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I'll Help with That, but Don't Ask Me to Lead It!

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Have you found that it is easier to recruit a volunteer to do frontline, hands-on work than to accept a leadership position on a board of directors, advisory council, or key committee? This is becoming a universal concern, including for professional associations of volunteer program managers.

The presidency of an organization or chairing a major event still offers status and public/professional applause, but there seem to be fewer and fewer people willing to give the time and effort necessary to fulfill these top functions. Why? And what is the future of our society if no one wants to lead?

The Negatives Might Outweigh the Positives

Consider what we ask of leadership volunteers in most situations. We expect them to:

- Give enormous amounts of time, often spent attending meetings – *lots* of long meetings, and not always productive ones.
- Mobilize a board or committee made up of other volunteers who may, in fact, have already rejected the heavy responsibility of leadership and have very different ideas of what it means to work on behalf of this group.
- Be willing to stick their necks out and take risks on behalf of the project at hand.
- Make difficult choices and then face scrutiny (and maybe criticism) from their colleagues and friends about these decisions.
- Accept legal liability.
- Defer gratification, in that it may take months or years to see the beneficial results of their work.
- In some cases, such as being an officer of a [DOVIA](#), to be leaders and also to do their own clerical work, data entry, and even bring meeting refreshments!

If we're honest about it, volunteers are right if they assume this is a major commitment. In fact, it may be more of a mystery why some volunteers agree to serve in such roles at all!

What Does a Volunteer Leader Get?

Applying basic volunteer recruitment principles, the key would be to articulate the *benefits of service* at the leadership level, and then to identify the type of people who would find satisfaction in those. For example:

- The intellectual challenge of developing and implementing strategies to help the community or association.
- Opportunities to interact with many colleagues or community leaders, possibly regionally, nationally, or even internationally.
- Being at the forefront of positive change and action.
- Doing something with long-term and lasting implications.

As important as these benefits are, many – perhaps most – prospective volunteers will *not* see them as outweighing the negatives already listed. Time is simply too precious a commodity today to sink hours into a volunteer role designed decades ago.

Strategies Worth a Try

Approach the Less Obvious Candidates

There are at least three categories of people to consider recruiting for leadership positions: those predisposed to fulfill the roles you need; those open to being convinced to fill the roles; and people who are more comfortable as followers but have leadership potential.

It is not always obvious who might be quite willing to accept your position offer because it's common to create a list of candidates based on who is already very active in the group. This approach, while certainly appropriate, is limiting and also tends to “reward” current volunteers with ever more demands. Instead, a nominating committee needs to learn more about less active members, some of whom might welcome an invitation to come and create a group more to their tastes.

What do members do outside this organization? Are they, in fact, officers of other groups or top managers in their place of work? It always surprises me that annual “dues renewal” notices do not ask even the most basic questions of renewing members, such as their professions or other affiliations. Most associations know practically nothing about their members unless these people self-select to become active.

Redesign Volunteer Leadership Roles

Regardless of the category of potential leadership recruit, it's time to examine how we can redesign volunteer leadership roles to improve our chances of getting a yes to our invitation to serve as an officer or chairperson. Here are two of my ideas – what are some of yours?

- Avoid “co-chairs,” which sometimes is the way we negotiate two reluctant leaders into accepting a role supposedly lightened by being shared. Wrong! First, the co-chairs now need

to take time to communicate and coordinate. Second, no one is really in charge and both chairs feel reluctant to overstep the other. An alternative is a leadership team of two to four volunteers who *rotate* the top position every few months. This makes it clear at any time where the buck stops, while genuinely allowing the others to have a bit less to do in the other months.

- Create designated “executive assistant” volunteer roles to support the top officers. Some people would never want to be the leader in the limelight, but are very happy to work behind the scenes. Some functions might be: handling routine telephone and e-mail exchanges that always fall to the top leader; setting up meetings and handling the logistics of invitations, rsvp’s, and refreshments; keeping track of deadlines; etc. Not only does this involve new people “on the inside” of association management, but it genuinely lessens the work load of the leadership volunteer.

There are some organizations that ought to consider *paying* someone to fulfill these support functions. This is not a negation of volunteers! Rather, it’s a recognition that someone paid for perhaps five to ten hours a week to do the routine tasks would provide continuity as volunteers rotate through positions, develop consistent systems that ultimately would save time, and free volunteers to do the work that they are most needed to do: lead with vision.

My point is that trying over and over to recruit people into serious, time-consuming roles without examining the traditional way we structure leadership positions is a dead end. People are smart enough to recognize a sacrifice when it’s offered to them! If we begin to pay attention to streamlining the work of leaders, we may discover more volunteers willing to say yes.

So, what are your ideas for changing our approach to leadership positions we need volunteers to fill?

What have you tried as a recruitment technique that’s been successful?

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Submitted on 11 December 2007 by Hodge Drake, Otterbein Retirement Living Communities, Regional Director of Development, Lebanon, Ohio USA

Consider making volunteer leadership assignments more temporal. Volunteers are more likely to respond to well-defined time periods rather than an open-ended assignment that may last literally years, ie: capital campaigns, for one. In light of this, consider shortening Board term commitments. Busy people may sincerely want to help, but just can't commit to a series of 2 or even 3, 3-year commitments.

