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Seeking Funder Support for Volunteer Engagement? Assess Your Approach!

By [Betsy McFarland](#)

December
2018

Hi there! I'm Betsy McFarland. Susan J. Ellis introduced me in her [September Hot Topic](#) as one of the consultants and trainers working with Energize, Inc. Just as my fellow consultants/trainers have done in the last couple of months, I will share a little more about my expertise and a timely volunteer engagement issue that we should discuss.

Who am I and why am I part of the Energize team?

Susan has been a hero and mentor of mine for twenty years. Like so many leaders of volunteers, I fell into volunteer engagement. After moving to a new state, I started volunteering at the local animal shelter and quickly realized they needed a lot of help. It was a revolving door of volunteers—no infrastructure or support, and an organization overwhelmed in the day-to-day. I jumped in without knowing anything about volunteer engagement and just figured things out to attract more community support.

Finding [Susan](#) and other experts such as [Betty Stallings](#) was a lifesaver! I devoured every article, purchased their books, and immersed myself in everything volunteerism. I'm forever grateful for their prolific publications and abundant support of the field!

I went on to spend 18 years at The Humane Society of the United States where I spearheaded the launch of The Humane Society National Volunteer Center, the first broad-scale coordinated volunteer effort in the history of the organization, which now engages thousands of volunteers across the country. I also authored a book, [Volunteer Management for Animal Care Organizations](#), and published research on staff-volunteer relationships and worked with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. That work resulted in the creation of a research-supported [Volunteer Program Assessment](#) model that serves nonprofit volunteer programs across the U.S. and Canada.

I now co-lead [Adisa](#)—a consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations leverage and unleash talent to meet their important missions. In addition to consulting and training, I work with Energize, Inc, as a director and faculty member of the [Everyone Ready® online volunteer management training program](#).

What is my burning issue in volunteer engagement?

More than ever before, volunteer engagement holds the power to help organizations achieve their missions. Yet, a large percentage of nonprofit organizations that say they desperately need volunteer help also say they do not have the infrastructure to effectively deploy additional volunteers. As a result, poor management and lack of support are a couple of the primary reasons people stop volunteering.

At the same time, **funding specifically for volunteer engagement remains elusive**. Have you ever inquired about funding for volunteer engagement and had a funder say, “Oh, we don’t fund volunteers, we fund child advocacy (*or insert your cause here*)”?

Where’s the disconnect? And how can we increase financial support for the critical, renewable resource of volunteers?

To effectively break through this impasse, **as leaders of volunteers we need to take a good, hard look at our approach and increase the dialogue with the philanthropic community** to develop a shared understanding of just how impactful volunteers can be. We all know volunteer engagement can increase an organization’s capacity well beyond what staff alone can achieve. We now have research on our side, evident in the findings listed below:



- Organizations that fundamentally leverage volunteers and their skills to accomplish their missions are significantly more adaptable, sustainable, and capable of going to scale.¹
- Organizations that engage volunteers are equally as effective as their peers without volunteers—many at almost half the median budget.²
- A majority of high-net-worth donors who volunteer give ten times more money than non-volunteers—and most donate to the organizations in which they are involved.³
- Organizations that build innovative infrastructures to connect those who want to donate their time with high-impact opportunities that empower them to make a real difference has been shown in some cases to reap up to a \$6 return on every dollar invested when considering the financial value of volunteer involvement.⁴

Sounds great, right? So why aren't more funders jumping at the opportunity to fund us?

No grant-maker will want to fund volunteers just for the sake of increasing volunteers. Volunteers are not an end in of themselves, *they are a cost-effective strategy to assist organizations in accomplishing their missions*. So, **it's up to you to paint a clear and compelling picture of what investing in the infrastructure to expand the volunteer corps will actually accomplish**. At the end of the day, funders want to know the impact their investment will have on the causes they support—the tangible outcomes the volunteers will achieve towards the mission.

When making the case for financial support of volunteer involvement, keep the following dos and don'ts in mind:

1. **DON'T** approach funders with a budget to support the infrastructure of running a volunteer "program." Infrastructure supports your organization, not your clients or cause. Focusing on the internal needs is the biggest mistake in fundraising!
2. **DO** be specific about your vision, your strengths, and your needs to help you accomplish your mission.
3. **DON'T** say "**volunteers save us money.**" In most cases, volunteers are not actually saving the organization money as the organization could not have spent funds they didn't have. As Susan Ellis always preaches, volunteers *expand* the budget and *extend* the services of the organization. If we perpetuate the thought that volunteers save organizations money, we are also implying that, if we all had the funds we needed, volunteers would be expendable. This is not true because volunteers are more valuable than the cost involved in supporting them.
4. **DO track the outcomes of volunteer involvement.** Outcomes-based evaluation focuses on tracking and measuring the difference that volunteers make in such terms as people reached, trees planted, books distributed, improved school performance by students being tutored, health screenings conducted, legislation passed, and more. Measuring outcomes in these terms really tells the story of the vital roles that volunteers play in an organization and in the community and can truly be the tipping point in garnering funder support.

