



United Way of King County

CHOOSE THE WAY | blog

The Promise and Challenge of Service

By Nikki Russell 24 November 2009

I recently attended City Club's 2009 Jefferson Awards luncheon and left feeling totally inspired (and somewhat humbled) by the remarkable service stories of this year's award winners, **Dallas Jessup**, Janie Plath and Mariana Quanstrom. I encourage you to check out their stories!

What really excited me about the award event was listening to 3 of Seattle's community leaders – **Alison Carl White** of Seattle Works, **Nancy Long** of Executive Service Corps, and **David Okimoto** of United Way of King County emphasize the critical role that managers of volunteers play in nonprofit organizations. It was music to my volunteer manager ears!

When you read the extraordinary service of people like **Dallas**, Janie and Mariana, you do get a clear picture of the incredible promise of service. But there is a downside. In an environments where volunteering and service is "in" and 4 out of 5 nonprofits involve volunteers, what gets in the way of tapping the full potential of volunteers? Here's where the discussion turns to the volunteer management. Effectively tapping the skills of today's volunteers requires more skill, training and resources than is often provided to those placed in volunteer coordination roles. Many nonprofits do a poor job of managing volunteers. As Nancy Long put it, "there aren't that many envelopes to stuff anymore". Yet many nonprofits struggle to move beyond "envelope stuffing" kind of volunteering to a more effective repurposing of the skill sets that today's volunteers bring to the nonprofit sector. To accommodate the influx of new volunteers, nonprofits will need to "repurpose" their volunteer involvement efforts. So here is the big question: What exactly does that look like?

Here's what I think: repurposing our volunteer involvement efforts will require elevating the position of volunteer managers within our organizations and providing all staff with the skills, training and resources to engage volunteers effectively. Shifting the way we think about and engage volunteers is the nonprofit challenge. Learning to partner with volunteers in new and innovative ways is the promise! From where I stand, these are exciting times for volunteer management professionals for sure!