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Volunteers? Donors? Let's Call Them All Supporters!

By [Sheri Wilensky Burke](#)

November

2018

Hello. I'm Sheri Wilensky Burke. Susan J. Ellis introduced me in her [September Hot Topic](#) as one of the consultants and trainers working with Energize, Inc. Just as fellow consultant/trainer Rob Jackson did in [last month's Hot Topic](#), I will share a little more about my expertise and an issue that concerns me in volunteer management.

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

I've known Susan since 1997 when I was the national director of volunteer management and board development for the American Lung Association and hired her to provide training at a national conference. The rest, as they say, is history – I have been fortunate to call her my friend and mentor ever since.

Since 2011, I have been president of my own consulting and training firm, Sheri Wilensky Burke Consulting LLC in which I employ a common-sense approach to volunteer management to empower organizations to engage volunteers. My clients benefit from my 30 years of hands-on experience, working with a variety of large national non-profit organizations in volunteer engagement, board development and fundraising. I was a founding board member and president of the New York Association for Volunteer Administration (NYAVA) and I also served on the former Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA) board.

In addition to consulting and training, I've been working with Energize since January 2015 as a director and faculty member of the [Everyone Ready® online volunteer management training program](#), and some of you may recognize me from the articles I have written for [e-Volunteerism](#).

What is my burning issue in volunteer management?

Before transitioning to volunteer management, I began my career in fundraising. What always amazed me – and still does – are the silos that exist between the development and volunteer engagement departments in many organizations. The reality is that **all supporters – whether they contribute time or money – are integral to our and can help extend our impact in the community.** I have worked with organizations who couldn't see over the silo walls as well as those who saw the potential in breaking them down. After years of experience, I firmly believe that **it is critical for the volunteer engagement and development staff to be connected in their efforts.**

In one of my past positions, we spent an enormous amount of time and energy debating how to categorize “pledge” event participants (the people committing to accomplish a goal and asking their friends and family for financial donations in support of their efforts). Were they *volunteers* or were they *donors*? Were they donating their time and skills to the organization, contributing money, or simply enjoying an event? I argue, when classifying their support, what does the motivation really matter? They met our definition of a volunteer *and* a donor. The bottom line is **we should think in terms of supporters; not differentiate how they deliver that support.**



In another past role, one of my responsibilities was to recruit corporate volunteers. Early on, the development director and I realized that we needed to meet regularly since, in many instances, she was asking for funding from the same companies where I was recruiting volunteers. **We recognized the potential to secure both time and financial support if we targeted companies together that were interested in funding our mission.**

We joined forces and developed a strategy to first engage employees from those companies as volunteers so that they could participate in our mission firsthand, with the intent that the company would then be more likely to fund our programs later. We believed that the more their employees believed in our mission, the more likely we would be able to capitalize on that commitment and secure the funding to further our mission. And it worked!

Joining development and engagement forces can work in other situations too. Some companies offer financial support to match the number of hours employees volunteer. Partner with development staff to identify such companies in your community and work together to maximize matching grant dollars. **When you eliminate the distinction between time donors and financial donors, you open the possibilities to foster more supporters.**

Another way to work together is to be intentional about connecting the ask for time and the ask for money. Do volunteers know about your organization's financial needs and fundraising campaigns to support the mission? Do financial contributors know about your volunteer efforts and opportunities? **Review your donor and volunteer materials, newsletters, or social media postings to see where you can reference both time and financial support.** Consider testing a joint campaign and make giving to your organization, whether it be time or money, seamless.

Even if you aren't quite ready to integrate your volunteer and fundraising solicitations into one "ask," it's easy to add a checkbox on donor forms to find out more about volunteering, or to add information on volunteer forms about how to contribute financially. And, it's also relatively easy to make sure that you are routinely adding volunteers to your donor outreach lists and reaching out to donors about volunteer opportunities.

I often hear the argument that if volunteers are already donating their time then how can we also ask them to contribute money? Or conversely that we can't risk financial support by asking our funders to volunteer. But a report by Fidelity Charitable, [*TIME AND MONEY The Role of Volunteering in Philanthropy*](#), demonstrates that isn't true.

