

# Creating a Culture of Volunteerism

by Joel Perry

At the 2007 January Business Meeting, I was asked by the CMG Board of Directors to prepare a report regarding creation of a Culture of Volunteerism within the CMG. It was to be delivered at the 2008 January Business Meeting. This is that report.

## Pursuing a Culture of Volunteerism

In deciding to pursue the establishment of a Culture of Volunteerism, the CMG recognizes the value of bringing the ideal of individual volunteerism to the front and center of each person's CMG experience. Furthermore, the CMG seeks to make this ideal pervasive throughout the organization.

## What is a Culture of Volunteerism?

Before we can proceed, we need to define these words so we may understand what we are pursuing. Additionally, they need to be defined in the specific context of the CMG. Hence:

*Culture:* The established behaviors, beliefs, characteristics, and ideals of the CMG that are transmitted throughout the organization and to new attendees.

*Volunteerism:* The policy and practice of freely offering one's time and/or talents for the creation of events, Gatherings, and—on a much deeper level—community.

## How Far Along Are We?

The good news is we are not starting from scratch. Important and valuable steps have already been taken.

- There already exists an understanding among leaders and most repeat attendees that nothing happens except by volunteers making it happen.
- When new attendees see other attendees volunteering by doing tasks, they often will pitch in, too.
- When Planning Committees have the luxury of having enough committee members, there usually is a person specified as the Volunteer Coordinator who is the "go-to" guy for tasks that need to be done. (More will be said about this further on.)

What the CMG is doing in seeking to establish a more fully realized Culture of Volunteerism, is to build on this level of volunteerism which we already enjoy, and expand it to the point of making volunteerism ***an explicit cornerstone of the overall CMG experience for each attendee and leader.***

## What Is Needed To Build On What We Have?

The following is excerpted from an on-line article by Nora Silver titled "From the Heart: The New Volunteer Challenges to Community Agencies." (It is on [EnergizeInc.com](http://energizelnc.com), a website for leaders of volunteers.) This particular article is in regards to volunteers for a hospice program. I think it applies to most volunteer organizations, including the CMG.

"...volunteer programs, to be successful, must be compatible with the agency's organizational culture and an integral part of that culture. ...[I]t is a prime task of the leader of an organization to manage the organizational culture.... Marketing approaches and materials should be carriers of this organizational message."

As applied to the CMG's organizational culture I feel this includes *all* of our leaders, i.e., the Board of Directors, Planning Committee members, and members of the five Local Events Committees, all of whom, of course, are volunteers. Since the ideal of a Culture of Volunteerism is already highly compatible with our organizational culture, we can focus on managing how we carry this organizational culture to the rest of the CMG—namely, the attendees. This is important because (a) we depend on the attendees volunteering in order

to make the Gatherings and events happen; and (b) it is from this pool of volunteers that tomorrow's leaders will come.

For us to be carriers of this organizational message:

1. We as leaders need to demonstrate volunteerism in what we do and how we work. I feel the CMG is very good on this point.
2. Leaders must manage this culture. That means *each* volunteer leader, from the Board of Directors right through all levels of planners, needs to be aware of his responsibility to foster this Culture of Volunteerism.
3. We need to make this idea of a Culture of Volunteerism explicit in our printed materials, our website, in each E-notify, and, going further, verbally when addressing attendees.

## Stating the Vision

Step one is to voice the intention. At the 52<sup>nd</sup> Gathering at Malibu in 2005, author and guest presenter David Nimmons said "It is the job of the elders to state the vision for the tribe." If it is not stated it will not be known. If it is not named by the leaders, it will not be heard or heeded. As CMG leaders, we are the elders. So our first job is to state the vision and live into it:

**"We have a Culture of Volunteerism."**

Note that that statement does not say "We are working on a Culture of Volunteerism," or "We are trying to create a Culture of Volunteerism." It avows boldly that it does, in fact, already exist—which is a true assertion. This effort is about making this ideal more true, more pervasive, and more identified as a basic tenet of the CMG community.

**"We *have* a Culture of Volunteerism."**

## Making the Vision a Priority

If we are to make this ideal a priority, it needs to be treated as a priority. Therefore *everything* we put out needs to carry this clearly spoken message. Prime places it needs to be *explicitly* stated include:

- Printed in the Gathering booklets at the beginning in large letters. (More on this below.)
- Printed in all hand-outs, flyers, and other promotional literature.
- Stated at all orientations for first-timers.
- Stated at all Welcoming Ceremonies as a reminder.
- Stated at all Local Events Committee events.
- Stated at Gatherings when leaders ask for volunteers.
- Stated at local events when leaders ask for volunteers.

It behooves us as leaders to ensure that we speak *proudly* of our Culture of Volunteerism at each opportunity, as mentioned above. Like any good advertising or public relations campaign, the more the message is seen and heard, the more it becomes manifest.

## Putting the Priority Into Practice

Okay, so we need to talk up our Culture of Volunteerism. How does that translate into everyday CMG activity? Here are three possible examples.

