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Yet Again

Fighting against Ignorance: Picking up My Sword Yet Again

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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I've been writing these Hot Topics monthly since 1997 – which means this is the 217th essay (you can still read them all in the [archive here](#))! I have tried to say something fresh every month, although some issues circle back around over and over again. One of those recurring themes has been, “Why are so many executives clueless about volunteer involvement...and therefore do stupid things that limit volunteer participation?”

The following three real examples all came to my attention in the past week, pushing me over the edge to grab my sword (my mighty keyboard) and tilt once again at prejudice and ignorance limiting volunteers. I am keeping the names of the organizations anonymous, for obvious reasons.

- A major health system in a very large city convened more than 100 representative staff members for a day of considering how they might improve service to patients. Missing from the invitation list was the director of volunteer resources or any volunteers, and (no surprise) the word “volunteer” was not mentioned once during the day.
- A major national organization, which had eliminated its national office of volunteer services despite being dependent on volunteers to provide program activities, sent a memo to its field offices requiring a new reporting system. They asked for the number of volunteers in key activities and the number of hours they worked. When challenged about the uselessness of this limited data, they did not accept other recommendations and also refused to allow the reporting of preparation time volunteers contributed prior to events. Oh, yes. The method of recordkeeping provided? Microsoft Excel[®] spreadsheets!
- A well-established nonprofit home for the aging, part of a national network, hired a new legal counsel. On her first day on the job, she *demand*ed that volunteers be removed from staffing the reception desk because this was a paid job function and was angry that the volunteer resources

manager had not complied by day 2. When her opinion was questioned, she quoted a law suit involving a for-profit business fined for involving volunteers. I was asked to give the executive director a quick tutorial on how to “respond” to the lawyer, after which he told me, “This was incredibly useful; could you speak at our next conference?”

Despite having such experiences often, I am never prepared for new examples of de-valuing volunteers. Each incident makes me angry, but there’s plenty of blame to go around.



Common Denominators

Let’s identify some of the interconnected attitudes that are insidiously at work in all these examples.

Thoughtlessness

Somehow, no matter how much lip service is given to the importance of volunteers, they never seem to make it onto the agenda when serious planning is taking place. Volunteers remain an afterthought, discussed only in terms of “How can they help?” once a staff-driven initiative is underway. This occurs because too often the volunteer resources manager is not included in senior management team meetings and therefore cannot contribute ideas at the beginning of a new project. Further, the subject of volunteers is not discussed on a regular basis in board meetings, their work is not included in organizational evaluations and assessments, and even their financial impact (costs and value of services) is relegated to footnotes.

Lack of Knowledge

Although some academics have discovered how under-researched volunteerism is, volunteer engagement is largely invisible in the degree programs claiming to educate future nonprofit managers, public administrators, and others who will end up running organizations. Lots of classroom hours on raising money; hardly any on raising friends and time donors. In addition, students graduate to become nurses, teachers, social workers, clergy, and other professions in which they will immediately be expected to interact with volunteers on a daily basis and discover they have never been taught anything about how to do this well.

Because so few people are educated about volunteer involvement, they simply extrapolate their personal experiences as a volunteer themselves to their agency decision making. (I often note that this logic is akin to saying, “I’ve *had* brain surgery, ergo I can *do* brain surgery”!) Worse, they do not even attempt to research whether any proper information exists. These days, it only takes a moment to Google something like “software to track volunteers” or “laws regarding volunteer work” to discover a great deal about best practices in volunteer management.

Especially problematic is when the CEO or ED suffers from this lack of knowledge but makes decisions *anyway* or expects the volunteer resources manager to “take care of it” without finding out if that person knows anything *either*!

Arrogance

Some of the nicest, well-meaning people are mean spirited when it comes to volunteers. There is no other way to put it. Again, despite politically-correct recognition event speeches proclaiming volunteers to be the “heart” of an organization, in practice volunteers are too often treated as interchangeable parts, moved around (even stopped from doing long-standing work) without notice or explanation, ignored in terms of their observations and opinions, and basically seen as a “nice” group of helpers to be tolerated. Even with all the recent attention to highly skilled, pro bono service, getting leaders to create assignments that truly utilize what expert volunteers have to contribute is like pulling teeth.

