fires, flooding, and supporting search and rescue personnel). Some experienced members of the team also volunteered for assignments in other countries where they provided humanitarian relief following such events as hurricanes and earthquakes.

The nature of this volunteer work with the Red Cross is helping people in times of crisis. The Red Cross has one strategic goal, which I find very compelling: *To improve the situation of the most vulnerable*. For me, this statement sums up eloquently what the Red Cross is about.

My most powerful experience I had with the Red Cross, and in fact with any community organization I've been involved, is my work in support of the Kosovar refugees in the spring of 1999. You may recall this event being in the news at the time. There were diverse views on whether it was appropriate for the federal government to airlift civilians out of a war-torn area in Eastern Europe to Canada. But for the Red Cross and its volunteers, it was a matter of extending a helping hand to those **most vulnerable**.

The refugees were flown to CFB Greenwood in Nova Scotia, and then bused to CFB Gagetown (20 minutes west of Fred.) The refugees consisted of men and women – young and old – and children. The plan was to house them temporarily in the Cadet barracks section of the military base.

Leading up to the arrival of the refugees, the Red Cross identified volunteers from their network. I arranged to take a few days off work since we would be working at Gagetown from midnight to dawn. The Red Cross then arranged briefings for the volunteers to explain our duties and how to conduct ourselves on the nights when our “guests” arrived. I also did some crash first aid training for some of the volunteers.

On my first night I arrived around midnight, and began the wait with the other volunteers for our guests. I definitely felt apprehensive about what was to unfold, especially since this was a new experience for all of us. Finally, around 2:00 am seven motorcoaches slowly filed onto the base, each packed full with people. Each bus had two translators to assist with the transition.

These people had traveled seven hours from CFB Greenwood. When each bus rolled up to the unloading station where a dozen or so Red Cross volunteers waited, we could see the haggard faces of the Kosovars peering at us through the windows. Some young children waved to us; others were very shy, taking occasional peeks, then burying their heads in their mothers' arms.

I vividly recall my first contact with the Kosovars. The first bus rolled up to the unloading area. The door opened and one of the translators stepped forward with his arm around the shoulders of a boy about 16 (same age as my son at the time). “Hey everyone,” the translator shouted to us,

“It’s his birthday today!” So we did the appropriate thing and sang happy birthday to this young lad. He bounded down the steps of the bus and ran up to us. He had the biggest smile on his face, and began pumping each of our hands. It was a very emotional moment for all of us.

I had to put aside what began running through my mind. How could this boy be smiling after what he and his family had been through in Kosovo? He had nothing but the clothes on his back, plus a few additional items that were provided to each refugee at CFB Greenwood. This contrasted sharply with my own four children, ages 10 to 19, who liked to complain about how hard they had it. Sound familiar to any of you parents?

This teenage boy taught me an important lesson that night: as middle class Canadians, we become caught up too easily in the small stuff and materialism. We need to periodically take stock of where we’re at in our lives and re-examine for what it is we stand. What propels us as individuals? What do we do to help make the world, and our communities, a better place in which to live?

It was Viktor Frankl (in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*) who said:

“Everything can be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

I worked until dawn that night and a subsequent night at CFB Gagetown to help greet more refugees and to assist them to their accommodations. I felt very humbled and honoured to have been able to help in such an important relief effort. While many of the adults were exhausted and appeared cautious, a few were smiling. Some joked with us. Perhaps the most powerful moments occurred when very young children took the hands of the Red Cross volunteers and walked with them to the reception centre. Trust.

The two nights that I worked at the base were magic. I know that the other Red Cross volunteers will hold these moments as precious treasures. As individuals on a shrinking planet, we grew as human beings, and as leaders, from this experience.

Juxtaposed against this community service work with the Red Cross was my involvement with Fredericton's well known Harvest Jazz & Blues Festival, held every September. The contrast was striking, in terms of community service. Some people might prefer volunteer work that is more consistent in theme. But then I've never promoted myself as being "normal." I like, and prefer, diverse people and taking on challenging and varied projects. The Festival offered such a challenge.

The planning for a five day festival takes one year. When the event finally arrives in September, an intense, highly collaborative effort is unleashed. Over 400 volunteers make the Festival happen each year, with attendance topping 50,000. There is only one paid employee. The organizers, who make up the board of directors, are all volunteers who devote huge amounts of personal time to see the Festival realized. They're amazing people.

I had been a volunteer with the Festival for a few years, but for the 1999 Festival I was asked if I would be an event manager for three consecutive nights in one of the large tents. My tent held over 800 people.

As event manager, I was responsible for overseeing the performance each evening, which consisted of three separate acts by musicians. I led an eight member management team, which in turn had over 40 volunteers in various capacities.

It was incredible to watch some 50 volunteers arrive each evening about 5:30 and then launch into an intense, team effort. There was no time for debating turfs or bickering over trivial issues that are common to organizations. People had to pull their weight and understand the interdependency among the different teams. This was shared leadership in action.

I went into this role with only a little experience with the Festival. It meant working from 5:30 pm to 1:30 am each night at full tilt. As multiple problems arose during each event, I had to work closely with the managers and their teams. Problems ranged from inadequate electrical capacity to drunk patrons to overcrowding in the tent (with the City Police watching closely) to an ambulance call for a medical illness.

Sure, it was taxing at times. On the first night, I asked myself: “What have I got myself into?” But working the Festival was an incredibly rewarding experience. I met many wonderful volunteers and patrons from all over North America, and was hugely impressed the sheer commitment of the volunteers whose sole goal was to deliver memorable experiences for the patrons.

My main point in recounting my experience with this music Festival is to underscore the importance of stretching oneself as a learner. We can’t maximize our learning and personal growth if we don’t put ourselves in new situations. And these situations need to go beyond workplace assignments and new jobs. They need to include community service work.

In 2000, Sue and I moved our family to Ottawa. My community service work has not been nearly as intense, and has been centered primarily on music festivals. Sue and I have been volunteers with the Ottawa Folk Festival for 10 years, involving both the summer festival and winter concerts. We’ve met dozens of wonderful people who donate their time unconditionally to help add spice and vibrancy to Ottawa’s culture.

And being a jazz aficionado, I joined the Ottawa International Jazz Festival four years ago, and have loved every minute of it. Again, the folks who help out are a great bunch.

Service to our communities comes in many forms. It is up to each of us to decide where and how we wish to leave a positive mark. I would suggest that getting involved in community work needs to be connected to our personal vision on how we lead our lives. It was Helen Keller who said: **“Worse than being blind is to see and have no vision.”**

Leadership includes stewardship. It means giving back to our communities, and more broadly society, and in turn learning from that interaction. I see it as an issue of balance: how each of us as human beings approaches work, home, and community. One way to see this is as a three legged stool. Remove one of the legs and our lives are profoundly affected.

At the outset of my speech I stated that my proposition to you was that community service matters. It contributes enormously to helping create strong, vibrant and inclusive communities. And at the personal level, having shared some of my experiences and adventures, it can contribute significantly to one's leadership growth.

I'll leave you with two questions upon which to reflect. Ask yourself:

How can I put myself out of my comfort zone so that I may further develop my leadership capacity?

Do I have the courage to do this?

This brings to mind some wise words from author Alan Cohen:

“It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power.”