

## LDI: Other Resources

### **Losing Your Volunteer Blues**

By John H. Ogden

Any single experience as a volunteer leader may leave you wondering why you became a volunteer in the first place. But the cumulative effects of a long-term commitment to your profession provide personal fulfillment otherwise hard to come by.

For more than 15 years, I've served as general counsel for the U.S. subsidiary of a European-based engineering and manufacturing company. So how did I end up hosting a pizza party for an ethnically and behaviorally diverse group of teenagers in one of my company's conference rooms?

More than a decade of volunteering has taken me down some paths I didn't expect and that didn't always make sense at the time. (More about those teenagers in a minute.) While not every activity has been immediately rewarding, my career as a volunteer has been extremely fulfilling.

At some point volunteering can, and arguably should, focus not only on personal and professional accomplishments, but also on advancing your profession or industry as a whole and engaging the public at large in ways that are inspiring and helpful. This means you may at times find yourself in roles you don't particularly enjoy or for which you don't feel prepared. At such junctures, surviving volunteer burnout requires taking a longer-term view, understanding that everything you do as a volunteer—each seemingly mundane task you undertake and each committee you chair—builds a foundation for a higher level of leadership.

### **Focusing on your needs and expertise**

My first significant volunteer activity as an attorney wasn't planned—it evolved from filling an organizational void. After working for two large corporations, I became general counsel of a midsized company where I was the only attorney. At about the same time, the American Corporate Counsel Association formed. ACCA, headquartered in Washington, D.C., is an international bar association for in-house attorneys. The first national meetings I attended had programming specifically geared to members of small law departments. Then one year no such program was listed. I called ACCA to ask why and was told that no one addressed this topic on an ongoing basis, but that I was welcome to see what interest existed.

With the full support of ACCA staff and volunteers, but with virtually no notice to potential attendees, we held a meeting. Despite the dearth of publicity, enough people showed up to indicate sufficient interest. We began planning for the next meeting and beyond. In the course of surveying ACCA members, we found that the majority practice in departments of five or fewer attorneys.

Several hundred attorneys attended our first major function. Once participants broke into roundtable discussions, it was clear we had tapped a major membership demand. Walking among the groups, it seemed as though everyone had discovered family members they didn't know they had. ACCA's Small Law Departments Committee was officially born. Today, this committee produces programming at ACCA meetings and freestanding events geared to small law department practitioners.

Founding this committee not only furthered the association's ability to serve a major segment of its audience, but also helped many others and me professionally by providing a network of colleagues with whom to exchange practice ideas. In some respect, I did the easy part in identifying and beginning to meet the demands of this new group. Too often new initiatives can lose steam with the changing of the guard. But to the credit of ACCA, its very organized succession planning model for volunteers enabled me to identify a successor with an equal amount of energy for expanding the committee's effectiveness.

My next volunteer activity wasn't so enjoyable. Another major activity of ACCA's Small Law Departments Committee is publishing relevant material. After publishing several articles, I decided to try editing a book. For this particular assignment, I found that being responsible for the work of other volunteer professionals can be extremely frustrating. Although I wasn't conscious of it at the time, this project was a transitional phase for me as a volunteer. Whereas forming the Small Law Departments Committee held a direct benefit to my paying job, my writing yielded fewer personal benefits.

In the same way one's paid professional role may at times seem at a standstill, a lifetime of volunteering will inevitably include activities that aren't personally fulfilling. Recognizing the larger contribution you're still making to the growth of others can help you see the bigger picture of your volunteer commitment. In retrospect, I realize that this less satisfying phase was preparing me for higher-level involvement and decision making on behalf of my profession as a whole.

### **Advancing your profession**

After working on issues directly relevant to my practice, I now assumed more general leadership roles within ACCA, including a term as treasurer. This wasn't exactly my forte, but I recognized it as a vital role. If one is to understand an organization, understanding its budget is key.

Another very useful assignment at this higher level of leadership that I've drawn from ever since was serving on ACCA's long-term strategic planning team. Like many organizations, ACCA would like to say yes to every good idea. The team I joined decided to focus instead on only a few issues, including one lead issue per year, and to devote enough resources to those issues to achieve excellence. This involved saying no to some good ideas to focus on the very best.

Perhaps the most interesting experience I had at this level was as the board member responsible for ACCA's continuing legal education. Not only did this assignment help me later establish and lead a cross-discipline training team for my own company, but it also served as a basis for future volunteer activities reaching outside the profession.

## **Dealing with disappointment**

Not everyone has the privilege of serving as chief elected officer for his or her professional organization. After years of hard work, I was honored with ACCA's board chair nomination. Although many of the issues I would face weren't high on my personal agenda, I identified a theme I wanted to emphasize: increasing volunteer participation. I was well prepared and confident in my ability to perform the job.

At about this same time, my company hired a new chief executive officer who did not support my association activities as much as his predecessor had. Two weeks before I was to assume leadership, my CEO told me he didn't want me to serve the term for which I'd been nominated. I was devastated.

Although my CEO wouldn't support my becoming board chair, he was supportive of me staying active in other ways. I easily could have wallowed in my disappointment, but I instead licked my wounds. Thanks in part to the incredible outpouring of support from friends, colleagues, and ACCA staff members and leaders I channeled the interests I intended pursuing as board chair. I founded and became chair of ACCA's Leadership Development Institute, which provides programming and online exchanges for the volunteers serving ACCA chapters and national committees-including the Small Law Departments Committee I previously helped found.

