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Volunteers

# Breaking through the Glass Ceiling for Volunteers

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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While consulting and training, I get to observe both intentional and unintentional situations in my client organizations. All too often I notice that a disproportionate number of volunteers are assigned to staff at the lowest rungs of the organization's hierarchy. In fact, the clear message to employees is: *If you work long enough and hard enough here, one day you will be promoted to a level where you will never be asked to deal personally with a volunteer again.* (Until, of course, you become the executive director and must work with the volunteer board.) It is a rare unit supervisor, department head, or executive-level manager who routinely interacts with a volunteer to accomplish his or her professional goals.

This "glass ceiling" beyond which most hands-on volunteers never pass perpetuates the separation between them and governance volunteers. The latter operate in the rarefied atmosphere of authority, clout and respect; the former are treated as extra help to assist paid staff. No wonder few see the similarities between both sorts of volunteers or apply the same principles of management to them.

## Starting at the Top

In order to break through the glass ceiling, we first have to see it (and remember that it is transparent, so it is often ignored). Analyze where volunteers in your organization are placed right now and which staff members partner with or supervise them. How many of these employees are considered "management"? If this simple survey opens your eyes, you'll be more effective at changing the status quo.



Frequently new assignments for volunteers are created at the request of paid staff. But we will become old and gray while waiting for managers to ask us for volunteer

involvement in sophisticated and skilled ways. Instead, we need to proactively offer volunteer support.

In the last few months, I have begun to ask participants in my training sessions to brainstorm what the right volunteers might do to assist the executive director or CEO – but without including any clerical functions. What's dismaying is how hard this exercise is for many colleagues. Fact: If we, the people most informed about who volunteers are and what they can do, are unable to envision the ways they might support the executive, then we are a big part of the problem!

The process is exactly the same as creating a volunteer position in any other unit of the organization. First, you analyze the job of the executive to understand its tasks, goals, and priorities. Then, you assess what skills and preferences the executive has (or doesn't) and what kinds of skills would extend his or her abilities. Add in any wish list of new projects and you begin to frame activities for which you can recruit qualified volunteers.

What do I mean? Here are a few example volunteer roles that might aid a top-level administrator<sup>\*</sup>:

- Speechwriter, PowerPoint® slides creator, public speaking coach or any other role supporting the executive's appearances in front of an audience
- Survey writer, interviewer, focus group facilitator or any other role that helps the executive to keep a finger on the pulse of the health of the organization (and will elicit more honest responses than those given directly to the ED)
- Online researcher(s) to spend time searching for useful materials, information, or resources of all sorts, on topics as assigned
- Undercover visitor who can covertly observe and report on all sorts of things from the perspective of a client or member of the public, both in-house and at other community organizations. S/he can also attend and gather information at key public meetings such as legislative hearings.
- A foreign language tutor who can improve the exec's conversational fluency in Spanish, Vietnamese, or Martian (your choice)
- A new technology coach to demonstrate how all those electronic gizmos and apps work (Recommendation: recruit a smart 12-year-old for this one!)

The above roles may not be common, but they are all reasonable and feasible. And if you can begin to visualize these sorts of assignments for the very top of the agency, think about what volunteer support you might create for middle managers!

## Two Caveats

Once you have determined truly helpful roles for managerial-level volunteers, it is critical to focus – especially when first developing such roles – on finding truly skilled volunteers to meet the goals. Content expertise is not enough. Someone may have advanced skills in technology, marketing, or writing, but that does not necessarily mean s/he knows how to work as a consultant or can be a successful project manager. So ask about that experience, too, and be prepared to offer some training and support in teaming with an executive.

In the same vein, even if you find the perfect volunteer, you cannot assume that managers in your organization already have good skills in partnering with this type of time donor. Orient your executives to basic principles, noting especially that even highly-skilled volunteers need clear directions, deadlines, expectations and follow up. And discuss what to do if the volunteer isn't living up to those expectations.

## Everyone Wins

Set yourself a goal of at least half of all managers becoming personally engaged with a volunteer specifically assigned to them (or any percent that appeals to you). The potential is enormous from many perspectives.