### #1: Asking for Volunteers

We sometimes seek volunteers in ways that are less than motivating. At meal times we find ourselves begging which appears disorganized and can be off-putting. Instead of begging for volunteers to do some chore we need done, I recommend another approach. When seeking volunteers in a public setting (community gathering, after a workshop, at mealtime, etc.), I recommend that we begin by stating proudly that the CMG has a Culture of Volunteerism and approach the need as inviting men to take part in something fun. The difference is between *asking* and *enrolling* men into doing a task that, while it may be work, is also desirable.

### #2: Gathering Booklet

In the Gathering booklet the language can be interpreted as seeming whiney. Here is one example from

an earlier Gathering booklet: "As you enjoy the weekend, remember it took a lot of hard work to make it happen. You can show appreciation by doing something yourself to contribute to the magic." When I asked men what this said to them, one person described his feelings by saying, "It sounds like you're going, 'We worked really, really hard, people! So you should step up and pitch in, too!' "

Changing attitudes like that is our goal. So for the 58<sup>th</sup> CMG, in addition to moving the paragraph about a Culture of Volunteerism closer to the front of the Gathering booklet, we changed the language to read:

*Every single thing that occurs at the Gathering happens because men volunteer to help make it happen! YOU will have opportunities all weekend long to step out into service and contribute to the magic by volunteering. For many men, volunteering at the CMG is a fun, rewarding, and important part of their weekend experience. Don't miss out by sitting on the sidelines! When you volunteer you get to:*

- *Connect to other men in ways you may not have thought possible.*
- *Help create community.*
- *Become an integral part of the Gathering's creation.*
- *Experience pride in your accomplishment and your gift of service.*
- *Help bring your own magic to your brothers!*

I am not suggesting that everyone must use this exact language. I offer it as an example that seeks to avoid a tone which could be perceived as begging or whining.

### *#3: First-Timer Orientation*

This is the perfect time to state the ideal of having a Culture of Volunteerism. The First-Timer Orientation is the first formal exposure the new attendees have to what the CMG is all about. They are sitting there completely open to whatever we have to tell them about who we are, what kind of culture we strive to represent, as well as what to expect for the weekend. With this in mind, the First-Timer Orientation for the 58<sup>th</sup> CMG included this speech as one of the first things the men were told:

*Everyone involved with the CMG—the president of the board, board members, the planning committee, workshop leaders, and all the men you see making this weekend happen—it is all 100% volunteer run. None of us get paid a dime for this. And that is terrific! It helps keep the organization pure. We volunteer because we love doing it, and the CMG is an act of love. Now, that said, you are not required to volunteer. But I encourage each and every one of you to volunteer. Volunteering opportunities will be posted and/or announced at each meal along with other announcements. Pick something and do it. In fact let me tell you 7 reasons why you WANT to volunteer!*

1. ***It's a great way to meet men. And become closer to the men you meet.***
2. ***It makes you an integral part of the event. Your contribution makes a difference.***
3. ***You help create community.***
4. ***You get a great feeling knowing you've done something for other men.***
5. ***It takes you out of your own problems. When you're working on something for other men, you're not thinking about your problems! It's like a mini-vacation!***
6. ***If you're shy, you don't have to worry over what to talk about. Volunteering alongside another man, even a stranger, gives you an instant topic of conversation.***
7. ***When other men see you step out in service, it encourages them to do it, too. When that happens, you are actually making them better men!***

*So when a workshop is over, ask if the chairs need to be set out, or stacked. If you notice the coffee*

counter looks messy, take a moment to wipe it clean. If somebody asks for volunteers, I really invite you to step up and say, "Yes!"

### Calling All Leaders: *You Make the Culture of Volunteerism A Reality*

This quote is from the same article on the [EnergizeInc.com](http://EnergizeInc.com) website"

"[I]t becomes the job of the Director of Volunteers to manage the volunteer culture. Since the Director of Volunteers is also a middle manager, s/he also is the liaison between the volunteer program and the larger organization. S/he therefore becomes the link between the organizational culture and the volunteer culture and it is his/her job to bring the two together.... [I]f we want volunteer programs to succeed, we will need to highlight this aspect of the Director of Volunteers' job."

Within the CMG we do not have a position equivalent to "Director of Volunteers" as expressed in this article—nor do I recommend creating such a position at this time. What I do recommend is that each man in a CMG leadership position (as expressed earlier) recognize that *he is part of the organizational culture*. As such, each leader needs to take it upon himself to see himself also as a *liaison* between the *organization culture*, and the *volunteer culture*, which is to say the potential volunteers. When he interacts with the volunteer (and volunteer leaders) whom he is directing, he communicates the following:

1. **The task at hand.** That is, a clear and definite knowledge of what needs to be done.
2. **Exactly what is expected of the volunteer.** Communicate respectfully to the volunteer clearly and concisely what he is supposed to do so he understands the worth of his task to the event.
3. **That the volunteer is valued and respected for his contribution.** Praise him often and sincerely. If the volunteer isn't being effective, praise the work done and assign him another task
4. **State the vision:** "This is all a part of our Culture of Volunteerism, folks!"
5. **Gratitude.** Once the task is complete, the volunteer is thanked sincerely.

