

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Grow Volunteer-Staff Harmony: Plant New Seeds
this Spring

Grow Volunteer-Staff Harmony: Plant New Seeds this Spring

By [Betsy McFarland](#)

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In my work helping groups and organizations improve their volunteer engagement practices, I am constantly approached by frustrated directors of volunteers asking, “*How do I make staff be nice to volunteers?*”

It seems like such a crazy question! But, I am sure that many of you are nodding your heads. Like me, leaders of volunteers recognize that volunteers donating their time does not guarantee everyone will respect them.

I spent twenty years in animal protection, working with shelters and rescue organizations across the country. It’s a challenging field filled with emotionally-charged, life-and-death decisions. Most folks in the animal welfare movement are attracted to the work because of their deep love for animals. Many proclaim they like animals better than people! As a result, interpersonal relationships between staff and volunteers are frequently a struggle.

Volunteers often feel they get the cold shoulder from staff and aren’t appreciated for the time they are donating. Staff tend to see volunteers as hindrances to be tolerated rather than resources to be included. They may avoid interacting with or training volunteers. They may not think volunteers possess the skills needed and fall into the “it’s-easier-to-do-it-myself” mentality.

Growing antagonism can create an “us-versus-them” weed that invades the soil of the organization. Territories are staked, negative feelings spread, and pulling bad weeds is enough to make leaders of volunteers want to pull their hair out instead!

Sound familiar? It’s time to plant new seeds!

Planting new seeds starts with setting expectations, building inclusion, and training all workers, paid and unpaid. For staff and volunteers to develop strong, collaborative relationships, we must think,

and actively demonstrate, that *both* staff and volunteers are critically important—not mutually exclusive.

Most of the time, the issue stems back to unclear expectations and lack of support. Changing the culture of the organization to ensure paid staff value the contributions of volunteers, are trained in how to manage them, and are held accountable for their interactions. Creating a culture shift is an investment; it will pay off as volunteers are integrated and empowered, and staff begin to see the benefits of engaging volunteers. When they begin working as a true team, the organization can achieve so much more!



Try these tips for growing staff-volunteer harmony

- *Set the expectation that staff will lead volunteers.* There is nothing worse than thrusting an eager bright-eyed volunteer onto a staff member who doesn't know what they are supposed to do with him or her. Staff sometimes feel like supervising volunteers is an “add-on” or a “roadblock,” keeping them from doing direct work themselves, rather than seeing it as *part* of their work, helping them to achieve their goals. Set the right tone from the start and include “working with volunteers” or “supervising volunteers” in staff job descriptions. Additionally, be sure to cover the expectations for working with volunteers in new staff orientations and include it as part of their annual performance review process.
- *Include staff in planning for volunteers.* To help staff see the benefits and embrace working with volunteers, it's critical to involve the staff at every step. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - Have staff been involved in developing the positions volunteers will fill?
 - Have staff reviewed and provided feedback on volunteer processes?
 - Did staff have the opportunity to interview prospective volunteers
- *Provide training for staff about managing volunteers.* The vast majority of staff I have met have [never received training in how to work with or supervise volunteers](#) Many assume there are no special skills! Yet, effective volunteer engagement requires direct supervisors to know the differences and similarities between supervising paid staff and volunteer staff. We need to prepare staff for success and provide them with the skill set to be effective in their work with volunteers. Keep training manageable for you and staff by suggesting mini-trainings or brown bag lunch meetings. Look for ideas from your local association for directors of volunteers or ready-made tools such as Betty Stallings' [55-Minute Training Series](#) or Energize, Inc.'s [Everyone Ready® Online Training Program](#) (which I help develop).
- *Create an advisory committee.* Get a few staff members and volunteer representatives around the table to review how things are going, identify where improvements need to be made, and generate ideas for the future. This gives everyone a voice as well as an opportunity to begin

working together to further the organization.

- *Reward the TEAM effort.* I bet you celebrate volunteers regularly and even host a volunteer appreciation week event. Great! Let me challenge you to start recognizing the *collective accomplishments* of staff and volunteers. Did the combined work of staff and volunteers create a specific outcome? Share it and state it! Nothing builds collegiality better than seeing the results and receiving praise for a job well done. Also, consider having staff and volunteers nominate one another for awards.

Now, it's your turn. I want to hear from you!

What have you found works well for sowing the seeds of collaboration between staff and volunteers?

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Comments from Readers

Submitted on May 18th, 2018

Sheryl Luebke, JFS, Richmond, United States

After reading your column, I realize I need to go back to the drawing board on my staff training. However, one point of training that has brought some collaboration between volunteers and staff is opening monthly 1-hr. seminars to both staff and volunteers on mutually interesting topics. They sit together, they chat, they compare notes. The volunteer recognition lunch is only once a year but these seminars are planned throughout the spring and summer (somewhat better weather than fall/winter, more daylight).

Submitted on July 5th, 2018

Paulette Hammell, Volunteer Coordinator, Hospice Care Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada

Great article. Thank you!

Submitted on July 26th, 2018

Lee Miller, Library Admin, Indian Rocks Beach Library, Indian Rocks Beach, United States

This was great! I am preparing a presentation for library workers about working with volunteers and would like to use some of your tips and give you credit of course!! Is there any chance you might be interested in a Skype Q and A in August?

*Submitted on September 6th, 2018
energize, Philadelphia, United States*

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