In a somewhat related matter, after I had to turn down my nomination as ACCA's chair, I was asked to serve on the nominating committee for a statewide professionalism award. For the first time, I turned down the request and asked instead to be considered for the award. I felt I needed something public to show that the reason I wasn't ACCA's chair was not because of anything I had done wrong as a volunteer leader. I received an amazing amount of positive feedback as a result of receiving the award, and it actually enhanced my ability to accomplish several key initiatives. The same held true for a subsequent national award I received. While I previously felt that awards often do more harm than good-since the recognition makes a few people happy but usually leaves more disappointed-I now view awards as not only something nice for the recipient but, more important, an effective means for leveraging volunteer efforts.

## **Reaching beyond the profession**

The next phase of my volunteer life led me to focus outside my profession. I accepted an invitation to join the Public Education Committee of the New Jersey State Bar Foundation, New Brunswick, the philanthropic and educational arm of the state bar. Our committee reviewed grant requests from county bar associations, state bar sections, consumer rights organizations, health groups, and other groups aimed at educating the public about their legal rights and obligations and about the system of law in general.

Many extremely worthwhile programs benefited from the grants we recommended, the results of which included published guides outlining the rights of students and HIV positive patients, and a television program that received several local Emmys. At times, recommending that a grant request be denied was as important as recommending that one be accepted. In one such instance, the organization making the request had received previous grants and had performed well. But while the request in question was sincere and well motivated, it seemed misguided in its proposed method of addressing a legitimate problem.

Without my experience gained through years of nonprofit volunteering, I most likely

would have recommended accepting the request since the organization had a solid history. Instead, I brought to bear on this decision my professional experience and my previous volunteer experience of serving ACCA's strategic planning team, where I learned to prioritize from among competing options. During several rounds of consideration I argued that we should not recommend the grant. It was neither recommended nor granted, and it later became evident that was the right decision.

After serving the foundation in this capacity for several years, and as my time on the ACCA board drew to a close, a new leadership role emerged with an opportunity to join the foundation's board of trustees. Soon after I was called to an emergency meeting because our primary source of funding was being threatened in court. Although I personally find programmatic issues much more interesting than financial ones, I know that programs can't be funded if your financial house is not in order. In retrospect, I was glad for my term as ACCA treasurer because it enabled me to quickly pinpoint the central funding issues in question.

Not all of my involvement with this board was as draining. Among the outreach activities the foundation sponsors are a high school moot court program and an extensive program on the court system for the public schools and for segments of the larger society. As a member of this board, I was also in a position to suggest that emphasis be placed on a topic I believe is of great importance: alternative dispute resolution. Thousands of New Jersey elementary, middle, and high school teachers have been taught conflict resolution and peer mediation through the foundation.

With strong staff activity to build upon, I was able to highlight and intensify those activities by forming the foundation's Youth Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Committee. Primary initiatives of this committee include providing recognition for accomplished student peer mediators—who typically represent a wide variety of academic, behavioral, and family backgrounds—and funding plays on tolerance and conflict resolution that are performed by actors with foundation training in peer mediation.

By far the most fulfilling volunteer activities in which I've engaged have involved school children. Through the foundation's speakers bureau I've spoken on a variety of subjects to students from the elementary grades through high school. I've also participated in the foundation's mentoring program. Through this program, an attorney develops a curriculum in conjunction with the teacher whose class the attorney agrees to visit throughout the semester. In my case, I served as a mentor to a group of special education students at a satellite vocational high school who were being prepared for semi-skilled positions in the workforce.

Mentoring presented an interesting new challenge for me to bring my professional expertise to the table in collaboration with another extremely dedicated professional to achieve the right balance for the course. This also required flexibility to address the students' interests—some of which, like the issue of curfews, required homework on my part. After a semester of give and take on why young people pay more for car insurance and the various rights of employees and tenants, it was time for their field trip. And that's how the group of teenagers mentioned at the beginning of this article wound up at my office.

My colleagues and I gave the students a tour of our facility, concluding with a

demonstration of computer legal research and tying it directly to some of their classroom work. Then we officially ended their semester of legal mentoring with a pizza party. The respect my colleagues and I showed those students was reciprocated and resulted, in part, in a group of teenagers having a more accepting view of lawyers and the legal profession.

Helping make my profession accessible and understandable to the public has, for me, been a high point of my volunteer career. And yet, my effectiveness in doing so would not be as great without each of the volunteer activities that preceded it—from activities very closely related to my job to more general association and foundation responsibilities to reaching out to young people of an impressionable age.

It's often easy to lose sight of the long-term benefits of your volunteer commitment. But knowing that what you do is helpful—to yourself, your colleagues, your profession, and society at large—should encourage you to continue volunteering with enthusiasm no matter the activity or the position you hold.

John H. Ogden is general counsel for Werner & Pfleiderer Corporation, Ramsey, New Jersey. E-mail: [jogden@wp-corp.com](mailto:jogden@wp-corp.com). His volunteer activities include founding the Leadership Development Institute of the American Corporate Counsel Association (ACCA), Washington, D.C., and the Youth Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Committee of the New Jersey State Bar Foundation, New Brunswick. He extends his appreciation to the staff members of both institutions.

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Association of Corporate Counsel.  
1025 Connecticut Ave, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20036-5425. 202/293-4103.  
[webmistress@acca.com](mailto:webmistress@acca.com).  
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