

Service vs. Serve-Us: What Will Your Legacy Be?

The posting below looks at the importance of service work in our academic lives. It is by Bradley J. Cardinal* and first appeared on April 30, 2013 in the Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance (Vol. 84 No. 5 May/June 2013) published by Taylor & Francis Group, 325 Chestnut Street, Suite 800, Philadelphia, PA 19106 Tel: 215.606.4334, www.tandfonline.com. Reprinted with permission.

Imagine a job applicant asking the question, “If I come here, what is the least amount of service work I have to do to get by?” Or how would you feel if you were preparing to depart for a professional conference and a colleague said to you in passing: “You still go there? Why?” Or you are working with someone who volunteers to chair a committee but does nothing to advance the work of the group and is non-communicative and non-responsive when others attempt to communicate with her or him. Sadly, these are not make-believe scenarios. They are real-life experiences that I have witnessed during my own career. From talking with others, I suspect they are relatable and not necessarily the most egregious.

Is there a prevailing attitude of avoidance, disengagement, and entitlement brewing in our disciplines and professions? Are we socializing people—our students, our colleagues—to dismiss or neglect the service needs of our communities, institutions, and professional societies?

In this editorial, I draw attention to what I view as a diminishing “service” mindset and a growing “serve-us” mindset among people in our fields of study. Table 1 articulates the key differences between these typologies. In a nutshell, those with a “service” mindset voluntarily give of themselves for the betterment of others, whereas those with a “serve-us” mindset partake in activities reluctantly or participate in only those activities that result in a direct personal benefit to them (e.g., power, privilege, title).

Service and Society

Civic engagement, civility, and the interconnectivity among people in the United States hit a record low at the close of the 20th century, according to *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Putnam, 2000).

Eleven years after the publication of Putnam’s book, volunteerism rates in the United States were 26.8% (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012). While this represents the highest rate of volunteerism seen in five years, it is still lower than the rates observed for all the years prior to 2006. Whether or not the 26.8% figure represents a bottoming out or reversal of the downward trend in volunteerism remains to be seen. Regardless, we are currently living with the consequences of a generation raised in an era of diminished volunteerism.

Table 1. Focus of a “Service” vs. “Serve-us” Mindset (Note: I have changed the format slightly to allow for e-mail posting - RR)

Focus “Service”

Advice

We are all stewards of something larger than ourselves. Seek out authentic opportunities to better humanity by contributing to your community, institution, profession, etc.

Approach
Communal, cooperative, interdependent

Commitment
Active, engaged, involved, participates, volunteers

Contribution
Puts into

Orientation
Community, group, organization, others, selfless

Outcome/expectancy
Doesn't care who gets credit, intrinsic, mutuality, satisfaction, win-win

Perspective
Authentic, give, offer

Questions
What can I do to help?

Focus

"Serve-Us"

Advice

Service doesn't really count for anything. Protect yourself and your time above all else. Find out what is the least amount of service required of you and stick with that.

Approach

Autonomous, competitive, individualistic

Commitment

Avoids, disassociates, disingenuous, passive, removed, waits to be asked

Contribution

Takes from

Orientation

Ego, me, selfish

Outcome/expectancy

Personal gain, contempt, extrinsic, wants personal credit, win-lose

Perspective

Receive, strategic, take

Questions

What is in it for me?

This disengagement seems to extend to our professional work as well, in which service duties are often shirked and even basic things such as affiliation through membership remain low. For example, Buschner (2007) estimated that only 8% of physical education teachers employed in the United States are members of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. Of those who do belong to professional societies, many are reluctant to volunteer their time or expertise to committee work, or to run for and serve in either elected offices or appointed positions (Asbell, 2007; Dowd, 2007).

Service Sustains

We are not socializing people to engage in or value service (Napper-Owen, 2012), and by not doing so, we are doing our charges and pledges a disservice, harming our fields of study, and depriving the communities, institutions, and organizations that we live in, work for, and affiliate with of our time and expertise. The scenarios highlighted in the opening paragraph are indicative of this. Service work is often described as a colossal waste of time, an unrewarded chore, and something to protect oneself from—especially early on in one's career (GMP, 2010). Even if well intentioned on some level, encouraging this perspective or suggesting that others take this approach to life and work does more harm than good. If service work is desirable or eventually expected, necessary, and/ or required of a person after a probationary period of time, then it only makes sense to socialize people to engage in service work early in their careers. Learning how to balance service work among other commitments, duties, obligations, and responsibilities reflects personal and professional maturity.