Want to learn more? I encourage you to download this free resource: [The Funder's Guide to Investing in Volunteer Engagement](#) developed by the [Leighty Foundation](#). Nonprofits and funders alike have found The Funder's Guide very helpful in gaining funder support. The Leighty Foundation also offers an [Advice for Nonprofits](#) section of their website that dives deeper into how to make a successful case to funders for volunteer engagement support.

What's been your experience when seeking support for volunteer engagement?

What approach has worked for you?

How might we as a fieldwork together to engage funders in supporting our critical work?

What's next?

In the coming months, I'll be facilitating the official launch of the new National Alliance for Volunteer Engagement which seeks to guide and inspire collective action towards embracing volunteer engagement as a key strategy for driving positive community change. Want to learn more about it? Visit <https://all4engagement.org/>

I'll be continuing to work on developing trainings for Energize's training program. This cutting-edge online program provides 40+ in-depth seminars and self-instruction guides on all kinds of volunteer engagement topics. Learn more at <https://energizeinc.com/enroll>

And I'll be working closely with each of my amazing clients who are changing the world for the better!

How to get in touch?

I'd love to hear from you! Drop me a line via the Energize [Contact Us](#) form or contact me at betsy@energizeinc.com.

¹ TCC Group, "'Positive Deviants' in Volunteerism and Service: Research Summary," <http://www.pointsoflight.org/service-enterprise-initiative/research>

² Ibid

³ Fidelity Charitable, "Fidelity®Charitable Gift Fund Volunteerism and Charitable Giving in 2009 Executive Summary"

⁴ Points of Light, "Where Should Nonprofits Use Volunteers? Everywhere." <http://www.pointsoflight.org/blog/2013/10/22/where-should-nonprofits-use-volunteers-everywhere>

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Comments from Readers

Submitted on December 24th, 2018

Eric Pizana, Community Engagement Director, Care and Share Food Bank, Colorado Springs, United States

Great article, Betsy!

I recommend for non-profits to check out The Funder's Guide to Investing in Volunteer Engagement by The Leighty Foundation: <http://www.leightyfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/FundersGuide-FINAL2-...>

Thanks!

Submitted on January 5th, 2019

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

Here's why many funders object: Most funding organizations are peopled by people who are paid: the principals make good money for whatever they do that enables them to donate to the funder (which they may control); and the managers, staff, and consultants are generally paid because the principal funders believe that they get sustainedly good work from almost anyone only when paying them for it and the people they hire agree and applied for work on that basis, and that's who judges your funding applications. They, in turn, believe that an infusion of volunteers will lower their own pay or prospects for raises and benefits for which they work hard. So they will reject volunteerism and, if that's forbidden, they'll sabotage it or, most often, neglect them so that volunteers almost never have work to do. In many nonprofits, I got the same response whether I sat silently, asked, or harassed for tasks. It made no difference if I came recommended or just walked in, because a recommender liked me and could be running the whole thing but the other people just resent my special status and politely fail to find useful tasks for me. Trying to find the responsible motivated leader is difficult, because most of the paid people will claim they're the ones to talk to and they'll let me know as soon as they can use me, which means that my asking someone else too soon might be rude. Going over a pretender's head has led to resentment and sabotage. One worker said shortly before the deadline that it's too late to fire anyone; that was their concern and volunteerism inflames the concern. I've heard of a funder asking for assurance that an applicant does not use volunteers.

Attribute volunteers' accomplishments not only to the volunteers but to the people supervising each of them, and not just the volunteer coordinator. If a volunteer plants trees, credit the number and species of trees planted to the forester. The paid forester may even earn more pay for the success of their forestry work in which a volunteer helped, if the forester was responsible for any amount of leadership or support for the volunteer's planting. Volunteers did health screening? The paid medical director should share credit. The medical director is a volunteer, too? Fine; the medical director still shares credit and if someone is above the medical director that person also shares credit. This is accepted in business: A sales rep snags a new account and gets a commission; the sales manager gets credit for that account, too; and the CEO of the whole business can tell the board of directors of the evident quality of the CEO's leadership in getting new account(s), all of this for the same single account.

Fundraisers likely have an additional concern against volunteerism, and, of course, fundraisers include many people who do not have "development" anywhere near their doors. The additional concern is that they often believe that spending money motivates seeking money. Therefore, freebies are bad. They'd say, "you get what you pay for."

Volunteers do save organizations money; they often can do work for which a salary budget is available. However, that budget can be reallocated elsewhere and the goals and objectives can be expanded proportionately to resource growth. Resources include money and people and people include volunteers. But saying that volunteers save money scares the very people who work for the person with that view, even as those listeners nod approvingly. They smell threats to their economic security from afar and they will work hard at self-protection.

Yes, focus fundraising on the goals and not on funding something for the lovely volunteers who otherwise would have nothing to do. Maybe no one writes that into a proposal, but I'm told of a CEO who wrote a memo saying we need to find something for volunteers or we'll be criticized. I was inside and didn't know about the memo and I had special exemptions letting me do my work, but most of my work was for one supervisor because almost no one else actually came up with a task for me to do and some were opposed because we should hire people. A wall was built in the office; I'm told it was built so a high executive did not have to see the volunteers.

