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LEADERSHIP

Mastering Volunteer Management

An interview with John Pearson

John, in your book *Mastering the Management Buckets*, you devoted an entire chapter to what you call the “volunteer bucket.” What makes this such a significant issue for those in church leadership?

It's like Bob Buford says in *Halftime*. We have this huge workforce in the pews bored to tears and not being utilized. When I came to California, I was shocked when I went to a church and found age listings for things that “50 and older” was the last option! So I'm in the group with the 85-year-olds?

In the book I talk about the four levels of management development. Level 1 is people who don't know what they don't know. Level 2 is people who know what they don't know but aren't doing anything about it. Level 3 is people who have an action plan to address what they don't know. Level 4 is people who are mentoring others.

It seems to me that there's an epidemic of Level 1 people in leadership in our churches, and nobody seems to be concerned about it. When I lead workshops, I ask people how many have ever taken a course on volunteerism, listened to a CD on leading volunteers, gone to a website, or done anything else for training. There are people who have tons of responsibilities and hundreds of thousands of hours of people time under them, but have no idea how to lead volunteers.

Why do you think that is?

Part of the problem is the perception churches have of unpaid work. In the book, we state a core competency for each of the buckets. For the volunteer bucket we state: “We reject the notion of a two-tiered Kingdom workforce. Instead, we seek to treat our paid volunteers (staff) and our unpaid volunteers with equal passion and intentionality. We will never have enough paid staff to accomplish our Kingdom assignments, so we continually hone our skills in volunteer cultivation, recruitment, orientation and engagement.”

Peter Drucker said everybody is a volunteer—some are paid and some aren't. And it's true, because in both cases we have to provide the right enticements—whether financial or inspirational—to encourage people to keep doing what they're doing. I encourage organizations to be just as intentional with their unpaid volunteers as they are with their paid volunteers. That includes performance reviews, written goals, and limited terms of service. That kind of structure makes it easier for either side to say when improvement is needed or it's time to move on to something else.

In the book you give an interesting but disturbing scenario of two people in a church. One is an intern brought in from a Christian college, and the other is a volunteer who has been a successful leader in multiple ventures in life. The

intern is treated better than the proven leader!

Yeah, that example is just classic. All of a sudden when you start giving a paycheck, you ascribe this young, inexperienced person with a level of implied authority and respect. Meanwhile, we don't give the proven leader the authority and respect she has earned with her years of experience. After all, she's a volunteer! We tell her before she can be given an unpaid leadership role over a project she has to prove herself by spending months greeting people or folding bulletins.

When we're recruiting people, we need to pay attention to the three S's: Spiritual gifts, Strengths, and Social style. It's just as Jim Collins said—we have to get the right people in the bus. But it also communicates that we value someone as a person rather than a worker when a leader says, "The first thing I want to do is find out who you are and who you want to be."

So what else can we do to start to change this?

In addition to the things we've talked about, I think we need to get rid of this two-tier system. More and more churches are being overburdened with paid staff. It seems like with every problem we have, we need another staff person to address it. But how many people do we have sitting in our pews who have the time, training, and experience to address that problem as an unpaid volunteer? I understand how it has developed, but it's not biblical.

John Pearson is president of the management consulting company John Pearson Associates, Inc. He served 25 years leading the Christian Management Association, Willow Creek Association, and Christian Camp and Conference Association. In addition to his management consulting, John conducts training workshops on his Management Buckets program and on nonprofit board governance. He is the co-author of Marketing Your Ministry: 10 Critical Principles and publishes a weekly eNewsletter, Your Weekly Staff Meeting.

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