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Together We Stand: Volunteers and Volunteer Resource Managers Connected

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

December
2006

December 5 is International Volunteer Day (IVD, <http://www.un.org/en/events/volunteerday/>) and, this year in the United States, the Congress of Volunteer Administrator Associations will be deliberating the future of our professional networks on that date. But this happened by coincidence, not purpose. Interestingly, International Volunteer Manager Appreciation Day (<https://volunteermanagersday.org/>) was originally created a number of years ago as an additional focus of IVD and so scheduled also for December 5th. But a majority of the new planning team (and many of the old) felt that this might confuse the public, draw attention away from the main purpose of acknowledging volunteers, and/or not give volunteer resource managers time in the limelight by themselves, so the date was changed to November 1st as of this year. And the separation is so complete that the IVMA Day site does not even mention IVD as anything of possible import to practitioners.

Both the unintentional scheduling and the purposeful separation brings up a fundamental question for me that is at the heart of the profession of volunteer management:

What exactly is the connection between ourselves as leaders of volunteers and the volunteers we lead? Ironically, this topic is almost never discussed in volunteer management literature or conferences, because it seems self-evident. Our entire reason for being is the existence of volunteers, so everything that affects them affects our profession (though it's humbling to remember that, while we hopefully make an important difference in the effectiveness of volunteers, they would be able to, and often do, function without us).

But how *does* our intimate relationship with volunteers affect both our professional practices and how we are viewed by others?

Consider how an articulated philosophy of the value of volunteers can affect what we do daily in our work:

- The more volunteers are respected and valued, the greater the appreciation for the person leading them. The paradox, therefore, is that the only way we can elevate our profession in the eyes of employers, funders, and the public is to work ceaselessly for the highest quality of volunteer engagement. We must be in-house advocates for significant volunteer work design and for inspired and creative outreach for the widest spectrum of donated skills available in our communities.
- If volunteers are limited to “helping” roles, they take a place on the lowest rungs of the organizational ladder — and where does that place their leader? We ought to also be managing top-of-the-line “consulting practices” in which the talent we recruit falls into the “much more than we could ever afford” category of assistance: the best minds and the highest skills. *There is no expertise we cannot get donated* if we are willing to recruit volunteers proactively and unapologetically from every level of society (and if we’re flexible as to when such talent can be put to use).
- Donated time is inextricably tied to donated money. Volunteers are the mainstay of all fundraising — both as donors themselves and as organizers of uncountable events and drives — so our separation from the development or fundraising profession is a continuing puzzlement. As is the unwillingness of organizations to budget appropriately for volunteer involvement. Only when we champion the concept that volunteers must be considered as a large part of *resource development*, either because of the value of their services or because of the actual cash they bring in, will our role as mobilizers of this treasure become important to our top management.
- Frontline volunteers and boardroom volunteers are more alike than different, and the principles of effective volunteer administration apply to each group. The attitude that board members are more connected, of higher stature, and wealthier than their hands-on counterparts leads to self-fulfilling prophecy and total separation. This is why we are rarely involved in the recruiting and orienting of board members (or placing volunteers into opportunities to work with, say, department heads), and also why “worker bee” volunteers are never seen as a talent pool for future board openings. Professionally, our goal should be a continuum of service donated to our agencies, with an ascending scale of available volunteer positions appealing at every stage to the best candidates.
- Our role is not to “direct” volunteers but to *enable* them. They are not “our” volunteers; we are “their” leaders.
- Organizations that treat volunteers well are much nicer places to work for as employees. We ought to see ourselves as organizational developers who model participatory decision-making,

create a climate for innovation and dedication, and make all participants feel appreciated for their contributions. So, for example, perhaps we should plan fewer volunteer recognition luncheons and more “success celebrations” in which everyone – unpaid and paid – applaud collective achievements.

So our vision of the value and status of volunteers cannot be separated from our goals as a profession. Only when we embrace this connection and articulate our vision, can we move on to deciding on a vision for our profession of leading volunteers. And, it seems to me, that *any* celebration containing the word “volunteer” is an opportunity to teach about and applaud *both* the people who give their time voluntarily and the people who make sure that contribution is as effective as it can be.

