

From Your Servant Leader

July 20, 2017

Recently the IRS re-valued and increased the value of a volunteer hour. On one hand, great news, we all got an instant raise! At least in the value of what we give. On the other hand, well, what a crock.

When we get bills from lawyers, accountants, plumbers and the auto repair shop we see how different the sixty minutes of time can be valued. We know that the time value represents more than minutes. It also represents education, cost of the office the person spending the time sits in, equipment the mechanic uses and all sorts of other costs. It all gets compressed into one standard metric of time. It's perceived measurement but without real accountability.



The value of one's time is of course very relative. Time goes faster when we're having fun and slower when we're not. School and work days are long; vacation days are short. When we're young, time stretches out forever. As we age, we feel the time ahead shorten. Time is always precious but not always valued. Or else why would we watch so much television?

At some point in the world of nonprofits we all convinced ourselves that we should measure the time we spend on our mission. In annual reports we actually value more time, not less, spent on the same activity! Think about it – we usually want to show that we spent more time and helped more people. Sounds good, but wouldn't we – and the people served – be happier in many cases if we spent less time and helped more people?

In a home visit, we definitely value the time spent with neighbors in need. Some may wish we would do a fly-by visit or even none at all. Instead, we listen to them and try to understand why they are where they are in an effort to see how best we can help. This takes real time. This measure of time is indeed valuable, and we “double” it intentionally when we go in pairs on the visit. We could simply mail a check to the utility company, but the human – and spiritual – element is indeed often one of time shared.

In our other work, productivity often means we can help more people in need in less time. Our country was built on manufacturing and farming productivity, doing more with less. Nonprofits never received that word, I guess, as we pride ourselves in adding more “service hours” independent of our impact and value received. Do we really think that most people helped by any nonprofit, not just our Society, want you to spend more time helping them? Or do they just want the help more quickly; the same as you want your car fixed in one day and not three, and order online so you don't need to spend time in the line at the store? Do we operate as if we are “paid by the hour”?

We all used to be able to blame, uh credit, funders for this time metric. That's because some foundations and other major donors were stuck on measuring inputs such as time and money, and outputs such as people helped and units of whatever created. But today, this is changing. Funders are moving toward impact investing, the measure of the actual value received from whatever the organization's mission and activities are supposed to create. It no longer matters how many staff and

volunteers one has, or how much one spent on the service. What matters now is what actually resulted from whatever resources were invested. What's the impact?

Somewhere in between a desire for productivity and the value of personal attention is our beloved Society. When a carefully evaluated and adjusted-for-inflation but still arbitrary volunteer value measure is re-introduced, to me at least it makes the whole question seem rather silly.

If we are concerned about time, perhaps we should take a look at how much time it takes to measure, and then report, our time! What value do we receive from all this work? Can you prove it, or are we resting on old assumption? Who really needs this number? Are you sure?

As the Society looks at the changing dynamics of volunteer availability and how all of us spend our time, we need to ask about such things, and be willing to throw away old measures and assumptions of value to help us recruit and keep volunteers. For example, sometimes we recognize volunteers for the hours they have spent in our service. Sounds good, but what did they actually accomplish? That's where we are today. And maybe it's about time.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Dave B.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dave