

## Just Between Us

# Volunteering breaks log jams



By  
William C.  
Nichols  
Ed.D.

Volunteering is one of the most productive things that we can do to enhance human relationships.

You do something for the other person because you wish to do it. They don't have to ask you to do it. You don't ask for anything in return.

Volunteering means deliberately doing things that are helpful or pleasing to another person without being asked.

Volunteering takes many forms. Telling your friend that you appreciate your friendship is volunteering. Offering to share some of your spouse's workload is volunteering behavior. Telling your child that you think he or she is "a pretty good kid and I like having you around" is volunteering.

Volunteering is different from several other kinds of behaviors. It is different from "doing a favor" for someone

else. Doing a favor implies an obligation on the part of the other person.

USUALLY FAVORS are done because we are asked. Someone requests, perhaps begs, us to do something. We can be condescending or gracious, but we owe something in return, and we have done it because we have been asked to do it.

It's different also from a straight bargain approach. If we're entering into a bargain, we're doing "something for something." This is a quid pro quo arrangement. I do this for you in return for that from you.

Both doing favors and entering into explicit bargains are part of most human relationships. They are necessary and helpful at times.

Volunteering also is quite different from "doing your own thing." To paraphrase, "You do your thing and I'll do

mine and if we meet it's beautiful" is hardly the same as looking for ways to help or please another person. Whatever potential it may have for individual enhancement, it offers very little for helping a human relationship to grow.

Again, the key thing with volunteering is that we do something because we wish to do so, without being asked, and without making any request for something in return.

WE MAY NOT volunteer something for entirely altruistic reasons.

Motivation generally is mixed. Our reasons for doing something may well be an amalgam of altruism and selfishness. We may not be conscious of major factors in our motivation.

Sometimes, however, the origins of actions may not be as important as the actions themselves in producing an outcome.

Volunteering does have risks. Our efforts may not always turn out positively. Others may not understand them.

For one thing, they may not be accustomed to receiving things "with no strings attached." They may look for the gimmick or the "hooker" in our action.

The other person may not greet our actions with pleasure and gratitude. If that's the case, perhaps our efforts were ill-advised. Perhaps our motives need some more examination.

Perhaps we have not used the best possible judgment. We may have made them feel uncomfortable because we have overdone it with our actions.

Sometimes the other person may take our volunteering for granted. If they continue to make a "regal response"—i.e., to act as if they have a royal right to have the mud puddle covered by our coat—the volunteering

isn't helpful. It is enhancing the self-centeredness of the other and not the relationship between the two of us.

WHERE THERE ARE rewards from volunteering, they may be either direct or indirect.

At first or at other times, the other person may not notice what we have done. This lack of awareness may be for a variety of reasons, including their preoccupation with other matters.

When they do notice, others frequently begin to respond in kind. When they become convinced that we did something primarily because "I thought you might like it and I wanted to do it," many persons become infected. What they have received makes it possible for them to begin their own volunteering behaviors.

They may begin to "stick their necks out" and risk doing something without

asking for something in return in the relationship with us and/or in relationships with others.

Volunteering has some potential for resolving impasses in human relationships. Some relationships are stuck and unsatisfactory largely because the participants are each waiting for the other to move, to do something constructive, to be giving.

Volunteering can be like removing the key logs that are holding a logjam together. Removing first one key log and then the next leads eventually to a breakup of the log jam. Things begin to flow and to move satisfactorily.

Just as breaking up a log jam is not without risk, so working to resolve impasses in human relationships is not without risk. But each action has the potential of reward.

(The writer is a suburban psychologist and marriage counselor.)

## Ask the Educator



JOSEPH HADDAD

QUESTION: My daughter is in the sixth grade, but is only reading at fifth grade level. Her teacher tells me not to worry, but I do.

I just know she has the ability to do a lot better if she would try harder or if she were taught differently. Do you think she sounds like she is learning disabled?

Mrs. R. L.

ANSWER: The chances are that your daughter is not learning disabled. This term is very much overused nowadays.

Every child with a learning problem is not necessarily handicapped. Perfectly normal children sometimes have difficulty living up to our expectations.

It may be that your daughter is learning just fine in relation to her basic ability. If so, then she should not be made to feel unsuccessful or a failure.

Talk again with your daughter's teacher. Ask her to seek the opinion of the building reading specialist. It is OK for you to ask for a second opinion in this way. You do deserve to be reassured in this matter for your own peace of mind and for your child's sake.

IF SUCH a reading diagnosis has not been done in the last year, it should be now. Unrealized potential or learning problems interfering with your daughter's progress should become apparent.

If the classroom teacher and the reading specialist suspect a learning disability they will discuss with you a referral for a special education diagnostic work up.

The chances are, however, that this is not the case. Less than five percent of the school age population have learning disabilities. Many, many more do have what might be called normal problems in learning.

I believe that it is all right for you to encourage your daughter to try hard in school and to always strive to improve, but be careful not to make a healthy normal child who is average feel a failure by setting unreachable goals for her.

A reading achievement level that is within a year or so of grade level is not at all abnormal for youngsters with average ability in the sixth grade. (The writer is director of special education in a suburban school district.)



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