Even though paid staff may feel superior to volunteers (related to the lack of knowledge about who these volunteers are and what they actually are skilled in), insensitive treatment can even be couched in concern for volunteers, such as, “We could never ask volunteers to give us money when they already give us time,” or “We wouldn’t insult volunteers by evaluating their work.” Here’s the subtext of such statements:

- Volunteers are well-meaning but not necessarily skilled.
- Because our staff has degrees and licenses in our field of work, volunteers can’t possibly be as competent or dependable as employees. What? You mean volunteers have *different* credentials that expand our services rather than simply assist paid staff with the things they don’t want to do?
- They must not have any money or influence, since they are volunteering.
- Even though many volunteers live in the community where we are located or have a personal connection with our cause, we can’t imagine they have opinions or new ideas worth hearing.
- Our main vision for volunteering is to get more staff at low cost. And we don’t necessarily treat our paid staff all that well, either.
- This may be risky, so let’s not try it. Oh, you mean there may be consequences to NOT letting volunteers do something? I never thought of that.

So, What Next?

OK. I’ve vented my newest attack of frustration. Thank you for reading this far.

I have spent my entire career attempting to educate those who need to support volunteer engagement. Some things have improved, but prejudices die hard. We all see examples of the problems here every day. My questions to you are:

- Do you pick up your “sword” when something negative is done about or to volunteers? How do you “educate up”? What is your “weapon” of choice?
- What have our professional associations/networks done to educate others about volunteer management? What might they do moving forward?
- How can we involve volunteers themselves in this struggle?

Related Topics: [Employee/Volunteer Relations](#) | [Executive Director, Role of](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on May 4th, 2015

Anonymous, Souderton, PA 1, USA

I too finally took up my "sword". After 8-1/2 years in the field, all of them full of frustration at the lip service regarding volunteer involvement, I ordered a new copy of *From the Top Down* and gave it to my supervisor to read. I have asked that once he is done with the book that he pass it along to our CEO. I even got a new copy for myself to re-read to be prepared to speak to both of these people.

Re-reading the book only fueled my fire at how poorly volunteers are valued within our organization. In the past I have cited the monetary value of donated time according to the information from Independent Sector, only to have that de-valued by administration staff as an exaggeration of volunteers actual value. I have not been allowed to educate staff in how volunteers should be processed into our organization, leading to everyone doing their "own thing". I am concerned that if our state regulators ever looked closely at our volunteer program we would be cited for violations, which would not be of my making but would be my responsibility as the volunteer coordinator!

I am hopeful that once my supervisor and our CEO have read *From the Top Down* things will change for the better for our volunteers and our organization as a whole.

Submitted on May 4th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Thank you for the book purchases! :-)) I certainly hope these managers at least read some of the chapters. You and others might also want to download the *free* booklet, "[Stalking the Elusive Executive](#)," which I wrote a while ago about how to get an executive to read *From the Top Down*. Obviously I recognized the need. Good for you for attempting the education.

One caution about the [Independent Sector valuation of volunteer time](#). It is somewhat exaggerated for most frontline volunteer responsibilities. It happily makes the point, however, that volunteers also do highly skilled consulting and govern agencies as board members. Before IS, too many groups insultingly applied **minimum wage** to calculate the monetary worth of volunteers -- vastly under-valuing it. You need to make a case that the value of volunteers is way beyond mere wage replacement equivalents (see that chapter in *From the Top Down*).

Involve volunteers themselves in "making the case." They will have new ideas, I'm sure.

Good luck!

Submitted on May 4th, 2015

Anonymous, Birmingham, AL, USA

Susan,

I share your frustration with Senior Management, but I also say that we need to look in the mirror regarding the same issues. How many times do volunteer professionals look for paid staff to handle a problem, rather than recruit a volunteer to their own department? For example, spending all your time interviewing new volunteers? Why not recruit a team of Human Resource Managers in your area to volunteer to conduct interviews?

All of us do some sort of planning, whether strategic or not. How many times do we include volunteers in this planning process? Are volunteer ideas and suggestions incorporated into the final plan? If you participated and none of your ideas appeared, would you continue to volunteer?

Are changes made to benefit the organization and staff, or are they to benefit your volunteers? We are often guilty of making things simpler for everyone but the volunteer, who we are there to serve.

Submitted on May 4th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Very well put. Thanks!

