THE PROXIMITY EFFECT | PART 1 OF 3

Why Most Volunteer Programs Don't Change Anyone

The hidden design flaw in corporate volunteering, and the call center study that proves it

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A corporate volunteer team shows up at a food bank on a Saturday morning. They sort cans for three hours, take a group photo, post it on the company intranet, and go home feeling good about themselves. The next day, they go back to work. Nothing about how they see the world, or their place in it, has shifted.

This is the norm, not the exception. And if we are honest about it, most corporate volunteer programs are optimized for exactly this outcome. They are designed for logistics, not for learning. For participation counts, not for proximity.

That is the real problem. Not bad intentions. Not even bad execution. The problem is that people never get close enough to anyone or anything that could actually change them.

What Proximity Actually Means

When we talk about proximity at Realized Worth, we are not just talking about physical nearness. We mean the reduction of psychological distance between a volunteer and the people their work is meant to serve. It means the beneficiary becomes vivid, specific, and real. Not a category. Not a statistic. A person with constraints, agency, and a name.

Research on construal level theory helps explain this. When we are psychologically distant from someone, we think about them in abstract terms. "The homeless." "Underserved youth." "At-risk populations." These labels let us care in the general sense without engaging in the specific sense. Reduced psychological distance shifts how concretely we think and, critically, how we act.

This is a two-channel construct. The first channel is contact: direct interaction that gives you sensory and relational data. A face. A voice. A response you did not expect. The second channel is what we call mentallization: an internalized mental model of the beneficiary, built through

story, guided imagination, or repeated mediated exposure. Both channels can reduce distance. Both can shift behavior. But neither happens by accident.

The Call Center That Changed Everything

The study that reshaped how we think about proximity did not happen in a volunteer program. It happened in one of the worst jobs in higher education.

Adam Grant and his colleagues ran a series of experiments at a university fundraising call center. The job was brutal. The annual turnover rate exceeded 400%. The entire staff quit and was replaced roughly every two to three months. The rejection rate on calls exceeded 99%. Callers worked from standardized scripts, endured verbal abuse from the people they phoned, and were treated like telemarketers. One caller posted a sign next to his desk: "Doing a good job here is like wetting your pants in a dark suit. You get a warm feeling, but no one else notices."

Here is the part that should matter to anyone running a corporate social impact program. These callers were raising millions of dollars. Over 60% of those funds went directly to student scholarships. But the callers had no idea where the money went. They had never met a single person whose life had been shaped by their work. They were doing meaningful work with zero proximity to its meaning.

Five Minutes. One Person. Everything Changed.

Grant designed a simple intervention. He brought in one scholarship student to talk to a group of callers. The interaction lasted five minutes. The student explained how the scholarship, funded by money the callers raised, had changed his life and allowed him to get an education.

The study randomly divided callers into three groups. One group met the scholarship recipient face to face. A second group read a letter from him. A third group, the control, had no exposure to him at all.

The results were so dramatic that Grant replicated the study six times before he believed them.

One month later, the callers who had that five-minute interaction were spending 142% more time on the phone per week. They had nearly doubled their call volume. And their weekly revenue had climbed 171%, from an average of $185.94 per week to $503.22. That is not a marginal improvement. That is a fundamentally different relationship to the work.

> *The job did not change. The script did not change. The rejection rate did not change. What changed was that the callers could see who their work was for.*

In one version of the experiment, a graduate student described how the callers' fundraising had supported her research. The effect was even more pronounced. Among callers who had previously been soliciting donors with an existing giving history, weekly revenue jumped from $411.74 to $2,083.52. In a single week, 23 callers raised $38,451 more than they had previously.

Sit with those numbers for a moment. A five-minute conversation with one human being, and a group of 23 people generated nearly forty thousand dollars in additional revenue in one week. No new training. No new incentive structure. No change to the job itself. Just proximity.

Why the Letter Did Not Work

This is the finding that should keep program leaders up at night. The callers who read the letter showed virtually no change. Same information. Same beneficiary. Same story. But no face. No voice. No reciprocity.

