

How to Align Right Motivation with Right Results through Service

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"It is not the motivation...we are questioning but rather the unintended consequences of rightly motivated efforts"- Lupton, 2011

Introduction:

The notion of service and the good that it can achieve for both the served and the one serving (a double benefit) as well as the broader community, has long been woven into our social, religious, and moral fabric. Peterson and Ritzenthaler argue that "service is no longer negative diminution of self, but a demonstration of reciprocity and social responsibility, a way of connecting with other members of the community" (2020, p. 8). Many schools require service hours for graduation, to be admitted to the National Honor society and/or for scholarship applications. Churches and various organizations create opportunities for their members to participate in acts of service as well. The United States government itself has many "service" programs designed to help those in need. However, a closer look at many service based initiatives reveals that some efforts to achieve good fall short of lasting change, and worse, some even cause harm to their recipients. In order for good to be achieved it is important to examine both sides of the "double benefit" and the way they are both engaged in acts of service.

What follows is a summary of documented benefits derived from acts of service specifically for youth volunteers (although it could likely be argued that adults do as well), as well as recipients. A closer look will then be taken at the possibility of unintended harm to recipients and the underlying reasons this may happen. Finally, I will share some keys to avoiding harm along with five recommendations on how to ensure good for both recipients and volunteers. These have been taken from existing literature as well as lessons learned from leading a small high school service club that was funded by a Character Catalyst Grant provided by The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. If service, as a virtue, is to be cultivated through habituation in those enacting it, it is important that considerations are taken to ensure that right motivations align with right results. Regardless of the context you are approaching service from, I ask that you read with an open mind, a questioning heart, and a willingness to lean in and reflect.

Why serve? The Double Benefit:

Existing literature and studies point to numerous benefits for youth volunteers through the cultivation of virtue, personal gain, and pathways to civic engagement (Watts et al., 2021;

Jubilee Centre, 2014; Yates and Youniss, 1996; Pathways to Participation, 2011). Serving provides youth opportunities to engage across generations and communities, occasionally even globally. It expands their world views, deepening their understanding of social, moral and political traditions at play in the communities they serve, while fostering a sense of agency and purpose.

On the other side of the double benefit, the benefits for recipients are covered significantly less in the literature. Generally their benefits are seen as having needs met that are not currently filled by existing structures and programs. Notably, in a number of studies, youth volunteers were not able to consistently verbalize what benefit their service work achieved (Seider, et al., 2010; Arthur et al., 2017). Of great concern, however, are studies that point to the potential for harm instead of benefits for communities and individuals on the receiving end of acts of service. This is because many traditional approaches to service have sought to address symptoms rather than root causes and failed to involve the people being served (Amplify Youth, 2021). Lupton, in his book, *Toxic Charity*, argues that this approach has caused harm specifically to recipients' dignity and motivation to take ownership over their own circumstances (2011).

How to avoid harm: "Recipient" leadership and relationships

Recipient leadership is the first key to avoiding harm. In 1968 Freire argued in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that the "oppressed", or rather those on the receiving end of service work, need to be the ones to lead any effort to address their needs. Service must be done "with" not "for" or "to", as this leads to savior complexes and unequal relationships between participants and recipients of service. This can also lead to "false" and "unexamined" generosity on the part of those serving and, as already mentioned, robs the served of dignity and motivation (Lupton, 2011; Freire, 1968). Outside help can instead come in the form of an advocating role beside or behind recipients through connections to resources and accountability. Youth can be mobilized as leaders when they are serving their own community as well. Their voices matter and can balance and protect the double benefit of service. When they are entering another community, however, the role of the served, how their voices are elevated and respected, is one that must be considered in order to ensure that right motivation yields right results.

The second key is relationships. Fikkert and Corbett, in *When Helping Hurts*, argue that broken relationships, either with self, others (at the familial, community, national and/or governmental level), or God ("higher purpose"), are foundational reasons people and

communities may find themselves in need (2009). Understanding root causes and seeing recipients as more than their circumstances, as people with stories who are worthy of dignity and respect, keeps relationships between recipients and volunteers from becoming unequal. People are made for connection and service is an opportunity to rebuild and reconnect people who are suffering from broken relationships. That said, long term relationships are more impactful than short term. When considering where and how to volunteer, the length of existing relationships and the ability to maintain them is important for ensuring lasting benefits.

