

[News and Hot Topics](#) » New Year's Resolution for Executive Directors of Volunteer-Involving Organizations

# New Year's Resolution for Executive Directors of Volunteer-Involving Organizations

By [Betty B. Stallings](#)

January  
2018

*For the past five years, Energize President Susan J. Ellis has been successfully living with cancer. She recently experienced a setback and is taking some time off from her consulting, training, and writing responsibilities. We are pleased that longtime colleague, friend, and fellow expert in volunteer management, Betty Stallings, generously offered to guest write this month's Hot Topic.*

For the last few years leading up to my retirement, I focused on the role of the executive director and the board of directors in supporting volunteer engagement within an organization. Without a culture and support from the highest levels of an organization, all the efforts of a director of volunteer engagement and volunteers may not be very successful. To start the year 2018 right, I challenge top leaders of volunteer-involving organizations to read the following excerpt from my book, which I co-wrote with Susan J. Ellis, [Leading the Way to Successful Volunteer Involvement: Practical Tools for Busy Executives](#) and develop their own *statement of philosophy on volunteer engagement*!

Executives can have a great impact by initiating and leading a discussion throughout their organizations to create a *statement of philosophy on volunteer engagement*. It can also be called a *value* or *commitment* statement. Such a document clarifies the rationale and value of volunteers to the organization and makes the commitment to community participation clear to everyone.



Many of the most supportive executives in my 2005 study, [12 Key Actions of Volunteer Program Champions: CEOs Who Lead the Way](#), indicated that they had not thought of the significance of creating a philosophy statement regarding volunteer engagement. After thinking through its implications for enhancing the mission, they all asked for a process to create one and for some real-life examples from other organizations.

A written statement of philosophy expresses a core set of values and beliefs about volunteers for executive leadership and staff—one which does not change as people come and go. An established organizational statement about the value and role of volunteers also encourages consistent support of volunteer engagement throughout the whole organization, rather than enabling the individual philosophies and biases of every department manager and staff member to create dissonant beliefs about the value of volunteers. Once developed, the statement should be put in *writing* to ensure employees, volunteers, funders, and the public know what it is.

## What Are My Beliefs about Volunteering?

As executive director, your personal philosophy and values about volunteer involvement are integral to the ultimate success of your organization's volunteer engagement strategy. So, [the first section of my book] begins with tools for exploring your personal history of volunteering, both in being a volunteer yourself and in managing volunteers. For example, I include the questions below to give you an opportunity to explore your current assumptions about volunteers and the impact of these assumptions on your leadership in supporting a strong commitment to volunteerism. (*Note: There are no "right" answers, but the questions are worth considering and will impact your leadership of volunteer involvement.*)

- Why is volunteering important to society as a whole? Are there any negatives?
- Why is volunteering important to the individuals who volunteer? Are there any negatives?
- How do I define "volunteer"?
- Are there other words I use (or even prefer) over the word "volunteer"?
- Is there anything I feel a volunteer should not be asked to do? (Why?)
- What is the balance between my loyalty to the support of volunteers and my obligations to my organization and the clients we serve?

## Steps for Creating a Statement of Philosophy on Volunteer Engagement

Creating, reviewing or enhancing your organization's statement of philosophy can be initiated at the top or in the middle of an organization. Ultimately, the final philosophy must be embraced by the board and executive(s) to have clout in setting a standard of approach. Below are the steps I suggest for your team to think through the right philosophy for your organization. These steps are fully explained in [Leading the Way](#).

**Step 1:** With key staff, board members and other volunteers, discuss the question, "If we had all the money we want and need to support the organization's mission, would we still utilize volunteers and WHY?"

**Step 2:** Revisit the mission of your organization.

**Step 3:** Identify how you involve volunteers today in carrying out your mission.

**Step 4:** Re-examine the questions above, but this time create a vision of potentially great volunteer engagement.

**Step 5:** Identify your key stakeholders (internal and external) who do or could benefit and/or contribute to successful volunteer engagement.

**Step 6:** Based on your answers in steps 1-5, develop a draft of a statement of philosophy on volunteer engagement for review and discussion by all stakeholders.

Here is a sample philosophy statement offered in the book [From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Successful Volunteer Involvement, 3rd Edition](#):

*Our agency encourages the teamwork of employees and volunteers so that we can offer our consumers the best services possible. Volunteers contribute their unique talents, skills, and knowledge of our community to provide personalized attention to clients, enable the paid staff to concentrate on the work for which they were trained, and educate the public about our organization and its cause. (Ellis 2010, 28)*

Your work in engaging the board of directors, legislators, or others with authority over your strategic plan for involving volunteers is crucial. Your and the board's support for this plan will be the ultimate test of whether the philosophy is living-in-action throughout the organization. Executive vision, attention, enthusiasm, and desire to hold all employees, including top management, to a standard of excellence when working with volunteers will make the difference in whether volunteer contributions reach maximum potential in your organization.

- *Do you agree that an executive's personal beliefs about volunteering can make an impact on how successful volunteering is in your organization?*
- *Have you (or your ED) already developed a personal philosophy about volunteerism and, if so, how has it affected your organization?*
- *How can managers/directors of volunteer resources encourage their ED and board to develop such a statement?*

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## Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on January 12th, 2018*

*Chris Linnell, Volunteer Services Supervisor, retired, Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, IL, USA*

Betty, thank you for this great "New Year's Resolution"! I, too, am retired and was reflecting on the best successes I had in twenty years as the volunteer services supervisor at the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County. I found I did my best work when the president and the executive director were in full support of the "value and role" of volunteers in our organization. At the Forest Preserve District, we had over 900 volunteers in more than 50 positions assisting staff in a variety of programs. Our best successes occurred when the president and executive director understood that their involvement, commitment, and expertise had a direct impact on my job supporting the volunteers AND the organization. When either of us needed assistance with a project or problem, we could literally speak the same language. I knew I could count on them, and they knew they could count on me -- we had the commitment to create the best outcomes for everyone. At times it might be tough, but we were in it to make it work - TOGETHER!

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*Submitted on January 17th, 2018*  
*Betty Stallings, Pleasanton, CA, USA*

Thank you, Chris

You were one of the best in this field! Always learned from you!

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