Submitted on May 4th, 2015

Anonymous, Barrington, Lake

As the Director of Adult Volunteers for a school district for nearly eight years, my office is permanently being closed. (The position has been around since the '60s). The funding from my salary is being reallocated to create a new secretarial position for an administrator at our business office. I was told the schools will simply have to absorb the tasks but that ignorance you speak of is overwhelming in this case. One school has a great need for volunteers as it supports children from low-income families where the parents often do not speak English. I recruit volunteers from the other 11 schools in the district to tutor these students. They put over 70 hours each week into this high-need school. None of the volunteers are parents from that school. It would take two full-time aids to replace the volunteers they will lose. This is just one of the many programs I support. According to the value that the U.S. Department of Labor places on volunteers in Illinois, I will save my school district \$92,000 this year alone (five times the value of my income).

It is obvious I did not toot my own horn enough. As a one person department in an office isolated from my supervisor and other administrators, nobody really knows what I do. So for the rest of you who still have your jobs, make sure everybody knows what you do and who benefits from what you do. It could save your job someday.

Submitted on May 4th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

This is a sad and maddening story -- so sorry! Not just for you, but for the students, the volunteers, and the whole school system.

Is it really too late to advocate not eliminating your office (which was too small in the first place)? Stop thinking of it as "tooting your own horn." While you probably do need to practice being assertive, the real issue here is that no one -- including you -- is standing up for the volunteers and the important work they have been doing!

If you're losing your job anyway, why not call a meeting of volunteers -- and of parents and kids -- and tell them what's happening? Videotape them talking about how important these services are to education and create a presentation that can be shown at meetings with administrators, politicians, the school board, etc. Figure out who has clout and will agree with your cause. Given that the idea is to shove this responsibility on already-overworked school principals and teachers, try going to their unions for support (seriously). Maybe you need some clergy. Or, of course, find a t.v. reporter who wants to make a name for him/herself.

I am sure that you and many readers will be shocked at this advice. If you aren't up for full-out revolution (remember I am talking about swords in this Hot Topic :-o), consider SOME sort of action that moves this from an administrative act that seems to affect only you and

instead shine a light on the wider ripple effects of the decision on lots of important people. This is egregious. Why don't you think others will agree with you?

Good luck!

Submitted on May 4th, 2015

Anonymous, Barrie, Ontario, Canada

This is a wonderful article. You are so right, Susan, and you have inspired me to pick up my sword and "educate up". We have a wonderful Volunteer Program and generally volunteers are valued and included in important issues affecting their area of service. However, there are definitely areas with sub-cultures that exhibit exactly the attitude and behaviour you describe. They pay "lip service" to the importance of volunteers and it's time to show them how absolutely necessary it is to include these professional, intelligent people in their decision making.....it will only help them to be better in the end. Thank you as always, Susan, for your candid remarks. I do appreciate you.

Submitted on May 4th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

You are very welcome! I appreciate thoughtful responders to my Hot Topics (like you).

Submitted on May 5th, 2015

[Tara R.](#), Volunteer Coordinator, Petey Greene Program, Princeton, NJ, USA

Amen! I have been working in volunteer management/engagement/coordination for quite a few years and you are right on target. I recently made the switch from a very large nonprofit that really depended on volunteers (but often did not treat them as if what they did or said mattered) to a small nonprofit that also really depends on volunteers (but where we treat them with respect, listen to what they have to say, and value them endlessly for their time, effort, and commitment). It's made a world of difference for me as a professional - I think we forget sometimes that being the voiceless employee within an organization that disrespects their volunteer workforce can drain the life out of us, too!

Submitted on May 8th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Good point, Tara. If we, as the employee, are drained of energy by insensitive employers, why would we expect *volunteers* to be anything but dissatisfied? That's why fighting back is

so important -- ultimately it's a requirement of being a leader of volunteers. It's our job to monitor and improve the workplace (for everyone).

Submitted on May 5th, 2015

Cheryl Fromularo, Manager, Good Neighbor Thrift Store, Navarre, FL, USA

Amen sister!

The most difficult concept for my higher ups to grasp (and they are very smart, caring people as a group) is that the entire reason that our store is even open is due to volunteers.

Volunteers that cannot be ordered, but must be asked to give more of their time.

I am frustrated because I don't have the volunteers to staff the store on Saturdays. I want to close the store on Saturdays in the summer. My higher ups don't want to; we make money on Saturdays they say. I have explained that closing is a direct function of not having the people volunteering. Still, they insist that we make money on Saturdays.

