

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA? VOLUNTEERING



Shaw Nielsen

There's a Monty Python sketch where a banker, approached by a collector for charity, is gobsmacked by the 'brilliant' concept of people parting with money for nothing in return, other than the good feeling it gives them. The London Olympic Committee recently pulled off the same trick on a vast scale with 70,000 high spirited and gratified volunteers happily running all the routine operations of the Games. How did the organisers get away

with it? Normally in an organisation when you ask, who'd like to 'be on X committee', 'help clean up', 'take the notes of the meeting', 'show the new girl how the accounts system works here', there's hardly a giddy rush. It rather resembles the scene where everyone takes a step back, and the unlucky 'volunteer' is the one who's slowest to react. Go back to the motivation textbooks and they'll tell you that as soon as you reward something you

diminish its 'intrinsic' motivation. Yet it's not even that the tasks of the volunteers were inherently gratifying, but rather it was the joy of being invited to make a really big party work, to share the public mood and to be able to say you were there, at the centre of the action, making a positive difference. That's a trick missing in many a business.

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