Submitted on 16 April 2007 by Greg Grunau, Volunteer Calgary, Board member Calgary, AB Canada

Great topic to post! I've been on a steep learning curve in this area, both in my role as a pastor and as a Board member in our local volunteer centre. Some key principles that have been coming to the surface are:

- Clarify who you're looking for and talk to "target audiences". Our volunteer centre recently identified 4 key areas we wanted represented on our Board, and for the 6 available roles we now have 15 applicants.
- Use effective tools. Boardmatch is available here in Canada in several cities. It's a web-based organization that helps organizations and people who want to serve on a Board connect with each other. It also provides a basic training for new Board members.
- Develop the people you have. We don't usually spend enough time getting to know our current volunteers and members and helping them get to know themselves (especially potential leaders). By giving people entry level leadership roles, they can test out their abilities, learn and grow, and be affirmed for their leadership in a less imposing role. Leaders need to recognize leadership qualities in people and call it out of them. If we raise up a culture of leaders who find and develop other potential leaders, then we will have healthier organizations with people who are serving in the right roles for them - Board members, managers and front-line volunteers alike.

Submitted on 11 April 2007 (in response to the comment below) by Hillary Roberts, President, PLNJ Inc., Keyport, New Jersey, USA

To Ms. TaNeashia Sudds at BBBS: We hear that a lot. Our methods are often considered unconventional. Not having a preconceived notion about mission does NOT mean we don't have a plan. All too often, conventional recruitment styles see those two ideas as mutually exclusive. Need not be. My point is, we welcome people with new ideas rather than placing ONLY our ideas upon them. This does attract forward thinkers and a great many concepts that impact our funding, programs and long term volunteer recruitment strategies. We approach volunteer recruitment as an investment in volunteer energy instead of leaving unique suggestions on a dream pile. I thank you for your comments.

Submitted on 11 April 2007 (in response to the comment below) by TaNeashia, Executive Assistant, Big Brothers Big Sisters, San Diego, CA USA

I have to admit that I'm impressed with your volunteer retention numbers in light of your not having a clear direction in which you are moving. I'm looking forward to reading more hot topics in the future.

Submitted on 5 April 2007 by H. Roberts, President, PLNJ, Inc., Keyport, NJ, USA

This is a BIG topic. In my position, I invest 40 hours a month meeting volunteers, recruiting sponsors and seeking out new partnerships.

Several times a year we coordinate recruitment workshops around the state. We interview roughly 50 candidates at each workshop for volunteer leadership positions. In attendance, a few Board members and Volunteer Coordinators active in our agency conducting the interviews. After the workshop we invite all of the candidates chosen from the workshop to an agency brunch. At the brunch they meet our "field volunteers," recipient client contacts, and Board Members. It's a relaxing question-and-answer atmosphere. We stress three important aspects of our mission statement: client service/quality, agency communication and FUN.

Over the past eight years we have successfully recruited, trained and retained 5,900 state wide volunteers, due in large part to collaborative and inclusive strategies. We welcome forward thinkers, idea people and individuals who have something special to offer. We do not stand on ceremony, do not rely on old methods, and first and foremost we do not have a preconceived notion about how our mission should move forward. FLEXIBILITY attracts reliability.

At the heart of this agency is a "pay it forward" spirit. Enthusiasm, compassion and a can-do attitude count for everything. We believe that is why our Board has a waiting list and our quality of mission and volunteer corps is strong.

I have many colleagues and mentors to thank for keeping me a hard-working President of a well-respected state agency. What works for PLNJ is listening and learning FROM volunteers.

Submitted on 5 April 2007 by Don Rhodes, Advocate, Don Rhodes & Associates Limited, Omakau, Central Otago, New Zealand

I contract to an organisation that is run by a board of volunteers, although their companies are members of ours and pay a subscription for the privilege. When attempting to recruit board members, I make a point of approaching those who are the decision makers—i.e., CEO or Managing Director, etc.—and also those who are very busy people. That way we get folk who get things done, and who are best able to "influence" others at board meetings to get on with the job. I enjoyed your article, and congratulate you on well thought-out points to consider. Cheers.

Submitted on 4 April 2007 by Sue Berlove, consultant, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

I use a concept I call "Leading from Behind" to support volunteers in leadership roles. It involves providing solid support to those leaders as you coach them in the role. But a critical part of this approach is creating a committee structure that defines various functional roles, clarifies who does what and who is accountable to whom. I think that having a clear structure keeps people from becoming overly dependent on me as staff for all the support and expertise that is needed and it allows decisions to get made by a group of volunteers without leaving one person out on a limb.

It is a successful technique that I have used in event organizing, where we used a steering committee and sub committees. I supported the event chair and the steering committee and the committee members worked with others in small groups and reported back. Again, what provided security was the clear structure, which I created in advance. I recruited to this structure, and then oriented people to it so that everyone knew what was expected of them from the beginning. It is not very sexy work—creating committee structures—but I think it has helped me in many situations.

Submitted on 3 April 2007 by Dana Wiley, Ardmore, PA

Boy was this timely and helpful for me as I'm chair of our church Nominating Committee (for our Board of Trustees and currently the Search Committee for Senior Minister)—you've hit the nail on the head about the dilemmas and I found your suggestions and cautions to be quite helpful. I'm

forwarding this to all of those in our church who are in similar roles of recruitment and also leadership development as well as our ministers.

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