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Are You in a Volunteer Management Silo?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

September
2017

When you want to increase your volunteer leadership skills, discover new ways of doing things, or simply rekindle your energy professionally, where do you look for education and inspiration?

Acknowledging that you may have limited time and funds for professional development, do you tend to prioritize books, conferences, even Web sites that focus on the same type of setting or services in which your volunteer corps works? For example, if you involve volunteers in a hospital, do you most often go to health care resources or, if you work in a museum, do you most often go to resources for cultural arts? But where do you go when you want to be challenged or connect to the wider volunteer management profession?

While you can learn a lot from your immediate colleagues, if you rarely venture outside your “field,” you are in a *silo*.

The problem is that a silo is a storage facility with circular walls and no windows. Its main purpose is to preserve what’s inside, not connect it to the world outside.

Evidence of Silo Mentality

Most of us would agree that the principles and even the daily tasks of effective volunteer engagement are pretty universal. Yet, those of us who publish and plan conferences for the field know from experience that it is a hard sell to attract an audience as diverse as the field itself. Let me share two recent examples.

- As you may know, I coordinated the on-site bookstore at the recent Summit on Volunteer Engagement Leadership in St. Paul, Minnesota. Many of the attendees were amazed at the selection and range of the books on display (about 35 titles, which doesn’t even scratch the surface, of course). Over and over, people would stand at the



table, look at the books (without touching them), and ask: “What do you have on working with volunteers in _____ (my specific setting)?” When I explained that we had chosen books that were relevant to many settings, they often still did not try opening any of the books. My personal favorite was being asked: “Does this risk management book apply to volunteers in _____ (my specific setting)?” I noted that the principles of risk management are about *human beings*, whether employees, clients, or volunteers, and issues like screening protocols or avoiding accidents apply to all organizations.

- The [Energize calendar of volunteer management conferences](#) actively seeks a wide variety of programs to promote. On the 21st of September, there’s an event in London, UK, sponsored by the Association of Volunteer Managers, “[Winning in Volunteer Management: How Sports & Non-Profits Can Learn Together](#).” Here’s how they describe the day:

Volunteering and Sport have the power to change lives, but do all Volunteer Managers face the same issues? This event aims to bring together presenters and delegates from sports and non-sports volunteer organisations, to see how sharing experiences, challenges and successes can be of mutual benefit to all.

I was excited and intrigued, and the editorial team of our journal, [e-Volunteerism](#), immediately contacted the organizers to try to develop some articles on what would be discussed. However, at the moment, the event is not attracting volunteer managers from human services or other sectors (*although there is still time to register and I hope some of you will!*).

I would love to be proven wrong, but unfortunately I suspect that many folks never seriously considered attending simply because they assumed they would not benefit from the program. That makes me sad at missed opportunities.

Roaming in the Volunteer World Expands Your Vision

Leaving your silo to explore the volunteer world is very much like recreational travel. You must go someplace away from the familiar to recharge your batteries, have unexpected adventures, meet new people, and come back home able to see your daily surroundings with a fresh eye. Reading a volunteer management book or spending a day in a meeting room with colleagues you have just met is not quite as broadening as a visit to the Taj Mahal, of course. But it always offers the potential to come away with new ideas.

Roger van Oech, in his wonderful book on developing creativity, [A Whack on the Side of the Head](#), includes an exercise that I have used a number of times at the start of large conferences. He suggests imagining conversations between people from very different jobs, such as a police officer and a clown, an airline pilot and an exotic dancer, etc. The test is to find topics that they might actually have in common. So I challenge you: if you spent time talking to someone who recruits and works with volunteers in sports, what issues might you share? What might the colleague teach you? What might

you teach him or her? (If you are the one *in* sports, let's partner you with a leader of volunteers in a nursing home.)

Here's my starter set of ideas:

- Many volunteer projects want more male volunteers. Sports organizations generally have more men involved. How do they do it? Do they do anything different to recruit more female volunteers? Do they need help with *that*?
- Most sports take place literally "in the field," where games are played. How do they schedule volunteers to make sure all the needed roles are filled? How do they maintain standards of care and performance remotely?
- What are the challenges when volunteers are related to the people being served? In other words, what are the dynamics when parents coach youth sports leagues, or parents volunteer in their children's classroom, or adult children run programs at their older parent's nursing home, or....? (See where this is going?)
- What are the similarities in running large events with volunteers, whether for sports, cultural exchange, or anything else drawing a crowd?

We All Need to Have a Cross-Sector Perspective

Changing the silo status quo needs everyone's energy. It begins with a genuine interest in things beyond the familiar. Purposely read an article or go to a workshop because you think it doesn't relate to you! Were you right? (Remember that someday you may change jobs but still stay in volunteer leadership, so what you don't think you can use today may become important to know later.)

Writers and presenters too often speak only from their perspective in whatever settings they have worked or studied. I frequently remind people that volunteering is not limited to the nonprofit sector and, in fact, may be even more critical to public, government agencies. In the same vein, exclusively teaching with case studies from human services ignores the innumerable volunteer activities (and equally valid examples) in animal protection, firefighting, environmentalism, sports, and so much more. Colleagues in the cultural arts especially are quite vocal about feeling left out. If you write or present, be sure you vary your vocabulary and examples.