Grant's subsequent research helped explain why. There is a meaningful difference between knowing that your work helps others and seeing the impact on a living, breathing human being. When people interact directly with someone who benefits from their work, they develop a stronger conviction that the work matters. They become committed to working harder, longer, and more effectively on behalf of the people they are trying to help. That commitment is not abstract. It shows up in behavior, measured in minutes and dollars, a full month later.

The time lag matters enormously. This was not a momentary emotional spike that faded by Monday. It was a durable shift in perceived impact that restructured how the callers related to their own effort.

The research has been extended into other settings with consistent results. When lifeguards read stories about other lifeguards rescuing drowning swimmers, they increased their monthly hours by 43% and supervisor-rated helping behaviors by 21%. When nurses assembling surgical kits met a healthcare professional who would use those kits, they worked 64% longer than a control group and achieved more than double the output with 15% fewer errors. Even a photograph of a patient attached to an X-ray was enough to increase radiologists' report length by 29% and diagnostic accuracy by 46%.

The pattern holds across settings. When people can see who their work serves, they do more of it and they do it better.

Now Apply This to Your Volunteer Program

Most corporate volunteering operates at the "letter" level. At best. Many programs operate with no beneficiary connection at all. Volunteers sort cans without knowing whose kitchen they end up in. They pack school kits without knowing the name of a single child who will open one. They plant trees without understanding the community that will live among them.

The work gets done. The impact report gets filed. And nobody changes.

If a five-minute interaction can reshape effort and performance a month later in a call center, what could thoughtfully designed proximity do across thousands of volunteer events every year? And what are we leaving on the table by skipping it?

Why Information Is Not Enough

One of the most counterintuitive findings in contact research is that knowledge is a weak mediator of attitude change. When researchers analyzed what actually drives shifts in how people relate across group boundaries, the strongest pathways were emotional: reduced anxiety and increased empathy. Not more facts. Not better briefing materials. Feeling.

This matters because most corporate volunteer "orientations" are information dumps. Here is the nonprofit. Here is what they do. Here is your task. Go.

That orientation gives people cognitive scaffolding. It does not give them relational scaffolding. It tells them what to do but not who they are doing it for. And without that who, the work stays transactional. Neuroimaging research has shown that when people encounter individuals from extreme outgroups (including homeless populations), the brain regions tied to social cognition can show reduced activation. Proximity and individuation counteract this. They re-engage the neural circuits that allow us to see another person as a person.

Grant's call center study proved this in behavioral terms. The letter contained the same information as the conversation. It described the same person, the same scholarship, the same life trajectory. But information without relational contact did not move the needle. The callers needed a face and a voice. They needed five minutes of reciprocity with a real human being.

This is not sentimental language dressed up in science. It is a measurable, designable dynamic. And it has direct implications for every volunteer event you run.

The Cost of Distance

When volunteers stay distant from beneficiaries, several things happen. None of them serve your stated goals.

First, the experience stays surface-level. People participate as what we call Tourists: they show up, they observe, they leave. That is not a failure of character. It is a predictable outcome of a design that never gave them a reason to go deeper.

Second, motivation stays external. Without felt impact, volunteers are driven by obligation, team pressure, or the vague sense that they "should." Self-determination theory tells us that externally motivated behaviors are fragile. They do not persist without the external push. They do not integrate into identity.

Third, nothing spills over. One of the strongest findings in employee volunteering research is that meaningful volunteering can increase job absorption and even job performance. But the operative word is meaningful. When the experience carries no personal significance, it does not feed back into the workplace. It just takes a Saturday.

Fourth, stereotypes survive intact. If volunteers never have their assumptions disrupted, they walk away with the same mental models they arrived with. Sometimes those models are reinforced. "Those people really do need our help." That is not transformation. That is charity theater.

What This Means for Program Leaders

If you run a corporate volunteer program, the most important question you can ask is not "How many people showed up?" It is "How close did they get?"

Close to a real person. Close to a real story. Close enough that the experience created a crack in their assumptions. Close enough that something had to be re-examined.