Five recommendations for ensuring effective service:

Effective service that is approached critically, intentionally and relationally, is arguably best suited for building a habit of service in youth (and adults) who enact it. Pulling from the literature summarized above, I ran a small intervention in Milwaukee, WI during the 2024-2025 school year with a group of High School students and two other adult volunteers. This was funded by a Character Catalyst Grant and built upon work I had completed for my MA Character Education dissertation (available upon request). The student and volunteer group met in person once a week to discuss what “good” service looks like and researched existing organizations with long term relationships in our community that were already doing it. One or two club meetings with an additional Saturday morning were then spent showing up at these organizations and participating in their work or supporting them in any capacity we could. Organizations included UMOS, an advocacy non-profit reaching underserved populations; Rawhide, an urban stable serving at-risk youth; Kinship, a food distribution center focused on community flourishing and prosperity; HAWS, an animal welfare society; and Mexican Fiesta, a nonprofit serving the Hispanic community in Milwaukee. We shoveled horse manure, wrapped Christmas presents, handed out Rosca de Reyes and champurrado along with Three Kings Day gifts, filled treat bowls for shelter dogs, and spent a couple Saturday mornings running a grocery store and cafe at a food distribution center, to name a few. Students stated that they enjoyed feeling like they were giving back to their community and being a part of work that was meaningful and impactful. Their voices were critical in how we used our time and directed our efforts. It was club students who made phone calls, sent emails and made connections. One of the aims was to help them feel equipped to continue volunteering outside of our club structure, aiming to build a lifelong habit of service, by familiarizing themselves with what channels to take: who to reach out to, what language to use, what type of service work to look for, etc.

Combined with the existing literature, I used our club’s experience to create a list of five recommendations for involving youth in effective service aimed at building a life long habit and

ensuring “good”. These suggestions are applicable whether service opportunities are offered through schools, churches, non profits or even families looking to connect their kids to service. They are as follows:

1.) Encourage Early and Frequent Engagement

In *A Habit of Service*, Arthur et al found that youth who began serving by the age of 10 were more likely to develop long term habits of service (2017, p. 5). However, it can also be argued that it is never too late or too early to start! Children are born with an intrinsic desire to be “charitable” (Body et al., 2020). Parents, educators, and service providers cultivate this intrinsic motivation by guiding students in “critical inquiry” into the underlying issues behind the needs they are serving and the intended impacts, helping them understand the deeper “why” behind their service (Body et al., 2020). Providing frequent opportunities to participate in service through partnership with local organizations, along with reflection to foster internalization of why service is needed and how their actions are impactful are what then build a habit of service (Yates and Youniss, 1996; Annas, 2011, pp. 22-25; Lamb et al., 2019; Peterson and Ritzenthaler, 2020; Watts et al., 2021).

2.) Let students take the lead

Students must have choice and voice in how their time service is directed. Youths’ agency in deciding where and how they serve increases personal investment and motivation, and leads to the cultivation of civic engagement (Watts and Flanagan, 2007). Getting started feels less daunting when they are invited into the process of identifying service opportunities and taking the lead in communicating with local organizations. This empowers them to continue doing so independently later on.

From our club's experience, I will add not to be afraid to knock on doors (physical and metaphorical) as service opportunities are sought. It does initially require work to get connected. Using personal or organizational networks is a good way to get doors to open. However, youth should still be given the opportunity to take the lead in communicating and coordinating service efforts beyond the initial connection.

3.) Provide Meaningful Service Opportunities

In order for service to be both effective and habit building, it is essential that service opportunities are contextual, relevant, and impactful, addressing real needs rather than superficial actions. Youth should not be tasked with building a wall only for that wall to be torn

4.) Consider volunteer and recipient dynamics: how are lasting relationships being created and protected?

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graph TD
    Youth[Youth] --- Voice[Voice (Agency)]
    Recipient[Recipient] --- Voice
    Voice --> Participation[Participation (Motivation)]
    Participation --- YouthBox[Youth]
    Participation --- RecipientBox[Recipient]
    YouthBox --- Habit[Habit of Service]
    RecipientBox --- Dignity[Dignity]
    YouthBox --- YouthList["• built through the development of Knowledge and Reasoning; they can identify relevant social and political factors affecting intended recipients and understand where their role is in partnering with recipients in service"]
    RecipientBox --- RecipientList["• Amplified through consultation about what they identify as community needs and what assets are present in the community already to meet them"]
    Participation --- ParticipationList["• Repeated involvement in service work and critical reflection throughout"]
    Participation --- ParticipationList2["• feel empowered through connections to resources to take a leadership role in the work being done"]
    Habit --- Equal1[=]
    Dignity --- Equal2[=]
    
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The diagram illustrates the Youth Voice Model, showing the relationship between Youth, Voice (Agency), Recipient, Participation (Motivation), Habit of Service, and Dignity.