Additionally, authentic service work has a multitude of psychological and sociological benefits (e.g., affiliation, belonging, interpersonal skill enhancement, knowledge acquisition, loyalty, networking, outreach, understanding, visibility). It is also associated with living a longer, healthier, and more satisfying life (Okun, August, Rook, & Newsom, 2010). However, there is an interesting catch to this. The service rendered must be for other-oriented reasons (“service”) rather than personal gain reasons (“serve-us”) for the benefits to hold true (Konrath, Fuhrel-Forbis, Lou, & Brown, 2012).

It's Not All Fun and Games

Now, before being accused of glorifying service work to the detriment of one's own personal life or professional career, let me also be clear that service work can at times be daunting, frustrating, and time consuming. For this reason it is important to make certain that the service assignments accepted or pursued are authentic, meaningful, and personally relevant. As the muse Kira, played by Olivia Newton-John in the movie *Xanadu*, said, “It must be frustrating to waste your talents on things that don't really matter to you” (Danus, Rubel, & Greenwald, 1980).

Of course, there are core functions that go along with any service assignment, and sometimes these are not glamorous—perhaps akin to cleaning your house. Indeed, such tasks may go unnoticed when done well, but if not done or done poorly, people will notice. Therefore, it is important to be attentive, caring, and responsive to the core functions of any service assignment assumed. Doing so reflects one's dependability, humility, and level of responsibility. And people notice this, too. If you cannot give something the effort that it deserves, then it is better to pass on the assignment in the first place. Attempting to do something that your heart is not in or that you truly do not have time for creates more work for others and deprives other people of opportunities, and it can tarnish your reputation. Knowing when and how to say “no” is also a sign of personal and professional maturity. If you are interested, but the timing is not right, let people know that, too.

Our Service Realities Vary

The context of each of our lives is different. The needs of our communities, work environments, and the professional societies we belong to are unique. The expectations placed upon us and others vary as well. For example, women and minorities are often over-burdened with service duties while other groups do comparatively little, or when they do serve, they take on the larger and more visible roles (Massé & Hogan, 2010). It would be easy to dismiss this as a simple timing issue; however, the unique interplay among gender, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation in relation to our service realities are difficult to disentangle. This is something of which to be mindful and attentive.

Cynicism sometimes becomes associated with service work, too. Those who serve must not be doing something else. Or, those who serve do it to compensate for other areas of weakness or because it is an accessible way to contribute. Of course, such assumptions are biased and fraught with prejudice. Conversely, some question the point of serving if their time and efforts are in vain or the results futile. For example, sometimes committee accomplishments go nowhere or are superseded by administrative decisions. When this happens, it counteracts the finding of meaning in service, which can result in mistrust and disengagement.

One result of our growing and, at times, fragmented fields of study is that there are infinite demands and needs for our services. A biomechanist may judge a science fair, a dance educator may help write state dance standards, a physical educator may testify to state legislators, a sport psychologist may consult with a team, and so on. There are more journals, requiring more editorial services; and more professional organizations needing to fill their boards and committees with devoted and dedicated professionals. Moreover, greater expectations, accountability, and documentation are required in the work we do. That said, service work remains important to the long-term success of any community, institution, or professional society.

Take-Home Message

Like mortar between bricks, service is paramount to stabilizing and sustaining our structures. It is also the intersecting point between all the bricks. The bricks sit in isolation, separated from one another by the mortar. The bricks need the mortar, and the mortar needs the bricks. They are interdependent; the presence of one without the other results in structural instability and weakness.

People should be encouraged to assume service assignments, rather than discouraged from doing so. Approaching life with a service-oriented spirit and participating in authentic service-oriented activities is reflective of a life well lived. As a reminder of this, one of Coach John Wooden's favorite maxims was, "Be more concerned with what you can do for others than what others can do for you. You'll be surprised at the results" (Wooden & Jamison, 1997, p. 200).

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