Grant's callers did not receive a raise, a promotion, or a new job description. They received five minutes with one person. And that was enough to rewrite their relationship to the work for at least a month. Imagine what a well-designed volunteer program could do with an hour. Or a year.

That is what proximity does. It creates the conditions where transformation becomes possible. Not guaranteed. Possible.

The good news is that proximity is not a personality trait or a stroke of luck. It is a design variable. And in the next piece in this series, we will unpack the two most underused tools in corporate volunteering that reliably produce it: the Brief and the Debrief.

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*Next: **"The Brief and Debrief Are Not Optional"***

THE PROXIMITY EFFECT | PART 2 OF 3

The Brief and Debrief Are Not Optional

How two fifteen-minute windows determine whether volunteering transforms or merely occupies

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Think about the last corporate volunteer event you observed. Was there a moment, right before the work started, where someone stood in front of the group and said something that genuinely shifted the energy in the room? Not logistics. Not a schedule overview. Something that made people stop and reconsider what they were about to do and who they were about to do it for?

If the answer is no, you are not alone. Most programs skip this entirely or treat it as a formality. And that single omission may be the biggest missed opportunity in corporate volunteering.

Fifteen Minutes That Change Everything

At Realized Worth, we call it the Brief. It happens before the volunteer experience begins. And when it is done well, it does three things that no amount of logistics planning can replicate.

First, it challenges assumptions. Volunteers arrive with mental models about the people they are about to serve. Some of these models are generous. Many are incomplete or wrong. The Brief creates what transformative learning theory calls a disorienting dilemma: a moment where the frame does not fit the picture. That disruption is not an accident. It is a catalyst.

Second, it communicates task significance. Not "here is what you will be doing today," but "here is who this matters to and why." Relational job design research identifies task significance and beneficiary contact as the two primary levers for prosocial motivation. The Brief pulls the first lever hard, even before the work begins.

Third, it creates proximity. A real person. A real story. Told with enough concrete detail that volunteers can begin to build an internal mental model of the beneficiary. Not a statistic. Not a category. A human being with specific constraints and specific dignity.

> *The Brief is not a warm-up. It is the mechanism that makes the rest of the experience land differently.*

When we train facilitators, we frame the Brief around three anchors: WHY this work matters, WHO it serves, and WHAT volunteers can expect. But the sequence matters. Lead with WHY. Humanize with WHO. Clarify with WHAT. That order does cognitive work: it primes meaning before it assigns tasks.

How Mentallization Works

We use the term mentallization to describe what happens when someone builds an internalized mental model of another person through story and imagination rather than direct contact. It is not a substitute for meeting someone face to face. But it is far more powerful than most people assume.

Research on narrative transportation shows that when people are genuinely absorbed into a story, they are more likely to hold beliefs consistent with that story afterward. This is not a quirk of gullibility. It is how human cognition processes relational information. We learn about others through narrative. Stories are the original proximity technology.

Imagined contact research adds another dimension. Studies show that mentally simulating a positive interaction with someone from an unfamiliar group can reduce implicit prejudice and improve attitudes. When a Brief invites volunteers to imagine living as the person whose story they just heard, it is activating this same mechanism. Anxiety goes down. Openness goes up. The beneficiary moves from abstraction to something approaching presence.

This is especially important for indirect service events, where volunteers may never meet a beneficiary at all. Packing meals. Building furniture. Assembling hygiene kits. Without a Brief that builds mentallized proximity, these events are just manual labor with a charitable label.

Remember Grant's call center study from Part 1? The callers who read a letter from the scholarship student showed no meaningful change. Same information, zero proximity. But the callers who sat across from that student for five minutes rewired their relationship to the work. Mentallization sits between those two poles. It will not replicate the full power of face-to-face contact. But it dramatically outperforms the information-only approach that most programs default to.

The Debrief Is Where Learning Actually Happens

Here is something that should concern every program leader: the experience itself is not where transformation occurs. It is where the raw material gets generated. The transformation happens in the sense-making that follows.

