I met a young woman in the Middle East who volunteered as a trainer for her professional association. We discussed the goals of the association 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 suggest they accept leadership roles in their association.

My mistake was to ignore the culture of the country. The bylaws did not allow women to serve on boards (even though a large part of the membership are women practitioners.) To amend the bylaws would require the unlikely approval process of the government.

The Need for Leaders

In the US there are 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 board 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 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.’

“‘I don’t have the skills.’

“‘Nobody asked me.’

The Gift
The rights to join, participate and volunteer in an association should be recognized for what it is --- a gift.

The privileges to associate and serve as a leader are provided for in the US Constitution. These include the freedom to assemble, freedom of speech and the right to petition government.

Other laws support associations in America, including:

- Exemption from federal income tax.
- Tax incentives for contributions.
- Volunteer immunity afforded to board of directors.

Some countries have no rights to freely convene, speak openly or to lobby government. Some governments regularly cancel meetings, requiring meetings of even a few people to be approved by the authorities.

US members should appreciate the unique rights to associate and the freedom to lead associations, chambers and nonprofits.

If Not YOU, Then Who?

I often ask boards and prospective leaders, “If your association or chamber did not exist, what would your industry, profession or community look like?”

Organizations (many decades or a century old) have tirelessly worked to improve, protect and advance their causes and communities. If the founding and successive leaders had not stepped up, would your cause or community be in worse shape?

Every organization needs a core of volunteer leaders to advance the mission. 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.

Asking Young Leaders

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

My suggestion made him aware of opportunities and leadership 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 second to encourage his leadership potential – and he accepted.

In summary, the right to associate, to lead and to protect and advance a cause, community, profession or trade is a gift that should not to be ignored.

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