

# Other People's Footsteps

**E**arlier this year, a relative of mine, Sidney Mandell, tragically passed away. I had the good fortune to serve with Sidney on the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee of the Machinery Dealers National Association (MDNA). Though he started before me, his MDNA career and mine overlapped for about 20 years. As I think back on the many things I learned from him, one of his favorite phrases keeps coming to mind: "We walk in the footsteps of those who have gone before us."

What Sidney meant to convey was a sense of obligation and an appreciation for our predecessors in our jobs, our companies and our industry. Industry standards, codes of ethics and professionalism, forums for learning and discussion, training and growth that contribute to the development of our industry are all a result of the work of those who came before us. They made the necessary sacrifices to make our work easier, more organized and more advanced. Sidney felt that because we have benefitted from those prior efforts, we have a moral obligation to continue these endeavors to benefit those who will come after us.

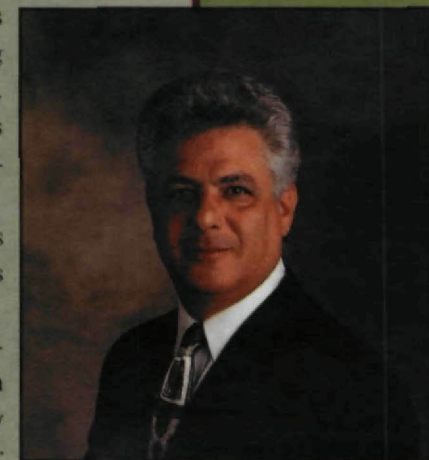
There are plenty of organizations—like MDNA, AGMA and SME—from whom we benefit. None of them are self-sustaining—they all need voluntary contributions of time, effort and thought from their memberships. Let's face it—somebody in those organizations spends hours and days in meetings to develop industry-wide standards or long hours on telephones and airplanes to make meetings successful and worthwhile. Somebody puts a lot of effort into contacting legislators to represent our interests in Congress. And all those "somebodies" are volunteers from whose work we benefit, whether we've made a contribution to the group or not.

All well and good, but most of us have more than enough to do in our lives without looking around for more tasks and responsibilities. Our usual response is something like, "Sure, maybe they made it easier, but what's in it for me?"

My observation in over 30 years of association and volunteer work is that volunteering is one of those odd paradoxes: It's a case of getting back far more than you give. The benefits to yourself, your company and your employer increase by the amount you put in—as a member, a committee chairman, a board member or a national officer.

Volunteering is a wonderful school for self-development, a way of learning skills that aren't always covered in our engineering and business courses, but still are vital to success in business.

Working within associations made up of volunteers hones your people skills. In such organizations, the first lesson is that you can't order anyone to do anything. If you want a project to succeed, you have to create the desire and convince others to be involved in the project. You have to lead, not give orders. What better skill can one cultivate in an era that demands teamwork?



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## PUBLISHER'S PAGE

Another vital skill that volunteer work teaches is time management. When you have to work one more commitment into your already busy life, you have to make some decisions about what's important and what's not; about getting started on a task sooner, rather than later. Of necessity, you become more efficient, more effective, more organized in your thoughts, your words and your work. That's a task with which many of us struggle, and there's nothing like being in charge of a volunteer project to provide the motivation for getting one's act together.

Leadership in a volunteer organization will often put you in the position of having to direct a meeting or speak in public. Some of us never get completely comfortable with these tasks, but working in a volunteer organization provides the on-the-job training to make it easier. I've seen many examples of people who begin as hesitant and awkward speakers only to blossom into confident and interesting forces behind a podium by the time their terms of office end.

Another important gift that volunteer work gives, particularly for people who become involved at a national level, is a view of the larger industry picture. Interacting with associates from different companies, from different locations, maybe from different countries, helps give you a better perspective of your company and the industry at large, helping you to develop and maintain a sense of vision and direction.

This meeting ground also helps build a valuable network of business acquaintances (and friends). These people share common interests and can offer insights into common problems, and as time goes on, you will find these relationships will become some of your most valued.

Finally, I have seen the combination of all these acquired skills result in a positive personality transformation in numerous people who take on national leadership. Their self-image and their self-esteem grew in positive ways. It sounds a bit hokey, but the fact is, working in volunteer organizations made them better people. The public speaking, the organization, the sense of self-worth and self-confidence, the leadership skills, etc., are all attributes we carry with us for the rest of our careers.

Many of you have gone to college and participated in extended education, and you know you had to pay for your education with work and coin. The cost of volunteerism should be viewed as a further investment for the opportunity to get or improve many necessary skills that aren't taught in school and refine those that are. They make you more confident and a better leader, owner, manager and employee.

What seems clear to me, as it did to Sidney, is that each of us has a responsibility to our professions and our industry to continue to build them for the next generation, not only because it's the right thing to do, but because it's good for us personally and for our businesses. Remember, we walk in the footsteps of those who have gone before us. You too should leave your own footsteps for those who will follow.

Michael Goldstein  
Publisher & Editor-in-Chief