The managers get real help, which means the organization gets more done. Further, the experience of meeting the kind of volunteer capable of doing managerial-level work will forever change each manager's attitudes and assumptions about all the volunteers in the organization. For the better, of course.

The paid staff who report to the managers will have role models in how to be effective in partnering with volunteers. They will learn by example, and the managers will be much better able to coach their reports in dealing with issues that may arise out of volunteer interaction.

The types of assignments under discussion here are very well suited to what today's volunteers want. Rather than being schedule-focused, these activities are goal oriented. Volunteers can achieve the end results in flexible ways, varying where they work (at the organization, in their place of employment, or at home) and when they work. The roles are either periodically active or end when the result is achieved, short-term. They are attractive assignments both to "highly skilled" or pro bono volunteers and self-directed, entrepreneurial ones. In other words, such roles will help you to recruit a diverse and interesting corps of volunteers.

Fully capable people may already be serving in your existing volunteer corps and ready to be promoted to a higher level of volunteering for the organization (only if they want to). Just as employees feel recognized by promotion, volunteers recruited for managerial-level assignments may be more than happy to assist or lead other activities throughout the organization when their initial project is completed. This might also mean a promotion to a committee of the board or even a seat on

the board of directors. Hands-on service in roles with middle and upper management can be a training ground for future organizational leaders – a proposition worth expressing to the board's nominating committee.

- *What executive or management level volunteer assignments do you currently have?*
- *Have you seen benefits to making sure volunteers are active at all levels of the organization?*
- *Do agency leaders recognize the potential of the frontline volunteer corps as a training ground for future board members?*

\*Betty Stallings and I created a whole page of executive-level volunteer assignments in our book, [Leading the Way to Successful Volunteer Involvement: Practical Tools for Busy Executives](#)

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**Submitted on 30 July 2013 by Marty O'Dell, CVA, Volunteer Program Manager, Goodwill Easter Seals Miami Valley, Dayton, OH, USA**

This is an interesting topic and perhaps the reasons we have not be jumping in with responses are as varied as the organizations for which we work.

I know that my CEO and board chair are very proud of the success of our volunteer program. But I am also very aware that in our large agency of 1000+ employees and 40+ programs there are people who still do not understand how the volunteer program works. I know this because these same people don't understand why I cannot pull 3 people out of my "volunteer closet" to assist with stuffing envelopes. (appropriate eye roll please!)

So education on all levels becomes an issue. While I would like educated, skilled volunteers doing creative tasks and working with our directors and managers I know that this may be a one office at a time task. I also know that I cannot do it without the assistance of my supervisor to open some doors, and then I need just the right volunteer.

Susan, continue to remind us to shoot for the stars, I like to put these things into my annual plan so that it is in front of me on a regular basis. Perhaps if we talk about it often enough the silence would not be so deafening.

**Submitted on 30 July 2013 by Linda Miller, Volunteer Coordinator, THE CENTERS, Cleveland, OH, US**

This is a timely topic. As I sat in a manager/supervisor's meeting last week and listened to our CEO and executive team talk about our future direction, I realized we have to realign our recruitment efforts once again. Although we have a board and a junior board and a few other volunteers with specific high level skill sets, we can do a better job starting with analyzing needs for talent at the executive levels which we have not done effectively. I don't know that it's a matter of our executive team not being willing to work with volunteers as much as it is that we have not demonstrated the

value by designing positions that will make an impact for them. Our CEO asked us to let her know our thoughts. I will address this with her and thank you for initiating this topic.

## Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on January 13th, 2015*

*Leah Jester, CASA Volunteer, CASA, Loganville, GA, United States*

This is a great area for expansion in the realm of volunteering. From the perspective of someone that has volunteered thousands of hours "stuffing envelopes"....while sitting on degrees in psychology, social services & business, I have always been frustrated at the lack of volunteer opportunities that gave me the chance to utilize my knowledge, skills and abilities. Although I did meet several very talented volunteers who were also chewing gum & stuffing envelopes!!!

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