To underscore the vital importance of those five elements (above), here is a quote from an article by Helen Little called "*Volunteers: How to Get Them, How to Keep Them:*"

"If work is not meaningful, do not ask volunteers to do it. Volunteers need to know that their contribution is important. They find time to work on projects that contribute to goals that they support. They are motivated when they gain in some way—a new skill, new relationships, a feeling that what they did made a difference. Volunteers are more likely to complete tasks and do so on time when they know that others are counting on them."

We expect volunteers to "fit in," yet we often leave them on their own to discover just exactly what they are to fit into and how they are expected to do this. Decisiveness, communication, and expressed gratitude are keys to creating ideal volunteers both in the short and long terms.

The ideal volunteer:

- Can function autonomously.
- Enjoys doing the work.
- Can solve minor problems.
- Has the discernment to know when to ask for help and/or further instructions.
- Eventually becomes motivated to step into leadership himself and direct other volunteers.

Awareness of the five elements above helps create these kinds of volunteers. With future leaders evolving from today's volunteers, the Culture of Volunteerism becomes self-sustaining.

## No Duh!

Some of this may seem painfully labored and obvious. Yet how many times have we as leaders become so stressed and wrapped up in our own tasks of the moment that we forget the volunteers' needs, even when they are working right by us? This is about being mindful of the volunteers, even when we are pressured by other competing and often urgent demands. If we can't maintain the ideal of a Culture of Volunteerism, how can we expect others to do that? And how can we expect to pass it on?

The way each of us takes care of our volunteers is how we demonstrate to him whether we truly have a Culture of Volunteerism, or if that is just a meaningless phrase.

That bears repeating:

**How we treat the volunteer is the test of our Culture of Volunteerism**

To emphasize how important it is for us, the leaders, to step up to this mindfulness about the volunteers, here is a quote from an on-line article titled "*Keep Those Volunteers Around*" by Dr. Bill Wittich:

"Every volunteer arrives at your front door fired up to perform a job.... So what happens? Many times it is the lack of leadership on the part of the manager and their staff that deflates that excitement."

## Planning Committees & Volunteer Coordinators

I recommend that each Planning Committee create the office of Volunteer Coordinator (VC) and support it at the level of other committee posts such as Secretary, Treasurer, Workshops, Community Gatherings, etc. Otherwise the coordination of volunteers at the Gathering runs the risk of becoming an afterthought.

Clearly not every Planning Committee will have the luxury of having enough men to do this. The CMG is filled with excellent leaders who, precisely because of a lack of volunteers, must double- and triple-up on duties as they plan Gatherings. When this is the case, I recommend that one of those leaders explicitly take on the role of VC. This can help the PC in two ways:

1. Prior to the Gathering this will help focus the volunteer needs of the other leaders.
2. At the Gathering it will provide a single man who knows enough about the other leaders' volunteer needs that he can be relied upon as the single and prime source of information for the volunteers. This cuts down on everybody wandering around asking everyone else for what needs to be done.

The VC should be recognized as playing as important a role in making a successful Gathering as any other Planning Committee member does. In order to attract a person with the "people skills" and willingness to grow in this experience, the potential VC needs to see and know that he can count on that commitment from the Planning Committee. The Planning Committee needs to treat this person as an equal. By that I mean that the VC is:

- Made aware of all Planning Committee meetings.
- Expected to report to the Planning Committee regarding progress, needs, etc.
- Receives the minutes of the Planning Committee meetings.
- Receives the same compensation as other Planning Committee members (i.e. free registration and/or other symbolic "perks")

## Summation

I believe the CMG is already well on its way to having a Culture of Volunteerism. Indeed, there is a core group made up primarily of leaders and long-time attendees who "get it" and embody this ideal in the way they interact with others. Our task now is to bring this paradigm for community further into being so it can be shared by all.

I believe in the suggestions and recommendations made in this report. I also believe that there are probably other actions that can be taken that I have not thought of. There may also be events and opportunities

that arise from circumstances we can't foresee. But I think those challenges can be easily met if we remember to take these actions to promote and grow the CMG ideal of a Culture of Volunteerism:

- **Embrace it.** Make the conscious decision for this to be one the central ideals of the CMG. That mindfulness will help each of us transmit the idea to others.
- **Embody it.** Recognizing our individual responsibility in modeling what a Culture of Volunteerism is will help define and promote it for all with whom we interact.
- **Publicize it.** Express the fact that we have a Culture of Volunteerism in print, orally, and through our own actions.
- **Manifest it.** Where possible, create Volunteer Coordinators (or similar positions) who can act as a liaison between organizers and volunteers, and make the tasks happen smoothly.
- **Celebrate it.** Name it for people when you see it in action, and praise their participation in it. Be proud of sharing in a community where something as wonderful and rare as a Culture of Volunteerism is the norm.

Thank you for this opportunity to serve the California Men's Gatherings in this capacity.