It is a weird disconnect. Surely one or more of them realizes that we are talking about volunteers, not paid employees. That the bounty of our volunteers stretches only so far. I run the risk of insulting them when I try to explain. How do you get this point across I wonder?

I appreciate your articles- they highlight the behind the scenes issues that tend to be dismissed or ignored, and I thank you for the camaraderie!

Submitted on May 8th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

With all the "amens" here, we must be having a prayer meeting! Sometimes Heavenly intervention is definitely needed.

Cheryl, your situation demonstrates both the reality of execs who do not "get" it, but also offers a chance to take some action. For example, if they are so eager for the store to be open on Saturday, might they hire someone specifically to staff the store only on summer weekends? Paying someone permits insisting on a set schedule and ought to pay for itself by keeping the sales going. Or do your execs never want to spend money to make money?

On the other hand, can the execs help you to recruit summer volunteers? Perhaps ask board members if they would spread the word of this need in their businesses, distribute special flyers at community meetings they attend, etc.?

Finally, are you really sure no one would want to volunteer in the summer? Year-round volunteers might want the time off (deservedly), but you might develop a summer corps of people who are most available then. Have you put notices up IN the store to let customers know of the need? They might be happy to help, too. For people who have the whole summer off, your recruitment message might be: *Why fight the crowds at the beach/pool on the weekends? Go swim during the week and spend Saturdays here in air conditioning, helping us to keep this store open for shoppers.*

If you don't ask, you can't get. Good luck!

Submitted on May 14th, 2015
Anonymous, Birmingham, AL, USA

Cheryl,

Since it is "only for the summer," then ask your executives to "volunteer" for a Saturday shift to keep the store open. Send them a calendar that shows which Saturday you are taking and ask them to sign up. After all if they aren't willing to keep the store open to make the money, then you have the perfect reason to close the store.

If they do indeed take a Saturday or two, it will be such an eye-opener than you will be treated like a hero for all you do.

Submitted on May 7th, 2015
Sam Elliston , Cincinnati, OH , USA

So glad you posted this Susan. It's astonishing to me that you have to and yet, I know the fact is that even with many of us Certified and educated, organizations continue to hire someone to coordinate volunteers with no experience and pay them the least amount on the payroll. I recently finally left a position when my new boss claimed he had been a volunteer coordinator numerous times and they didn't need to be paid. I was tired of educating up.

I wish I knew the answer- you are terrific to have the conversations with CEOs and give the kind of suggestion that you did in this list; keep up the good work.

Submitted on May 8th, 2015
Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Yeah, Sam, I will never stop being stunned at the continuing lack of executive knowledge about volunteers. Hope these sorts of posts show our colleagues that they are not alone and give them "ammunition" for the battle!

Submitted on May 14th, 2015

Donna Lockhart, Ennismore, Canada

Thanks Susan for being brave again. After my 35+ years in the field, I too continue to be surprised at what is happening in the voluntary sector here in Canada. Colleagues have lost jobs during down times who engaged volunteers in a wide range of organizations from small to very large. Senior staff do continue to 'not get it' and like you I keep asking why; what can we do to reposition this profession. I decided to develop curriculum and teach volunteer engagement thinking it would make a difference. The jury is still out on this one. We thought having professional content behind our work would help..and I think it does. But we need more.

I have come to realize a couple of things. What can we learn from the field of HR and Fundraising? Both these professions struggled in their early years but have now gained the recognition they deserve. How did they do this and what could we do to raise the level of understanding about engaging volunteers?

I also think a critical fact exists: there is a pervasive culture that says "what is free is not or can't be worth much." What we pay for we seem to value more. We need to do what you have suggested in these posts. Look at both outcomes and impact of volunteer engagement and get our volunteers to help us tell that story. We do not market the changes in behaviours; or contributions to our society etc. as other professions do. Our soft sell strategies of the past are not working so new strategies are being called for. Perhaps the influx of HSV's (highly skilled volunteers) will help turn this around if we use their energies and talents (advocacy and social consciousness) to our advantage. Thanks for keeping this topic alive and interactive.

Submitted on May 27th, 2015

Lois Milne, FL, United States

Susan, thanks for 'recycling' this topic and for the challenges you have offered. In my years of experience if/when the most senior person responsible for managing volunteers is not at the 'decision table', it is difficult to educate/influence those who can move the organization towards 'enlightened management of volunteers'. Perhaps it is a challenge to be met through the "boomer generation".

Cheers

Lois Milne, CVA

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