- 87% of volunteers surveyed *overlap* their volunteer efforts and financial support
- 50% of volunteers reported *giving more* financial support because they volunteer
- 58% of volunteers indicated that they were more likely to support a charity financially *before* volunteering. They donated to the cause and then learned ways to get involved to support the organization's mission
- 42% volunteered at a charity *before* donating to that organization, indicating that for some, volunteering can be an important way of evaluating an organization before committing to financial support

Often volunteers and contributors don't make the distinction in their support of an organization, so why do we as staff feel the need to do so?

Please share your thoughts below about combining strategies to work with all supporters, whether they give money, time, or both.

Does your organization think of donors and volunteers separately?

Can you see a window of opportunity to combine efforts?

Do you already work closely with development staff? What are the successes? ...challenges?

What's next?

I look forward to continuing my work with [Everyone Ready](#) and recently developed a new video presentation *Volunteers on the Continuum of Supporters*, available to members in the *Everyone Ready* Learning Center.

I am excited to continue consulting with my current clients to help them expand their volunteer engagement efforts, and am also available for your training and consulting needs.

How to get in touch?

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

Related Topics: [Collaboration](#) | [Fundraising](#) | [Membership Development](#) | [Preparing for Volunteers](#) | [Recruitment](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on November 11th, 2018

Elisa Kosarin, Twenty Hats, Falls Church, US

Sheri, thanks so much for this post! Volunteering is a powerful gateway into an organization, but it's not the endgame. As you point out, smart nonprofits nurture relationships — they offer volunteers the opportunity to add their support in other ways that are meaningful to them. That support might translate into financial and in-kind giving. To see this philosophy in action, readers might want to check out my post on Calgary Food Bank, which treats its volunteer development, and in-kind staff as “specialized relationship officers” with equal status. <http://twentyhats.com/how-to-feel-ok-about-volunteers-as-donors/>

Submitted on November 14th, 2018

Sheri Wilensky Burke, President, Sheri Wilensky Burke Consulting LLC, Exton, PA, US

Thanks Elisa for your comment and for sharing that information.

Submitted on November 11th, 2018

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

Your hot topic triggered some “forgotten memories”.

Initially I worked at a HIV/AIDS CBO as the Events and Volunteer Coordinator (before becoming Director of Volunteers). I answered to a Deputy Director who oversaw three departments - development, education, and volunteers. The annual auction had a strong volunteer component including volunteers contributing items/services, bidding on items the day of, and volunteering on the event.

Next I was Director of Volunteer Services at a nursing home. We were one of many facilities under the corporate/headquarters umbrella. We were removed from the development department geographically and organizationally. My supervisor, the Administrator, didn't want staff reaching out to "headquarters". That was the culture. My one interaction with headquarters was when a "donor", wanted to volunteer. This supports your point that donors might become volunteers.

I then worked at various NYC hospitals on United Hospital Fund grants that supported the start-up and launch of new and innovative volunteer programs. My relationship with some of the development departments was when the interim and final grant reports were due. Sadly, the development staff I collaborated with were small cogs in big departments at big hospitals.

I like your suggestion to test/pilot a "joint campaign". I appreciate the research from, TIME AND MONEY The Role of Volunteering in Philanthropy. Data is a valuable tool for volunteer engagement leaders. I also like the term "supporters" for those who donate time and or funds.

Finally, I volunteer Monday nights at a dinner program for LGBT+ elders and we frequently work with corporate teams that the development department collaborates with – a happy partnering. The one-day volunteers often ask about regular volunteering at the organization.

Submitted on November 14th, 2018

Sheri Wilensky Burke, President, Sheri Wilensky Burke Consulting LLC, Exton, PA, US

Thanks Jerry for sharing your thoughts and those examples. I hope my post will trigger some creative thinking about how organizations can more fully integrate their supporters in their organizations. Glad it spoke to you.

Submitted on November 28th, 2018

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

The PBS NewsHour on Tuesday, November 27th, made me think of your November Hot Topic. The title for the segment was, HOW HENRY TIMMS WAS INSPIRED TO CREATE GIVING TUESDAY.

Henry Timms:

"And we need to say to ourselves, how do we mobilize these people who want to help to do

more than simply give their money, but to give their time, to give their voice, to give their ideas?"

Here is the link to the video and the transcript,

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-henry-timms-was-inspired-to-create...>

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