Readers and participants, on the other hand – if they test unknown waters at all – resist having to "translate" information to their setting-specific language. Or worse, they do not ask questions during the event that would help them understand. Yet they will complain on the evaluation sheet afterwards that the material wasn't relevant to them! So *speak up*. If you are unsure how an example relates to you, ask. Or offer a different example so that others also broaden their knowledge. This is good advice online as well: if what you're viewing offers a comments section or some sort of

discussion board, use it! Every site visitor will benefit and very often the source of the material will be happy to add a response to your comment, too.

Always remember, the volunteers we lead are not one-dimensional. We may know them through a hospital, a youth sports league, or an art center, but chances are excellent that they also volunteer with other organizations – certainly other members of their families do. Doesn't this suggest we ought to see what we do as interconnected and not go back into our separate silos?

Do you have an example of something you learned about leading volunteers from an unexpected source? Please share.

Related Topics: [Leadership](#) | [Training](#) | [Volunteer Management, Overview of](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on September 1st, 2017

June Chapman, Chief exec, Citizens Advice St Albans , St albans hertfordshire England , England

I learned how important it is to make people feel that they are developing from my tennis coach! He was so positive patient and encouraging despite my clumsiness that it really motivated me.

I took this lesson and found reasons to praise my volunteers for the smallest of their achievements.

Submitted on September 1st, 2017

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, United States

Great example, June! Thanks.

- Susan

Submitted on September 1st, 2017

Jayne Cravens, Self, Forest Grove, United States

One of the best pieces of advice I ever heard you give is that, when attending a conference with multiple workshops, attend at least one that you believe has NOTHING to do with your job, your organization, etc. I've made a point of doing that - I question your wisdom every time the workshop begins, and then believe in it all anew when the workshop is over. I remember when I directed the Virtual Volunteering Project, for instance, and found myself at a volunteer management conference, in a workshop about a collaborative effort to clean up a park next to

a hospital. And I walked away with an idea for two new blogs and a whole new way of thinking about what "collaboration" really means.

A great example of silos: all the people that present on volunteer recruitment, or volunteer risk management, or involving youth volunteers, and never mention virtual volunteering, believing that belongs in its own silo - a workshop of its own, only.

Submitted on September 1st, 2017

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, United States

Glad my advice was sound, Jayne! I keep testing it myself, and -- assuming a decent presenter, of course -- always come away from a session outside my usual interests with some fresh thoughts. And *of course* I agree about virtual volunteering.

- Susan

Submitted on September 6th, 2017

Elisa Kosarin, Twenty Hats, Falls Church, VA, USA

That's so true, Susan and Jayne. One of the best conference workshops I ever attended was on developing apps for your nonprofit. It's something I knew nothing about -- and to this day, I have no immediate use for the information. But I was so impressed by the creativity of the participants (we had to break into groups and "design" apps for our organizations). The exercise taught me a lot about the needs of different volunteer programs and how they might be addressed.

Submitted on September 6th, 2017

Karen Carson, Volunteer Coordinator, NJ State Library Talking Book & Braille Center, Trenton, New Jersey, United States

Great topic, Susan! When I have presented at state-wide conferences as well as at local workshops I have encouraged participants to widen their scope of information (another way of "thinking outside the box". In hindsight I believe I have a tendency to do this because of my theater background. Sometimes asking the initial question "what did you come to learn?" or "what are you expecting to get out of this workshop that you can take back with you?" seem too direct, but the answers can be helpful to the facilitator.

Submitted on September 6th, 2017

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, United States

Thanks for posting, Karen. Those questions are certainly useful and not too direct at all. (I also like to ask: "What's a burning question you're really hoping I cover today?" -- and try to do so, but if I can't, I let them know right away.) But in some ways the point here is to help people be open to the UNexpected. So it might be fun to ask: "Did anyone come today because you were skeptical that this topic is really for you?"

-- Susan

Submitted on October 5th, 2017

Jennifer Thompson, Manager of Volunteer Services, Hometown Hospice - Broken Arrow OK, Tulsa, United States

The Silo Mentality doesn't only pertain to volunteer managers, you can see it in all professions especially when you are dealing with students. I was teaching a class in the Human Service Department on Volunteer Management. We were having trouble getting students to enroll since it was considered an elective. Majority of these students will be transferring to a 4 yr college to complete their degree in Social Work. Here is what I heard when we were discussing with student about enrolling in Volunteer Management or the Leadership Class. "Why do I need this class, I am never going to have to work with Volunteers". I guess all of them thought they would just do one on one work with clients behind closed doors, never seeing the outside work. True silo mentality. I would love to be a fly on the wall when an executive director of a organization assigns that silo Social Worker the volunteer program. We see it in our profession and we see it in others. Look around how can all of us help each other learn new professional skills and help our co-workers learn about volunteers and what an amazing job each of them do for our organization, community, country, and the world. Great article. So glad I found your website again.

Submitted on October 5th, 2017

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, United States

I am, too, Jennifer! Thanks for the pertinent post.

-- Susan

Submitted on November 22nd, 2018

Nick Levinson, New York, NY, U.S.A.

May I broaden this a bit?

I observed in my neck of the woods that many nonprofits would receive trusted periodicals about their own field and well-known mass-circulation news media. So would businesses. The

difference is that businesses would also receive periodicals about general business, organizational management, and other in-between topics. Nonprofits rarely did. As confirmation, I looked in free libraries, both general public libraries and a library specializing in the nonprofit sector, and found far fewer periodicals with content on nonprofit general management than exist for for-profit businesses. The content differences are enough to justify more nonprofit management media but the subscription income isn't forthcoming and just try imagining a newsstand carrying them.

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