You may need to pay for volunteer support from overhead (e.g., the electric bill for staying open late) until your success is clearly intertwined with volunteer usage. Then, approaching a funder for volunteerism may be more successful.

Submitted on January 7th, 2019

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

Hi, Nick -- Thanks for posting both to this topic and the one for January (which I wrote). Everything you say is believed by many people and I could keep you "amused" or dismayed for many hours sharing awful volunteer management stories. But I could also take you to many, many organizations that are far more experienced than you think. I began leading volunteers for a family court and soon discovered that the teens on probation usually mistrusted the court personnel. When they discovered that we had recruited a *volunteer* who truly *wanted* to spend time with them, true relationships developed and supported the teen. Money would have hurt, not helped that service. The very same thing is true for all groups providing visits, meal delivery, pet visits, troop leadership, etc., etc. The results are not "better" than what paid people do, but they may well be incredibly meaningful. Also, every single nonprofit out there was **STARTED** by revolutionary citizens who wanted to create a service, then raised money to hire staff, but continued to have volunteers on the board, at the very least. Do you think all the political action marches we've seen for all causes are important because some staff member helped to do some of the work? It's the

thousands of volunteers - active citizens -- who make the difference. Paul Revere earned his living as a silversmith (a good one). But his volunteer work as a revolutionary is what we all know and appreciate.

Submitted on January 9th, 2019

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

Absolutely: service recipients and advocacy recipients like volunteers, and the probation example is great. And that holds true for recipients who are themselves paid, provided where they're paid is somewhere else. But the paid people who are inside the organization with the volunteers are the ones who feel threatened, although they generally won't speak out to the general public against volunteers, preferring to discourage them (usually quite effectively) inside.

Which organizations are effective at using most of their volunteers is another topic. Percentagewise of nonprofits, it's not many. The few who do can be outstanding and their model replicable, but the model tends to be rejected by others.

Some situations so clearly require volunteers that even the paid people are forced to concede the necessity. No one I know of was threatened by Paul Revere's doing the alarming as a volunteer other than the British, and the British probably didn't put their concern on his being a volunteer. But I don't know of anyone who was paid to raise an alarm who might therefore have objected to the free competition. In modern political electoral campaigns, the need for volunteers is conceded for petitioning (enough qualified signatures are needed within a time period), persuasion calls and voter ID calls (to every voter in a district), and GOTV (done so close to election day that it doesn't put any paid job at risk); an argument that people should be hired pales when you need a hundred "warm bodies" when a temp agency could bankrupt the campaign, and candidates who lose tend to have no patronage to offer to the hardworking paid people, so that's when volunteers are welcome. But those same campaigns don't want the volunteers the next day to, say, prepare a legal filing.

Volunteers' work is often better. I volunteered for a campaign and handed out flyers, walking to people I thought might want a flyer. (Many do.) I watched paid people for an opponent stand in one spot in case any potential recipient should come near them, and that was a pair of paid people who stood close together. On another street, the opponent's leafletter brought a chair and sat in it, flyers in hand, with few passersby. He did not look disabled. I crossed the street repeatedly to approach people. One candidate had a duly deferential staff member with her at a table, while I, a volunteer, got fed up and went to her and said (a nearly perfect quote), "Two thirds of the time I see you, you're not talking to anyone. [John Doe (opponent)] is at the front door and he's having a great time." She moved nearby. I believe being a

volunteer doesn't change my responsibility to open my mouth. One candidate never objected to my calling her shortly after she woke up many mornings, unsolicited.

CEOs (defined by function, not nameplate) tend to be ambiguous about volunteers and refer us to the paid staff to figure out how to use us. The CEOs are as not much of a problem, but they're busy. The paid folks are our day-to-day problem.

Founders are often indeed volunteers; agreed. But they're shoved (okay, "honored") into memory lane and new volunteers are much less welcome by the paid people who replaced the founders, especially once the founders are personally gone. Or movements were begun by volunteers but the staffed organizations active later are not the founding organizations. Founders of movements are often relatively-lower-income people (with drive) and they are often not entrusted with large donations. Major gifts tend to go to organizations run by people who themselves have money and tend to save, invest, and carry insurance; and they tend to pay their staffs. Volunteers found; then get marginalized and forgotten (the big names are remembered but, I think, their having volunteered is omitted from the organizations' official biographies).

You make a very good case for the use of volunteers. But to persuade about the case we need to recognize the counterargument that, quietly but fiercely, motivates most of the competitors. We have to push back. And then we have to find a way to wage dialogue so they can't politely dodge it. One paid person used to walk out of the room whenever I, a volunteer, bought it up. But she did speak once: "I hate volunteers. Only kidding." No laughter ensued from her, her boss, or me. The CEO there who used me the most and let me have keys was herself a volunteer; some of the paid CEOs there who didn't use me much likely would have happily paid me, and that place prided itself on being a volunteer organization.

Easier said than done. I wish I knew how.

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