A meta-analysis on debriefing found that structured debriefs improve performance across work and training settings. The key word is structured. An unstructured "How was it?" conversation over pizza is not a debrief. It is social time. It has value. But it is not doing the work.

Our Debrief design rests on two core prompts. "What did you experience?" and "Was it what you expected?" Those two questions do something specific. The first anchors people in their own lived experience, not in evaluation. Not in judgment. In what actually happened for them. The second surfaces expectation violations, the gaps between what they thought the day would be and what it actually was.

Those gaps are where the learning lives. If everything went exactly as expected, there is nothing to integrate. But when the reality surprises people, when the person they met did not match the mental model they arrived with, when the work felt harder or more meaningful than they anticipated, when their assumptions got disrupted and they felt it in their body, that is the moment where a new frame of reference can start to form.

> *The Debrief is not a feedback session. It is the container where emotion becomes meaning and meaning becomes identity.*

Notice what our prompts avoid. They do not ask "Did we do a good job?" They do not ask "How can we improve?" Those are evaluation questions. They push people into a performance frame. We are after something different: autobiographical meaning-making. What did you learn about yourself? What changed in how you see this? These are identity-level questions.

Why Both Are Non-Negotiable

The Brief and the Debrief are not decorations on top of a volunteer event. They are the proximity engine. Without the Brief, volunteers arrive as psychological strangers to the people they serve. Without the Debrief, whatever raw material the experience generates goes unprocessed. People make sense of it alone, if they make sense of it at all. And when people make sense of complex social experiences alone, they default to existing frames. The assumptions survive.

Research on contact theory mediators reveals that the strongest pathways to attitude change are affective: reduced anxiety and increased empathy. Not cognitive. Not informational. The Brief opens the emotional channel. The Debrief consolidates what traveled through it.

Think back to those 23 callers who generated $38,451 in additional revenue in a single week after five minutes with one beneficiary. That interaction was, functionally, a Brief. It challenged

assumptions about the meaning of the work. It communicated task significance. It created proximity to a real person. Grant's experiment did not include a structured Debrief. Imagine if it had. Imagine what could happen when you pair that kind of proximity moment with intentional reflection afterward.

Your Briefs and Debriefs are where you engineer that relational moment for every volunteer, every time. Even when direct beneficiary contact is not possible.

The Practical Reality

We hear the pushback. "We only have four hours on site." "The nonprofit does not want us taking time away from the work." "Our volunteers just want to get their hands dirty."

All understandable. All addressable.

A Brief does not need to be long. It needs to be honest. Ten minutes with a real story, a genuine connection to task significance, and a moment that makes people reconsider their assumptions. That is enough to prime proximity. Grant's intervention lasted five minutes. Five minutes, and the effects were still measurable a month later.

A Debrief does not need to be therapy. Fifteen minutes with two good questions and a facilitator who knows how to hold space for honest reflection. That is enough to convert raw experience into lasting meaning.

The math is simple. A four-hour event without a Brief and Debrief is four hours of activity. A four-hour event with them is three and a half hours of activity plus a shot at something most corporate programs never achieve: actual behavior change.

In the final piece of this series, we will look at how proximity design needs to shift depending on where volunteers are in their development journey, from Tourists encountering this for the first time to Guides who are ready to lead it.

Part 1: "Why Most Volunteer Programs Don't Change Anyone" *Next:* ***"From Tourist to Guide: Designing Proximity That Lasts"***

THE PROXIMITY EFFECT | PART 3 OF 3

From Tourist to Guide: Designing Proximity That Lasts

Why sustained change requires calibration, not repetition

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There is a moment in every well-designed volunteer program where a participant stops being someone who showed up and starts becoming someone who belongs. It does not happen on a schedule. You cannot force it. But you can design for it. And if you understand how proximity works at different stages of a volunteer's development, you can create the conditions where that shift becomes far more likely.

