WHEN LEADING COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS, IT AIN'T ABOUT YOU

by Barry Altland, author of *"Engaging the Head, Heart and Hands of a Volunteer"*

May 2016

It ain't about me.

If a leader of community volunteers can remember, embrace and live these four simple words, they are bound to make a profound impact on the volunteers in their circle. In turn, those volunteers will have boundless impact on the communities they serve.

Otherliness, used as a noun, is recognized only in the Urban Dictionary. The definition for O*therliness* is *to place the needs, wants and desires of others ahead of one's own*. *Otherliness* is not an actual word . . . yet. However, the term deserves to be center to the conversation regarding volunteerism, and leading volunteers who serve in our communities across the country and around the globe.

For professional managers and volunteer Board members, their work is not supposed to be about themselves. Nor is their work supposed to be focused only on the community or organization. As counterintuitive as this may appear, the most important thing a leader of volunteers can do is focus on the individuals who choose to offer their time and talents. When leaders make the experience about the volunteer first, the volunteer has the greatest opportunity for fulfillment. This enrichment will touch the volunteer's heart, drive their choices, and sustain their passion for serving. And when the community volunteer's passion is fed, everybody wins. They are inspired to make phenomenal work happen. They then also generate amazing results.

The individual volunteer is more important than the community? Yes.

Think of the O*therliness* philosophy as a prioritization list. Priorities are all important in their own way, but can be ranked by those that have the greatest impact on the desired outcomes.

Placing the community volunteer first on the leadership priority list does not mean that the organization, its mission, our neighbors, the leader, and other elements of the volunteer equation are not important. The opposite is true. Leaders of volunteers must still actively lead and manage all these other moving parts. The prioritization only suggests that, above all that requires attention from the leader of volunteers, the people who offer their head, heart and hands rest at the top. The volunteer is the number-one priority.

Otherliness comes easily to some leaders of volunteers—professionals and volunteers alike. Other leaders benefit when they are reminded of its importance in their role. It is easy to get distracted by all that a leader of volunteers must do. At times, important *management* stuff consumes us, leaving little bandwidth for the *people* thing. When this happens, opportunities for *Otherliness* pass by. A moment when a volunteer could benefit from a smile, a kind word of encouragement, a well-placed question that begs their opinion or guidance, or an expression of gratitude could be missed when the leader's focus is on logistics. When personal, human touches do not occur in those moments, the possibility of the volunteer's passion being fed less becomes real. This is the reason the individual volunteer rests at the pinnacle of the leader's priority list.

The leader of volunteers is called upon to wear their O*therliness* hat every day. When fully embracing the *It ain't about me* philosophy, leaders help fill the souls of their community volunteers with satisfaction, joy and fulfillment. These emotions are essential to the volunteer engagement equation. The hearts of volunteers are touched. They will feel their passion-fires burning. They will serve for greater purpose than just to "protect their property value." They will be inspired to continue to serve in meaningful ways!

Say it again, all leaders of volunteers: *It ain't about me.*

This adapted excerpt is derived from the book, "Engaging the Head, Heart and Hands of a Volunteer," published by The Peppertree Press in June 2015 and available in all major online retail outlets. Signed books available from http://shop.HHHEngagement.com.