I met a young women in the Middle East who volunteered as a trainer for her association. We discussed the goals of the organization and she asked what I thought of the mission and vision statements.

“Why don’t you run for a seat on the board of directors,” I asked after observing her passion and dedication. I was thinking, “She would make a great president.”

Then I realized I probably should not have asked the question. Don’t get me wrong; when I see talented people I am quick to encourage a leadership role in their association.

My mistake was to ignore the culture of the country. The bylaws did not allow women to serve on the board, although a growing part of the membership are women practitioners. To amend the bylaws would require the unlikely approval process of the country’s government.

Not many countries encourage the development of associations. In the USA they are a platform for advocacy, economic growth and employment.

**The Need for Leaders**

The US has more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations; about 150,000 of them are associations and chambers. Every organization has a board of directors.

The average size board is 15. Multiply that by 1.5 million and there are at least 22 million persons serving in leadership roles. Each of these organizations is working to improve a cause, community, trade or profession.

But not everyone steps up; generally less than ten percent of the membership volunteers to lead.

When volunteers are asked if they would consider a leadership role, many respond: “I think other people have more time than me,” “I didn’t know they needed leaders,” “Nobody asked me,” and “I don’t believe I have the skills.”

**The Gift**

The rights to join, participate and volunteer in an association should be recognized for what it is --- a gift.
The privilege to associate and serve as a leader are afforded in the US Constitution. These include freedom to assembly, speech and the right to petition government.

Other laws supporting association sustainability in America, include:

- Exemption from federal income tax.
- Tax incentives for contributions.
- Volunteer immunity.

Members in the USA should recognize these unique rights to assemble, join, volunteer and lead their associations, chambers and nonprofits. An understanding of these unique rights might encourage more members to volunteer to lead.

If Not YOU, Then Who?

I often ask potential volunteers to imagine what their community or profession would look like if there was no association or chamber. Organizations, many decades or a century old, have tirelessly worked to improve their interests. If the founding and successive leaders had not stepped up there is a possibility that the sector would be in bad shape.

When I ask leaders why they volunteered, I hear many selfless replies:

- My family has been a part of the organization’s leadership for years; it is our responsibility to give back to the community we serve.

- I have invested heavily into my career (or company) and by giving back to the organization through leadership I am protecting my investment or assets.

- I consider it an opportunity to be a part of shaping my profession or community.

Inviting Young Leaders

I said to a young man in another country, "You should consider being the first leader of the association’s Young Professionals’ Network,"

“Every man owes a part of his time and money to the business or industry in which he is engaged. No man has a moral right to withhold his support from an organization that is striving to improve conditions within his sphere.” President Teddy Roosevelt - 1908
My suggestion enlightened him to the opportunities he had not considered.

I reinforced the suggestion by giving him a key chain with the sentence: “Failure is not an option.” The quote comes from the 1970 Apollo 13 mission. The theme guided NASA in launching a mission to the moon.

It only took a day for him to say “yes” to the leadership opportunity.

In summary, the freedoms to associate, to lead and to advance a cause or community is a right and responsibility that should not to be dismissed.

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Bob Harris, CAE, provides governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.