Not Everyone Needs the Same Proximity

This is the mistake most programs make. They deliver the same experience, at the same intensity, to everyone. First-timers and fifth-timers. The curious and the committed. People who signed up because their manager sent a calendar invite and people who have been quietly doing this work on their own for years.

At Realized Worth, we describe three developmental stages that volunteers tend to move through. We call them Tourist, Traveler, and Guide. These are not judgments. They are design inputs.

The Tourist is encountering this for the first time. They are curious but cautious. Their mental model of the beneficiary is built mostly from media, assumptions, and social distance. They need a great first experience. They need a Brief that opens the door gently. They need enough proximity to spark interest, not enough to overwhelm.

Push a Tourist into heavy emotional contact before they are ready, and you get threat. Avoidance. The kind of discomfort that makes someone decide this is not for them. Contact theory research is clear: proximity works best under supportive conditions. Threatening or coercive contact can actually increase bias.

The Traveler has been around. They are investing. Asking harder questions. Their assumptions have started to crack, and they are curious about what is on the other side. Travelers need

deeper exposure. More sustained contact with beneficiaries. More honest Debriefs. They are ready to sit with discomfort and make meaning from it.

The Guide has integrated this into their identity. This is not something they do. It is part of who they are. Their psychological distance to beneficiaries has collapsed. They think in terms of "us," not "us and them." Guides need meaningful responsibility: co-designing events, delivering Briefs, facilitating Debriefs, mentoring Travelers. Treat a Guide like a Tourist and you will lose them. Not because they are offended. Because you are wasting their capacity.

Calibrating the Engine

If the Brief and Debrief are the proximity engine (as we explored in Part 2), then the Tourist-Traveler-Guide lens is the calibration dial.

For Tourists, the Brief should lean into mentallization. A compelling story about a real person, told with enough specificity to build an internal mental model. Imagined contact research suggests that guided mental simulation of a positive interaction can reduce anxiety and improve attitudes, even without any direct encounter. That is what a good Brief does for a first-timer: it creates "as-if" contact that makes the real thing less threatening.

The Debrief for Tourists should be light. "What did you experience?" is enough. Do not push for systems-level analysis on day one. Let the crack form. It will widen on its own if you create the next opportunity for it.

> *Proximity is not one-size-fits-all. The same intensity that transforms a Traveler can paralyze a Tourist.*

For Travelers, the Brief can be more direct. Name the power dynamics. Surface the assumptions explicitly. Use the disorienting dilemma deliberately. Travelers can handle it because they have enough relational foundation to stay engaged when things get uncomfortable.

The Debrief for Travelers should go deeper. "Was it what you expected?" becomes a genuine exploration. Add identity-level questions: "Have any of your values or beliefs been influenced by what you experienced?" "What changes are you considering for yourself?" Travelers are in the zone where critical reflection and discourse can catalyze revised frames of reference. That is transformative learning in action.

For Guides, the Brief is something they help deliver. They are not the audience anymore. They are co-creators. And the Debrief is where they model vulnerability and reflective practice for everyone else in the room. Their contribution is not just personal growth. It is culture.

Why Repetition Is Not the Same as Habit

Some programs try to solve the transformation problem by adding more events. If one day did not change someone, maybe four days will. Maybe eight.

Repetition matters. Research on habit formation shows that repeated action in a consistent context increases automaticity over time. But the range of how long it takes a behavior to become automatic varies enormously: from 18 to 254 days in one widely cited study. Frequency alone is not the mechanism.

What turns repetition into sustained change is the quality of the reflection cycle between events. Each Brief builds on the last. Each Debrief deepens the sense-making. The volunteer is not just accumulating hours. They are accumulating meaning.

Self-determination theory provides the framework here. Behaviors that are externally motivated ("my company wants me to") are fragile. Behaviors that are autonomously internalized ("this matters to me and here is why") persist without external pressure. The journey from Tourist to Guide is, at its core, a journey of internalization. And that journey requires autonomy-supportive design, not guilt-based repetition.

The Spillover Question

Here is where this gets interesting for anyone who cares about organizational outcomes, not just social impact metrics.

