



A People Lens:

How Your Organization Can Adopt a People-First Philosophy

A Discussion Paper for Executive Directors

**By Colleen Kelly
December 2006**

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Why Can't We Find Board Members and Other Volunteers We Require?

I. Creative Opportunity

We are finding current structures and practices are not effective in working with the “new volunteer”. We continue to seek traditional volunteers we want to involve in traditional ways – doing repetitive and often menial tasks. These volunteers are in limited supply. We are seeking board members in the same way we always have and from the same places, when we now truly require visionaries, strategic thinkers, planners and dreamers in that volunteer leadership role.

Organizations in Canada cannot:

1. Recruit the types of volunteers they require and
2. Obtain board members

Organizations in British Columbia (BC) cannot:

1. Retain:
 - a. trained staff and
 - b. competent and skilled Boards of Directors
2. Succeed in the competition for volunteers
3. Adapt to the shift in volunteerism

The Canadian information is from the National Survey on Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations, conducted by Imagine Canada and released in 2004. The BC information is from the Vancouver Foundation. Their CEO, Faye Wightman, recently conducted Community Conversations around the province. The BC information is from a preliminary report from the Vancouver foundation.

We can begin to be creative by changing our frame of reference. Consider these two very relevant facts:

1. There are many people. People who want to be involved in community. People who are passionate about causes. People who have a skill set that could further organizational missions. In most cases we really haven't done enough strategic thinking about how best to involve these people.
2. There will continue to be the perception there are insufficient dollars to achieve organizational goals. (Yet how many examples can we cite where throwing money at something did not make it better?) While it is very important for

organizations to have a strong financial base, there will not be enough money to fulfill all of our missions in the traditional sense – in the arts and the environment and health and education and recreation and social services and...so on.

What about introducing a “People Lens” to your organization? This becomes **your** competitive advantage.

II. One Potential New Twist

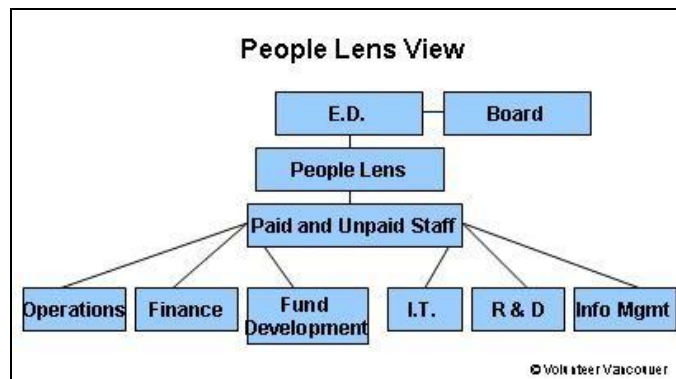
People are the competitive advantage of the Voluntary Sector.

We are suggesting we integrate all the people who work for our cause and create a true people-first culture. We are **not** proposing a new way of problem solving or benchmarking or fundraising or recognizing volunteers or evaluating results. We **are** talking about an intentional philosophy that creates a culture that says people really do come first. It is about building and growing an organizational structure that engages a new kind of workforce. It is about carefully and deliberately determining which people, both paid and unpaid employees, have the skill sets and talents our organizations require to deliver our missions. The ability of the paid staff to work effectively with volunteers is critical. It is about how people work with people.

If we are CEOs and Executive Directors (EDs) who want to encourage a new way of working by connecting people to people and ensuring every person is successful in the role s/he plays, then this concept will work. This way of working is about developing a new philosophy or a “People Lens” in the organization. It is about being the kind of leader that focuses on growing a structure that engages all the talents of a wide range of available people in a new way. Overall, it is a new way for a CEO/ED to begin to lead.

A “People Lens” means the CEO/ED is intentional about involving people and their talents. The talents of the people are the focus of all organizational development. Organizations have, traditionally, had a major focus on money. Organizations have often set context based on dollars. What would happen if the primary organizational focus became people, a “People Lens”? What if we set context by asking “who?” before “how?” or “how much?” As Jim Collins states in Good to Great, “First Who... Then What.”¹ Organizations can always look first at “who” – and then build from a “People Lens”, as pictured below, rather than primarily from a framework that flows from a budget.

¹ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Collins 2001.), 13



There are many benefits to adopting a “People Lens.” This way of viewing our organizations recognizes there are many individuals with very specialized skill sets who can be unpaid employees. Then we all have an opportunity to be more strategic about the financial base we do have. It can often provide our organizations with the option of paying more appropriate salaries. That can often attract the right people as paid employees who can work with and lead the right people as paid and unpaid employees. Salaries in the voluntary sector may not ever be as high as the private or public sector, but that doesn’t mean we forfeit our responsibility to bridge that growing gap.