Do you agree?

What other connections do we need to consider between volunteers and our profession?

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Posted on 12 December 2006 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA

Although discussions such as this month's hot topic are important in framing who we are and the roles we all play in moving a mission forward, I'm not overly fond of analyzing what all too often keeps the non profit sector professionally segregated.

After all, we aren't alone in what we do IF we are doing our jobs. Boards, management and volunteers from all walks of life share the circle of commitment. More time should be spent underscoring shared goals, team building and forward thinking than on how we distinguish ourselves under the umbrella of one agency.

It is my sincere hope that the newly formed COVAA will take a BIG leap of faith and form a circle of commitment that does not distinguish titles but celebrates accomplishments. We are the power! WE!

Posted on 7 December 2006 by Suellen Carlson, Lutheran Social Services, Director of Volunteer Services, Jamestown NY

What an interesting topic. I have read it over several times because I'm puzzled by the concept of attempting to get some kind of recognition for my position in the company. As a member of the management team, my job is to participate in meeting the goals of the agency. The way I do that is to develop human resources - my "employees" just happen not to be paid. If I'm not valued in the company, it's because I'm not meeting either my goals or the company goals, or for some reason that I'm not taken seriously - that's my fault, not the executive team's. I place (or suggest to the CEO in the case of Board members and consultants) the very best people in whatever positions that are requested from friendly visitors to Board members to "consultants". I think we have to see ourselves as more linked to the company than to those folks who volunteer for us. I want recognition as a team

player and a member of management - not as the Volunteer Director. It doesn't matter what my position happens to be, it matters what I do with the position.

Posted on 5 Dec 2006 by Nellie Gooden, Barren County Schools, Director of Volunteers, Glasgow, Ky U.S.A.

The connection between ourselves as leaders and the volunteers themselves is simple - respect, a desire to contribute to society, and a common vision. With this alliance established the next step is to turn our vision into reality by working together as a team.

I believe creating an intimate relationship with volunteers is vital to the success of a program. Some volunteer directors believe keeping your distance and not forming friendships with volunteers is necessary. They warn of dangers in forming close relationships. I disagree with this approach to volunteer management. I feel very blessed by the friendships formed and feel because of this friendship volunteers know they play a vital role in children's educational experience and truly feel a part of the educational team.

I love the idea of a "success celebration" for volunteers as a way to show appreciation and the value of their volunteer time. When we show we value volunteers, I believe others will automatically value the work we as volunteer managers do everyday.

Posted on 5 Dec 2006 by Donna Lockhart, The RETHINK Group Consultant, Ennismore, Ontario Canada

WOW! Just when I think what more can be written about volunteer administration/management?...Susan finds a new nugget! I totally agree with your comments and how important they are to raising our profile, which we continue to struggle with.

I teach a college Certificate program in Volunteer Management and it was the first program to integrate a 'fundraising' component (in 1996) into the course outline. Participants couldn't understand why I would focus on fundraising and later on board volunteers in this course when they had involvement in neither aspect in their organizations.

In various employee roles over my career, I have done both fundraising and board development and kept trying to get managers of volunteers to connect with their counterparts as a repositioning strategy (especially to integrate their services within the organization.) When this didn't seem to happen I dropped this component. You have given me the renewed energy to examine this again and so much food for thought. Also as Director of Education for PAVR-O (Professional Administrators Volunteer Resources-Ontario, Canada) I continue along Committee Volunteers to seek new ways to deliver messages. I think you have hit on a strong positioning and marketing message> something that stares us in the face and is so logical!

Posted on 4 Dec 2006 by Marty Martin, M&M Consulting, White Lake, MI USA

How often do we under- or de-value ourselves? For some of us, it's most difficult to move from a

"doer" to a leader who delegates. How often I have attended a volunteer recognition event when no mention was made of the folks who enable these community resources. Susan, thanks for bringing the topic to the table.

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