Contact theory research shows that the effects of positive intergroup contact can generalize beyond the immediate interaction. People who develop reduced anxiety and increased empathy toward one group sometimes carry those shifts into other contexts. The boundary shifts from "I care about this specific community" to "I notice and care about inequity in general."

Employee volunteering research tells a parallel story. When the experience is meaningful, it relates to increased job absorption and better job performance. Not because volunteering teaches job skills (though it can). Because it gives people a sense of significance that feeds back into how they show up at work.

Grant's call center research revealed the same dynamic from a different angle. The callers did not learn new skills during their five-minute interaction with the scholarship student. They did not receive coaching or feedback on their technique. What they received was proximity to the meaning of their work. And that proximity made them 142% more persistent and 171% more productive for at least a month. The spillover was not a side effect. It was the primary effect.

But here is the tension every program leader needs to hold: that spillover only happens when the proximity was real and the reflection was honest. If you shortcut the Brief, skip the Debrief, and treat every volunteer the same regardless of where they are on the journey, you get participation without transformation. Activity without spillover. Hours logged without lives changed.

Measuring What Actually Matters

If proximity is the active ingredient, then your measurement stack should track whether it is present, not just whether events happened.

Start with self-other overlap. There are simple, validated tools (like the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale) that measure how much someone has psychologically merged their sense of self with the beneficiary. Pre-event and post-event, same day. This is your "fast signal" of proximity taking hold.

Add perceived impact. Not "did you enjoy the event" but "do you believe your effort mattered to a specific person." Those are different questions. The first measures satisfaction. The second measures the felt belief that drives sustained action.

Track behavioral follow-through. Did they sign up for the next event? Did they refer a colleague? Did they take on a leadership role? These are Guide-trajectory indicators.

And listen to the language in your Debriefs. When participants shift from "them" to "us," from "those people" to "our neighbors," from "I helped" to "I learned," you are watching identity integration happen in real time.

One More Thing About Beneficiary Dignity

None of this works if it comes at the cost of the people being served. Proximity cannot become extraction. Beneficiaries are not "motivational props" for corporate transformation journeys.

Every proximity design needs consent, opt-out pathways, and co-created boundaries. The most powerful Brief tells a beneficiary's story with their permission and in their voice. The most powerful volunteer experience includes reciprocity: the volunteer gives something, and they also

receive something they did not earn and cannot buy. That exchange is what makes it transformative, not transactional.

Grant was careful about this in his original study. The scholarship student who spoke to the callers was a willing participant sharing his own story on his own terms. The interaction was brief and respectful. That matters. Proximity that disrespects the beneficiary is not proximity. It is extraction. And the ethical line between the two is one that every program designer needs to hold with care.

This is the ethical line that separates what we do from voluntourism. Proximity in service of mutual dignity. Not proximity in service of a corporate engagement metric.

Where This Leaves Us

The proximity effect is not a theory waiting for validation. The evidence base is deep and converging: from relational job design to contact theory, from narrative transportation to self-determination theory, from service-learning meta-analyses to neuroimaging research on dehumanization. The mechanisms are understood. The moderators are mapped. The measurement tools exist.

What is often missing is the design discipline to apply it.

Every volunteer event is a proximity opportunity. The question is whether your program is treating it as one. Whether the Brief is creating a beneficiary mental model or just covering logistics. Whether the Debrief is consolidating meaning or just filling time. Whether your design is meeting Tourists where they are and challenging Travelers to go further. Whether Guides are being given real responsibility or just recognition.

Twenty-three callers. Five minutes. $38,451 in one week. That is what happens when proximity meets effort. Your volunteer program has the same raw ingredients. The question is whether you are designing for proximity or hoping it shows up on its own.

These are design choices. And they determine whether your program produces photo ops or produces people who see the world differently and act accordingly.

That is what we are after. Not perfect programs. Programs that create the conditions for people to become more fully human. One proximity moment at a time.

Read Part 1: "Why Most Volunteer Programs Don't Change Anyone" and Part 2: "The Brief and Debrief Are Not Optional."