

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Lessons Learned About Leading Volunteers From
a Volunteering Working Mom

Lessons Learned About Leading Volunteers From a Volunteering Working Mom

By [Sheri Wilensky Burke](#)

April
2019

In addition to my consulting and training work in volunteer engagement, I am a busy mom and an active volunteer in my community. While I am fortunate to have a flexible work schedule, my time is limited (like most of us these days), and I am amazed at how often in my volunteer experiences that my time is wasted. While frustrating, I recognize that these experiences are *teachable* moments.

Often when I conduct a training or deliver a presentation, I discuss what I call “the common-sense approach” to volunteer engagement. What I mean is that we often have all the information we need to successfully partner with volunteers just by thinking about our own volunteer experiences. The best way to learn the *dos* and *don'ts* of volunteer engagement is to become a volunteer and experience what they experience. I am not trying to minimize the importance of volunteer management practices – quite the opposite! My point is that having the knowledge of the processes to effectively partner with volunteers is just one component of successful volunteer engagement; the other is to understand the reality of the volunteer experience.

Here are some examples from my own experiences and the lessons I learned.

Lesson 1: Respect volunteer time

This is my number one biggest pet peeve, particularly with scheduled meetings! It's also one of the reasons cited repeatedly for why volunteers stop volunteering – they felt that their time was underutilized or wasted.

I serve on committees and teams and have attended countless meetings that were just not necessary. Before you plan a meeting, think about the objective and the outcome and if a meeting is the best way to achieve them. If there is no good reason to meet, then cancel the meeting. Or, consider if everyone involved needs to be present at that meeting. Perhaps new volunteers need to be present but veteran volunteers don't need to be, or only need to attend

part of the meeting time. Can new information be shared by e-mail? Trust me, no one will ever say I wish we had met; conversely, they will appreciate you recognizing the value of their time.

Lesson 2: Prepare volunteers for success

To maximize volunteer potential, we as volunteer coordinators need to ensure that volunteers have the information and tools needed to do their assignments to the best of their abilities, and with adequate time for them to prepare. It's not just conducting orientation and providing training. It's considering what is needed, and by when, to perform their responsibilities.



Which brings me to my next pet peeve... if a meeting is necessary then provide a *timed* agenda in advance so participants will know what is being covered and can come prepared to discuss the issues. Provide background materials *prior* to the meeting, with adequate time to prepare – not an hour before the meeting. Introduce meeting attendees or provide name tags. Start on time and end on time and stick to the time allotted for each agenda item. These tips work for orientation and trainings as well – *any time* you need to gather a group of volunteers.

Here are a few more examples from my own experiences:

If a coach has her first practice the next evening, she shouldn't have to reach out several times the day before the practice to find out what she needs to know for that first practice.

If background checks and security clearances are needed to perform a volunteer task, don't wait until two days before the task is scheduled to ask about those checks and clearances, particularly if they had already been submitted prior to the current assignment.

If the chair of a major annual event relies heavily on volunteer support, don't send out what is needed from the volunteer committee one month before the event, with the expectation that goods and services that need to be donated will be collected within the next two weeks.

Imagine how each of these scenarios made me feel as a volunteer. No one volunteers to do a bad job. It is our responsibility to ensure that volunteers are fully prepared for their assignments.

Lesson 3: Follow-up in a timely fashion

I have been a volunteer coordinator for several organizations, so I know firsthand the challenges of balancing the time needed for work responsibilities and keeping up with

communication. It is important though to establish a communication system and make sure volunteers know when they can expect a response. We often spend a great deal of time focused on formal recognition, but it's this type of informal recognition that can have the greatest impact on volunteer tenure. A return email or phone call within 24 hours is realistic. Even if you don't have the answer at that time, acknowledgement that you will follow up and when is essential.

And back to those meetings. It's important to make sure that next steps are communicated in a timely fashion and there is accountability for implementation of meeting outcomes. If someone was unable to attend, who will follow up and communicate what happened, next steps, expectations, etc.

There are many more lessons to be learned from my experiences, but you get the idea. The reality is that I continue to volunteer for some of these causes despite some of these challenges, but there are other roles that I have discontinued because of my frustrations. With more people feeling the stress of trying to do it all, you want to ensure you maximize volunteer time and not waste it. Consider your own volunteer experiences – what you liked, what you didn't – and use that information to strengthen the way you lead volunteer partnerships.