Youth and **Recipient** are connected to **Voice (Agency)**. **Voice (Agency)** leads to **Participation (Motivation)**, which is represented by a large blue downward arrow.

Participation (Motivation) is connected to **Youth** and **Recipient**. Below **Participation (Motivation)** are two boxes: **Habit of Service** and **Dignity**, each preceded by an equals sign (=).

Youth is associated with the following bullet point:

- built through the development of Knowledge and Reasoning; they can identify relevant social and political factors affecting intended recipients and understand where their role is in partnering with recipients in service

Recipient is associated with the following bullet point:

- Amplified through consultation about what they identify as community needs and what assets are present in the community already to meet them

Participation (Motivation) is associated with the following bullet points:

- Repeated involvement in service work and critical reflection throughout
- feel empowered through connections to resources to take a leadership role in the work being done

Figure 1: the role of voice and participation

5.) *Examine the virtues enacted through service*

In order to protect the cultivation of virtue through service, as well as the virtue of service itself, it is essential to assess whether right motivation is aligned with right results (see Figure 2). This can be achieved by approaching acts of service with criticality and intentionality by all involved. Service should cultivate humility and gratitude through the recognition of privilege or need, hope through the belief that change is possible, and justice by promoting fairness and dignity for all involved. Saint Augustine says it best: “Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.” We cannot focus solely on the benefits for volunteers, we must ensure that recipients of our well intentioned acts are not unintentionally harmed, or simply left without benefit, in the process. May our generosity never be deemed false through thoughtless action, but rather grounded in curiosity about root causes and a desire to walk shoulder to shoulder, on equal ground, not with the “served” but rather with those in need of a hand to help them on the road toward flourishing.

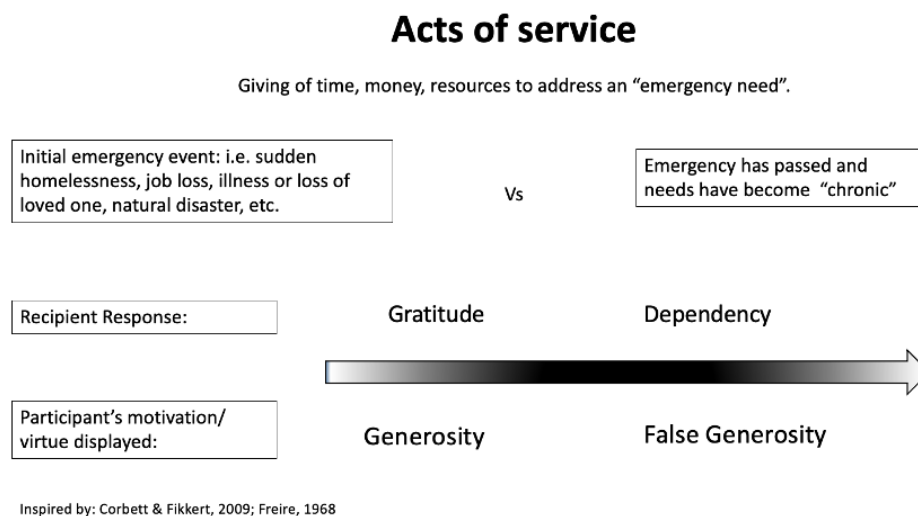


Figure 2. Acts of Service

Conclusion:

The aim of this paper has been to encourage more thought regarding how to build lasting relationships that promote motivation while protecting dignity of both the served and those serving. Instead of throwing resources and limited time at areas of need, may we all slow down, look each other in the eyes and get curious about what root causes and lasting solutions look

like. The list of authors who inspired these suggestions can be found in the reference section that follows. I highly recommend their work. There is also a level of anecdotalness to this as well from my own lived experience across the United States, Latin America and Africa both as a youth volunteer and later as a youth leader and service club supervisor. Further research to round out these ideas and tweak them for other contexts is welcomed and desired. May we never stop seeking to align our motivation with right results, achieving good and avoiding harm in our pursuits.

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