



## **Preserving the Culture of Volunteerism**

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This article is a perspective on volunteerism that is somewhat of an outsider's look at the credit union movement. I have had the privilege of working with many credit unions from large to small for the past two plus years as a Principal Consultant for HRValue Group, LLC. But prior to joining HRValue Group, LLC, my experience was with high tech, biotech, and manufacturing companies where profit was the reason for existence. "Not for profit, not for charity, but for service" was not the mantra of the for-profit sector! Even the board of directors on which I served compensated its board members for their time at meetings. Any volunteering I did for my community or my church was done on personal time – time for volunteering was not provided in the course of one's workday. In fact, the subject of volunteerism never surfaced at any level – it simply did not exist.

So every day for the past two plus years that I have been a consultant to the credit union industry with HRValue Group, LLC, I have been amazed at the culture of volunteerism within credit unions – and more amazed at how taken for granted that culture is. Many credit union employees have spent their careers within the credit union movement so just don't realize that the credit union industry is indeed different and indeed very special.

Within individual credit unions, I have watched employees volunteer to cover for a co-worker who has to leave the teller line early or change a schedule unexpectedly. There is a built-in assumption that a co-worker would always help out! I have seen a credit union lend an employee to another credit union to help that institution in a crisis. I have attended Chapter meetings where credit union employees and individual credit unions have devoted significant time to raising money for a variety of charities. Many credit unions and credit union leagues adopt their own special charitable group to support, and throughout the year employees remain involved with that organization. Volunteering is not only a way of life for employees, it is built into the work model -- and then it is nurtured.

I have come to recognize that volunteering in the credit union movement is a subset of service. The credit union movement is built on service to its members, and volunteering is a natural outgrowth of this culture. I have been particularly intrigued by the service of board members. These individuals devote countless hours to their board responsibilities, learn new roles that are often outside one's expertise, attend regularly scheduled board and emergency board meetings, and assume fiduciary responsibilities as volunteer directors. When I have asked board members why they volunteer so much of their time, the responses I hear are, "The Credit Union gave me a loan when no one else would and I never forgot that." "The Credit Union helped me get on my feet, and this is payback." "I am committed to the philosophy of credit unions, of members helping members."

To me one of the challenges for credit unions as they grow and compete in today's economy is to maintain that culture of volunteerism within credit unions and within board rooms. Reaching out to new, younger members to join a board as a director becomes daunting since many of those younger members have very stretched lives. Convincing new retirees with diverse interests and disposable incomes for



other pursuits to join a volunteer board is equally challenging. How does a credit union instill that sense of payback? How does a credit union insure that it still helps those members when no one else will help? So amidst all the changes with which credit unions are struggling in the new millennium, preserving the basic culture on which the movement was founded is key!

As Edward Filene once said, "Progress is not the mere correction of evils. Progress is the constant replacing of the best there is with something still better." As credit unions look to replace some of the old ways of doing business, they must ensure they replace those things with something still better. In remaining competitive, the toughest challenge is to do that without altering the culture and philosophy of service -- service that fosters volunteerism.

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