Questions:

Think about a time when you volunteered, and the experience was positive. What contributed to your commitment as a volunteer?

Think about a time when you volunteered, and the experience was not a positive one. What could have been improved?

What do you think are volunteers' biggest frustrations partnering with your organization? What could you do to minimize those frustrations?

Related Topics: [Leadership](#) | [Motivation](#) | [Preparing for Volunteers](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on April 7th, 2019

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

On the positive:

My commitment was already driving me; that's why I showed up. What kept it included having no problem finding plenty of work that needed doing, partly because leaders and most others were so hungry to fulfill organizational goals and objectives that they liked using volunteers as

effectively as they used paid people and they didn't mind my taking work; having the same essential resources that paid people had for virtually the same tasks in the same organization, such as the same channels of internal communication, especially upward; and, unless there was a good reason against it, staying open nearly 24x7 if I wanted to, say, come in after my paid job and letting me work at home if I'm willing to.

Most nonprofits actively refuse these qualities. Unlike other paid people, who are usually adamantly against relying on volunteers except as warm bodies when unavoidable, CEOs, even when paid, are ambivalent about us, because they're hungry enough but they don't know what we can do, so they refer us to their paid staff, who have no intention of having their model (you pay people what they're worth and volunteers are already paid exactly what they're worth) upset by a volunteer actually being useful without money, so the CEO rarely sees more than a few volunteers produce.

In one political campaign, where I was supposed to deliver the office keys to the candidate's home concierge each morning before she woke up, I routinely did not but instead checked her campaign schedule, called her at home when I thought she'd be awake, and met her somewhere with the keys, thereby getting more work done. I invented that procedure. No one told me I shouldn't be calling the candidate at home or I should lock up earlier. In another nonprofit, I often spent most of a weekend in the office, alone; the cost to the organization was mainly electricity and a set of keys. I once volunteered in two campaigns and two issue organizations simultaneously (88 hours/week and up); of the two candidates, one had endorsed the other's opponent; both candidates and people I reported to knew about my volunteering for the now-half-opponent because I said so. I had keys to both sets of offices, routinely worked in both at night alone, and routinely used their computers that gave me the ability to edit donor lists and data and I had some sensitive knowledge about each. Nonetheless, the volunteering, though resented by some, was accepted and successful.

On the negative, as a volunteer: I've written plenty on this. Here's one: The CEO (with any title) should never say that volunteers "save money". That's a dagger at paid people, and they urgently drive us out in ways the CEO probably won't notice. Instead, CEOs and others should expand goals in order to take advantage of having more hands and brains.

On being a volunteer leader: I did it ad hoc and with implicit permission, but, when I got away with it, it generally wasn't encouraged. One leader said, at a board meeting, "you can't ask volunteers to work." A higher leader elsewhere was annoyed at my supporting a volunteer who bugged leaders but produced public support in spades. As a leader, I'd want to know what additional work leaders want done.

You describe bad experiences that sound like chaos. That's often deliberately directed at most of the volunteers with the intention to drive them out. When you're competent and work hard for long hours, that's a triple offense.

A few institutions and CEOs get it. Getting it requires shaping a culture that requires heavy use of volunteers by most of the paid people.

Submitted on April 30th, 2019

Sheri Wilensky Burke, President, Sheri Wilensky Burke Consulting LLC, Exton/PA, United States

Thanks Nick for sharing your perspective. Yes unfortunately some CEOs do not understand the true value of engaging volunteers but I am hopeful that anyone can learn. Honestly the message needs to include what's in it for the organization - mission impact speaks volumes particularly to those in leadership roles. Now political campaigns are a whole different animal. Often campaigns are so short-lived that by the time good practices are learned, the campaign is over. How great that you showed your own initiative to improve situations.

Yes you are correct that some of my situations were chaos but I don't think the intent was to drive volunteers out. I actually think there was no intent at all which was a large part of the problem - no one had thought through the situations.

I think often it is up to us as volunteers to educate both staff and volunteer leadership about issues and give them the opportunity to improve systems and practices in place.