There is another competitive advantage of involving PEOPLE. Every person who has a positive interaction with our organization becomes a “raving fan.” This is true for every specifically skilled volunteer who works on a project basis. There are also times when it is appropriate to engage the episodic volunteer. By really involving the *right* people, possibly hundreds of short-term volunteers every year, there is an opportunity to build a word-of-mouth marketing campaign most organizations would never have dollars to create.

A people lens recognizes the changing face of available talent.

Consider the Who: Some of the Available Talent

The Baby Boomer

The largest demographic in history is moving into the next stage of their life. Peter Drucker states “the organization that first succeeds in attracting and holding knowledge workers past traditional retirement age and makes them fully productive will have a tremendous competitive advantage.” He goes on to state “some of the organization’s most important work will be done by people who are past traditional working age; who are not and should be neither “executives” or “subordinates” but have no rank; who

above all, are not “employees” in the traditional sense...”² Although Peter Drucker considers many will remain in the workforce as paid employees, he also comments there are many that have skills they are happy to donate.

This is a really different group from years past we see knocking on the doors of our community organizations. This group has arrived at a new stage of life. Drucker mentions that this era of “knowledge worker” is not worn out at this time because s/he has not been involved for years in manual labour. These individuals have skills and experience and a passion for many community issues. How do we find them? Then, how do we **really** engage them? Are they writing our business plans? Crafting our financial investment plan? Asking the tough questions that come from a place of their deep knowledge? It is important not to lose them all to the golf course. That would be a huge loss - to them and to the community organizations serve. We believe there is a way.

The Last Part of Generation X (born 1970 – 83)

As is common in generational shifts, Generation-X thinking has significant overtones of cynicism against things held dear to the previous generation. So, although this group has been very irreverent in many of the traditional aspects of community engagement, they share the Boomers’ (who are often their parents) desire to be engaged in community in a different way than traditional volunteers. They do not want to fit into the system doing the tasks organizations traditionally have assigned to volunteers. They want to contribute time and talent, make new contacts, learn new facts, and add balance to their lives. They are the selfish volunteer. Long may they live!

Generation Xers are very involved in their careers and they spend significant time in their places of work. Although they are often content to be part of teams of volunteers, they also are incredibly excited when they are invited into an organization to contribute their skills. Often they say they have limited time, and they deliberately seek that specific opportunity because of a cause in which they believe. They have made overtures to volunteer in new ways in organizations and been offered traditional roles. These unfulfilling roles will ensure they stay wrapped in their hectic work schedule. Or they will start their own community organization, because they really care about the cause – and they don’t think the traditional organization is innovative enough or nimble enough. Are we involving this group to better inform our organizations how to better use technology? And how to create innovative solutions? It is important to be aware of how to engage this group in the current community.

² Peter Drucker, *Management Challenges for the Twenty-first Century*, (New York: HarperCollins 1999), 48

III. The Advantage and The Benefit

A Story

For the Alberta Summer Games, the Organizing Committee recruited the Director of Marketing (a Generation Xer) at the local Credit Union to volunteer to be the event planner. She was great at event planning – and that was a large part of her job. She told them she did not want to plan an event. She did that at work. The Organizing Committee then stated. “It doesn’t work. These young people do not want to contribute their skills.” Although they thought they were moving to a new way of skilled volunteer engagement, it was still more of the “current way.” What we suggest is approaching the Director of Marketing to state: “We would not ask you to do exactly what you do at work. We would ask you to sit on an advisory committee that developed the event plan. Or develop and deliver a training session for those who will do the event planning. Or work to create a look that combines the local games brand with the provincial games brand. Or coach and mentor the event planner.” Her answer then: “Yes, I choose all of those! They are very exciting opportunities – and I can learn too!”

The CEO/ED is the Driver of the process. In this role it is important for us to be students of organizational development. A “People Lens” has the potential to improve our effectiveness as a leader and thus our organizations. As the CEO/ED, we have the potential to become a level 5 Leader and make a huge difference to our organizations.

In Good to Great, Jim Collins talks about Level 5 leaders and states they would have these attributes:

- Ambitious for the organization (not for themselves)
- Set up their successors for even greater success
- Modest, self-effacing, and understated
- Fanatically driven
- Must produce sustained results
- Diligent
- Unwavering resolve to do what must be done
- Look out to attribute success
- Look in the mirror when things go wrong³

Many CEO/EDs already have many of these attributes in our own ‘baskets’. But how can anyone develop them if they are not currently in our basket? Developing them is the first step in adopting a “People Lens” as a method for making our organizations more effective. These are some of the qualities the CEO/ED will have to work in a “People Lens” Organization. These qualities will reside in the CEO/ED – and ultimately most of

³ Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001.), 36

the employees and most of the volunteers. There will be huge interdependence and all the people in the organization will be focused on delivering the mission. It will not be such a lonely role to be the CEO/ED. We can greatly increase our impact with no more \$\$ - and many more people. The people will deliver the word-of-mouth campaign that we could not afford. If we establish a system full of very talented paid and unpaid employees, as CEO/EDs we can be much more assured our organization will be able to successfully deliver its mission well into future years. It is about sustainability.

