

CEV is collaborating with Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM) to publish a series of articles on volunteering-related topics in English. The articles will cover a broad range of topics and versions of the articles have been previously published in Dutch.

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What all leaders can learn from volunteering and civil society

Effective leaders - in business, civil society and government - need skills that can be developed in civil society and through volunteering. Leaders need to learn how to let values lead in decision making, how to deal with different norms and values, and how to lead without strict hierarchy based upon the stick and carrot. Volunteering and civil society offer possibilities of experiential learning.

In private business, the invisible hand of the market helps to make choices for business operations. However, a market price that automatically balances supply and demand does not exist in most civil society and voluntary work, so the choice about who will or will not receive the service becomes a personal and subjective choice of the provider or the contracting body such as a government in the case of a contracted service. In other words, a visible hand. In government, the watchful attention of interest groups and the need to retain and/or acquire voter support, creates a counter force for political decision makers. In civil society this pressure to maintain legitimacy and be publicly accountable is certainly similar for (tax deductible) fundraising organizations or subsidized service providers. On the other hand, this pressure is less for endowed foundations that can make decisions on what to fund without real public accountability as long as it is within their mission and the existing legal framework to which they correspond.

As an example, the comparison between a supermarket and a food bank. In both cases, the leaders distribute food to the people who want it. In the case of the supermarket, this choice is outsourced to the price mechanism; the invisible hand. When food is in high demand, the price will rise. Those who can't afford this price don't get food.

A "food bank" or "soup kitchen" type of 'free food' distribution system, on the other hand, working to reduce food waste and provide free food to people who are in need, faces a more complex dilemma. The leader(s) can in some cases be called upon to make a decision about who is entitled and why. Are they the people who earn less than a certain amount? Or those who cannot get by with their disposable income due to personal circumstances? Are they people in a certain zip code? Or only those who practice a certain religion? And how does this work with people who still spend money on smoking, or pets? Are they worthy of the "free" food? And should the leader allow the choice of who gets what to be influenced by donors, or do simply not accept money if there are unfair conditions attached to it?

And what to do with people that have no formal residence status, but that might be in need of food the most? Making tough decisions without being able to outsource them to market, price mechanisms or a majority vote is an unprecedented leadership challenge. This is what managers in civil society organisations are very well placed to learn. The real learning moment is often when explaining and substantiating the decisions made to others.

Base decisions on values, not procedures

Civil society consists of the sum of private opinions, norms, and values that all form 'truth' in their own way. To illustrate the point, we take the book 'Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance.' (Pirsig, 1974) The book describes a motorcycle road trip, but more importantly, it addresses the concept of quality. Translated to leadership: Is quality the way things go in bureaucratic organizations, following prescribed procedures (opening the engine, tinkering, closing it), having a clear hierarchy, rules, et cetera? Or is quality more like Zen, feeling the wind in your hair, the sound of the engine and being immersed in the experience?

Civil society should be much more about Zen than about following procedures. Civil society is about space for heterogeneity, while in contrast, both the market and governments are inherently aimed at homogenizing. This is one reason why civil society is so difficult to understand. The management manual alone is not enough to guide leaders and volunteers in the right way. Understanding the Zen of the organization is a must. The effectiveness of a leader is not only based on professional competence as a manager, but also on whether you are accepted as a leader within the context. That acceptance will only take place if the leader has a clear connection with the higher purpose and underlying values, the Zen, of the organization. Decisions will therefore have to be made taking into account the Zen of the organization, a lesson that can be of value in private business and government too although they are indeed different.

Operating in a minefield of different norms and values

In civil society, leaders can expect opposition from unexpected counterparts. Precisely because civil society consists of the sum of opinions, norms, values and own truths, there will always be people who will resist in one way or another. In business you have to deal with competitors, the way of resistance in civil society will be much more political, subjective and harsh.

An example of this is MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers¹, a USA based organization that has built an effective anti-drunk driving movement through private funding. The success of MADD brought about its own counter forces in the form of DAMM (Drivers Against MADD Methods and Drunks Against Mad Mothers²),

¹ www.madd.org

² <https://www.cafepress.com/+damm-drunks-against-mad-mothers+gifts>

which by now have largely disappeared. Dealing with different norms and values is therefore an important lesson that can be learned from working and volunteering in civil society.

Implementing without hierarchy

Another learning experience can be found in managing personnel with hardly any hierarchical power. Volunteers engage with an organization because they want to, they don't have to. They can therefore leave at any time, and it is impossible to control and less effective to motivate them by means of a bonus or penalty. So, if the more than several thousand volunteers of national organizations or the 500 at the field-hockey association manage to do what the organization leaders want them to do on their own initiative, without bonus and salary (increase), imagine what these leaders could achieve with those learned skills in private business.

In short, civil society is a school for the leadership of the present and future, in all sectors. It always has been, but given the contemporary complexities, it is becoming increasingly more important.

References:

Pirsig, R. (1974). Zen and the Art of Motor Maintenance.

A version of this article has been published in dutch:

<https://www.socialevraagstukken.nl/wat-leiders-kunnen-leren-van-vrijwilligerswerk/>

A speech on this topic can be seen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVBmrk7ucmo>



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Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM) is one of Europe's top-ranked business schools. RSM provides ground-breaking research and education furthering excellence in all aspects of management and is based in the international port city of Rotterdam – a vital nexus of business, logistics and trade. RSM's primary focus is on developing business leaders with international careers who can become a force for positive change by carrying their innovative mindset into a sustainable future. Our first-class range of bachelor, master, MBA, PhD and executive programmes encourage them to become critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinkers and doers. Study information and activities for future students, executives and alumni are also organised from the RSM office in Chengdu, China. www.rsm.nl



The Centre for European Volunteering (CEV), established in 1992, is the European network of over 60 organisations dedicated to the promotion of, and support to, volunteers and volunteering in Europe at European, national or regional level. CEV channels the collective priorities and concerns of its member organisations to the institutions of the European Union and the Council of Europe. CEV's vision is a Europe in which volunteers are central in building a cohesive, sustainable and inclusive society based on solidarity and active citizenship. CEV is a European network of organizations dedicated to the promotion of and support to volunteers and volunteering. Our mission is to provide collaborative leadership to create an enabling environment for volunteering in Europe.

