

The Value of Volunteering

By Karen Thickstun, NCTM

“You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give.”

–Winston Churchill

“I don’t have time.” But do you have time to gain knowledge and experience while expanding your professional community? Do you have time to seek a greater sense of purpose while enriching your personal network? The value of volunteering is greater than the time given.

With busy lives, we are conditioned to say no. In doing so, we may overlook the greater value being passed up. With a bias toward balance and deeper consideration before saying no, we are richer from “The Value of Yes!” (Foxy 2020).

I initially volunteered in my local association to support my students through service and to be part of something bigger than my studio. I was also motivated by the peer discussions that I missed from graduate school. My first state board position, newsletter editor, increased my layout and editing skills while meaningfully connecting me with every state chairperson.

Over time, these volunteer connections grew into lifelong friendships.

Additional benefits included job offers, new professional relationships, increased communication skills and many opened doors to unexpected opportunities. In turn, these experiences of personal and professional growth led to leadership positions, with additional challenges outside my comfort zone. Thus a “volunteer→grow→volunteer→grow” cycle emerges.

While many serve from an innate desire to help others, volunteering yields myriad benefits (see chart).

BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING

- Making a positive difference while embodying generosity, integrity and gratitude.
- A deeper sense of purpose.
- Resume-building experiences that showcase character and passion.
- Expanded perspectives through interactions with diverse communities.
- Friendships and professional relationships.
- Stress reduction through meaningful time with others.
- New skills, experiences and knowledge.
- Challenges outside of one’s comfort zone in a low-stakes environment.
- New opportunities.
- Renewed creativity and motivation.
- Increased confidence and self-esteem.
- Increased social and communication skills.





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Research Confirms Benefits

Recent studies show a correlation between volunteering and increased physical and mental health (Jamal and McKinnon 2008, 26) as well as increased problem-solving abilities and long-term/short-term memory (Rominger 2020).

In a study of volunteers within schools, 80% of volunteers reported improvement in communication, influencing and relationship skills; 84% described benefits in daily motivation outside of work; and 94% reported a better understanding of society and social issues (Percy and Rogers 2021).

Time is not your only asset. Share ideas, skills/abilities, money, wisdom, experience, encouragement, love of learning, attention, advice, laughter. Don't say no because you think you are not qualified. Skills are gained through doing. Don't say no because you're afraid of being embarrassed or making a mistake. Stepping outside of one's comfort zone to build new skills enriches ourselves as well as others.

"The main distinction between those who participate fully in their community (and therefore give more) and those who withdraw into private life is that active citizens learn a key lesson: You don't have to wait for the perfect circumstances, perfect cause, or perfect level of knowledge... Proceed step by step...and enjoy the process of engagement as much as the objective itself" (Jamal and McKinnon 2008, 135-136).

As Theodore Geisel (Dr. Seuss) said, "To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world."

Are You a Giver, Taker or Matcher?

The premise of the book *Give and Take* by Adam Grant is that there is great value in being (or becoming) a giver. Grant asserts that in addition to hard work, talent and luck, there is a fourth ingredient for success—how we interact with other people. He defines three reciprocity styles. A "taker" likes to get more than they receive. A "matcher" seeks an equal balance of giving and getting. A "giver" prefers to give more than they get. At work, this means one is generous in sharing time, energy, knowledge and skills with others who can benefit.

Across industries, "extensive research reveals that people who give their time and knowledge regularly to help their colleagues end up earning more raises and promotions...Two hours a week in a fresh domain appears to be the sweet spot where people make a meaningful difference without being overwhelmed or sacrificing other priorities. It's also the range in which volunteering is most likely to strike a healthy balance,

offering benefits to the volunteer as well as the recipients.” (Grant 2013, 74, 174).

Grant’s research affirms that volunteering is a smart business strategy. When our giving efforts support our students, colleagues and communities, everyone benefits. Making a difference in the lives of others... *priceless*.

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