Another Story

Two summers ago, a man came to Vantage Point asking us how he could find a job in the voluntary sector. He was a chemical engineer with an MBA—and we truly did not understand one item of his work experience on his resume. However, when the Executive Director sat down to talk with him in an interview, we discovered that he had been the COO at a manufacturing plant for automobile parts and his area of expertise was how systems of people all work together. Vantage Point had 13 employees that summer—and he worked with each of us to examine our systems for getting our work done. He examined how we collected information and how we stored it and to what purpose. He wrote a report with 47 recommendations—and that meant four employees had action plans for the next year.

It was that time in his life. He had worked with widgets and he wanted to work with people and make a difference for other people. While he volunteered with us, he learned about the community sector. We worked with him so he understood how to change his resume. It was a difficult process for him. He went to many organizations to volunteer and to seek employment. The people he encountered in the voluntary sector did not have a people lens that allowed them to examine his strengths. Eventually he found a job managing a program for women who were attempting to leave the sex trade. He was finally able to work with people in a position that suited who he was at that time in his life.

IV. Call to Action

At Vantage Point, we are developing tools and training modules and case studies. We think we are all in this together, so we hope you will tell us what you have learned. And work with us to spread the word. It's all about forging a new path down "the road less traveled."

We would be very excited to have you come along. So, call us. Email us. Send us a snail mail. Contribute to our blog: www.thevantagepoint.ca/blog.

V. Conclusion

This is about growing an organization from the inside out. This is about a philosophy that focuses on the talents of the people, starting with the CEO/ED. However, there are many assumptions that are part of a “People Lens”. Those assumptions include a focus on assets and eliminating “needs assessments” from our frame of reference. It is critical we examine all that is available to us. We must be ready to refrain from the doom and gloom of listing everything we do not have. As Jim Selman, Vantage Point’s very new organizational volunteer coach related to me, “we constantly remind ourselves the future doesn't happen 'out there' and the future isn't a problem to be solved or a 'fixed' reality waiting for us to arrive. The future is always a possibility and when it arrives, it will always be a function of our individual and collective actions... today. “ A “People Lens” begins with this philosophical view of the world. This is a people-focused way to create and grow values-based, effective, sustainable, dynamic organizations.

John Gardner talks about how “the barnacle is confronted with an existential decision about where it’s going to live. Once it decides... it spends the rest of its life with its head cemented to a rock.”⁴ It is important we take stock of how our head is attached to that one rock – and find a way to detach it. There will undoubtedly be huge pain in wrenching free from that long attachment. There will be many who will say we will lose our anchor. People are the amazing resource that is the competitive advantage of the voluntary sector – and we must create a people-first culture that truly involves, engages and develops people in many new and exciting ways.

⁴ John Gardner, *Living, Leading, and the American Dream*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.) p. 41

About the Author:

Colleen Kelly is the Executive Director of Vantage Point. Colleen, like many of her generation, “fell” into her career and the “business of volunteerism”—an area that is extremely important to her and one which evokes her passion for building leadership in the voluntary sector.

Colleen has been with Vantage Point since 1999 and leads a team of 10 staff, approximately 126 volunteers and the delivery of nine programs including GoVolunteer.ca, BoardMatch.org, a full program of open and customized workshops, and the recently launched Executive Director & Board Governance Learning Circles.



Colleen served as a member of the Senior Sector Steering Committee of the Voluntary Sector Initiative and the Co-chair of the National Volunteerism Initiative Table, and helped develop the Canada Volunteerism Initiative that the Prime Minister announced as a legacy to the International Year of Volunteers in 2001. Outside of Canada, she has spoken to audiences in Cape Town, Amsterdam, New York, Barcelona and Sao Paulo, Brazil on such topics as board governance, employer-supported volunteerism, engaging skilled volunteers and integrated human resources.

As a volunteer, Colleen has served as a Director on the boards of Volunteer BC, Leadership Vancouver, the Centre for Child Development, and the Centre for Sustainability. She has also been a member of the Health and Social Development Allocations Committee and the Vancouver Foundation, a member of the planning and chair of the volunteer committee for the CIVIVUS World Assembly in Vancouver, a member of the committee to evaluate the Vancouver Foundation granting process, and an organizational leadership volunteer with Canadian Red Cross.

Colleen is the mother of four grown children and four grandchildren and she and her husband, Gerry, live in White Rock, BC Canada.

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