Thanks for sharing your thoughts.

Submitted on April 16th, 2019

Gerald (Jerry) ..., Presenter and Blogger, independent contractor, NYC, NY, United States

Sheri, I too have learned to be a better leader of volunteer engagement from my volunteer experiences. I first volunteered when I was 38. This was followed by my career change to "volunteer administration" (as we called it then) when I was 44. My volunteer experience was a contributing factor to my career change based on a career change class.

From the class I learned to focus on transferable skills; have information interviews with those in the career you are considering; and look at what you are doing during your "free time" because your second career often focuses on your passion. During my "free time" I was volunteering at a community center on a committee. I experienced both the good and the bad. Folk were not focused on the organization's mission rather on committee loyalty. There wasn't screening of volunteers because they didn't want to disenfranchise an already marginalized community. Training of volunteers wasn't consistent. Some veteran volunteers didn't want to share info with new volunteers in order protect their power. I was a good worker and mentored by leadership committee members. They welcomed my ideas on project management, my offer to coordinate volunteers for the shifts needing coverage, my assigning

volunteers to tasks and training them, etc. I learned that I enjoyed “setting up volunteers to succeed”.

After changing careers I volunteered as a friendly visitor and found it hard to follow the rules when a strong willed client asked me to do something that volunteers were not permitted to do. Yes, even as a volunteer resources manager I found it difficult to apply the rules from my “training” to a “real life” situation. The volunteer supervisor was able to help me work through the issue because she had an “open door” policy for volunteers. Volunteer engagement leaders need to be available, make time, to support volunteers.

I volunteered for Thanksgiving dinner where I’m a weekly dinner volunteer. I was moved from an assignment in the kitchen (the year before) to an assignment at the dessert tables. Desserts are donated the day of the holiday. The issue of information being shared from the first seating team to the second seating team (that I was assigned to) was not efficient. There wasn’t a system regarding the acceptance of the desserts, where to place them, cutting of cakes and pies, arranging cookies and other items, workstation space, etc. The following week I sent an e-mail to the volunteer manager and my regular kitchen supervisor. I provided some solutions and offered to serve as team captain for both shift at the upcoming Christmas dinner. The volunteer manager’s reply to my e-mail, “Only a fool would say no to such an offer!” As volunteer engagement leaders we need to be open to listening to ideas volunteers suggest.

Submitted on April 21st, 2019

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

Screening is hard to do well and I didn't bother. I put people to work in 60 seconds. Political campaigns are concerned about volunteers who really are spies for the opposition, but spies can also be put to work, because they want credibility, so keep sending them out to leaflet accompanied by a trusted leafletter and the spy won't dare throw the leaflets away but will hand them out. They do a good job? Great! Keep sending them out with trusted company as often as they want to come. Most screens are based on hiring the best person for your money, but almost all volunteers can be gainfully added at little cost, although most paid people object on principle.

On the strong-willed client vs. management: Your manager was supportive but if they're not, like if they say "we told you the policy just do that" and then blames you if the client complains, try presenting to the manager a better way of handling and a bad consequence of the client's demand and see what they say. If a manager complains about your problem report because they want to pretend to their manager that there are no problems on their watch, ask if they'd rather you not say anything; that could change the manager's mind. Example of conflict: At a paid job, a business wanted me to deliver an envelope to a government agency's management and bypass the mailroom, this in another city. The

business manager gave me a motivational speech. But delivering straight to management is not allowed, so finally I asked if I can't does he want me to bring the envelope back to his city? "No." His receptionist was listening and watching him. I said I'd "take care of it." I took it to the mailroom. I got no complaint.

Submitted on April 30th, 2019

Sheri Burke, President, Sheri Wilensky Burke Consulting LLC, Exton/PA, United States

Thanks Jerry for sharing your thoughts and your journey. I love how your own volunteer experiences turned into a career path!

I like your perspective and completely agree that "As volunteer engagement leaders we need to be open to listening to ideas volunteers suggest." Communication is key to volunteer retention and recognition. As I stated understanding volunteer engagement practices is only one piece of the puzzle - the other is to truly understand the volunteer experience and accepting feedback from our volunteers is one way to achieve that perspective.

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025