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Words and Phrases to Erase from the Lexicon of Volunteer Management

S#%& Words We Need To Stop Saying: Words and Phrases to Erase from the Lexicon of Volunteer Management

By [Rob Jackson and Erin Spink](#)

July
2019

It's widely acknowledged that words have power. It's also true that the language of volunteerism and volunteer engagement has struggled to define and differentiate itself. Just look at the number of job titles we hold – volunteer coordinator, volunteer administrator, volunteer manager, volunteer development manager, volunteer engagement manager, director of volunteers, head of volunteers – and that's before we use the word volunteering instead of volunteers! All these titles get used at different levels and with different responsibilities, meaning no consistency of terminology to describe what any of us do and are responsible for. No wonder nobody understands us!

As a profession, we need to be very clear in communicating who we are and what we do, using language as an effective influencing tool. We diminish our perceived value if we are unable to articulate the skill, potential, and impact of what we amplify, steward and create when we successfully involve. Furthermore, when we define ourselves and our work, we clarify who and what we are not, as well as what we are. This two-fold illumination gives focus to the most powerful expressions of what volunteer engagement is capable of achieving.



To that end, this Points of View presents our thoughts on the words and phrases that no longer serve the volunteer engagement profession – and, in fact, may actually hurt us. We review and present new ways to communicate about our field. Beyond the simplistic and basic, we argue that a committed and consistent change in the language used by leaders of volunteers could be transformative for us all.

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Comments from Readers

Submitted on July 5th, 2019

Anonymous, New Plymouth, Taranaki, New Zealand

Thanks and looking forward to your writing

Submitted on July 6th, 2019

energize, Philadelphia PA, United States

The full text for the above *Points of View* is on the *e-Volunteerism* website at: <https://www.e-volunteerism.com/WordsWeNeedToStopSaying>

Submitted on November 9th, 2019

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

While I couldn't afford to follow the link, the principle is good. This is a cat-and-mouse game, because we volunteers are almost universally hated by paid people in nonprofits other than the single top leaders (who are usually ambiguous about us), so any new name for us that is clean of negative connotations will acquire them soon enough and we volunteers are not organized enough to keep them clean. We wouldn't be organized enough, because once we start significantly dissenting from the organization, we likely leave.

I boosted my success in recruiting volunteers by phone when I steered clear of the "v" word. So, prospective volunteers have likely absorbed the negativity for themselves. One museum dropped the "v" word from its entire volunteer program and had great success.

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