

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Stop Volunteers from Being Their Own Worst

Enemies

Stop Volunteers from Being Their Own Worst Enemies

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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2013

As part of a conference in Canada last week I joined a site visit to an historic property with a large, volunteer-run garden estate. Several classic incidents occurred, any one of which could have become the focus of a Hot Topic essay. For example, in the Q&A session following the tour, conference attendees asked one of the property's managers about the demographic profile of current volunteers. In responding, the manager said, "We have about an equal number of men and women." To which the historical site's volunteer manager (a volunteer herself) reacted in great surprise with: "No we don't! It's about 90% women." Now it was the property manager's turn to be surprised and he even tried to press the point. "Are you sure?"

With us for the tour and Q&A was the president of the volunteer association, a very pleasant older woman, wearing her gardening clothes. She listened to the discussions (and agreed with the volunteer manager about the lopsided gender of the volunteer corps she led) and then asked to speak. "I want to tell you how wonderful the administration here is to all of the volunteers. They say thank you all the time and give us teas and lunches." The executive beamed and reiterated how "We just couldn't operate without these wonderful people who give us 17,000 hours a year and save us so much money."

Not fifteen minutes later, the president was taking us on a short tour of the gardens. We marveled at the variety of unusual plants but asked why there was no signage identifying them (as is common in other public gardens). She shook her head and said, "Oh well, we have asked to label things but keep getting turned down." When we pressed for more explanation, she finally said, "They always say no to our suggestions." You guessed it. "They" included the same executive she had just praised to the skies.

Why did she feel compelled to applaud the executive in front of him, then dismiss him as unresponsive behind his back? And why did she feel powerless to implement a reasonable idea?

So what I decided to write about this month is something we don't often discuss: how volunteers themselves are equally uneducated about their value and can contribute to the negative images so often held of volunteers.

Being a Volunteer Does Not Mean Knowing about Volunteering

Whenever I talk about tension between volunteers and paid staff, I remind people that practically no one receives formal training in how to work with volunteers. Nurses, social workers, teachers, curators – all the professionals who are most likely to come into contact with volunteers during their work life – earn advanced degrees but are totally uninformed about volunteer engagement. Then I point out, “and the same goes for volunteers.”



We all have had that tear-your-hair-out moment when we hear someone say, “I’m *just* a volunteer.” What’s so frustrating is that we continue to hear variations of that mindset all the time. Not from paid staff. From the very people who give their time and talent!

Maybe we need to educate *volunteers* about who they are and how they fit into our organizations. If we wrongly assume that volunteers “get it,” we open ourselves to potential problems of various sorts. Consider the ramifications if volunteers think the following:

- *I am “helping out” in my own way.*
- *If there was more money available, this organization would not need volunteers. So I’m being charitable to give free labor.*
- *How insulting to do a background check on me when I am donating my time!*
- *Since I don’t get paid, I can make this a lower priority in my life and change my schedule whenever I want to.*
- *As a volunteer, I have no say in how things get done around here and probably have no reason to expect to be asked for my opinion or input.*
- *Anything I do will be of some help, so I don’t really need to put much effort in.*
- *I like coming here but don’t necessarily want to do all the things they ask of me.*
- *They can’t order me around because they don’t pay me.*

Of course there are many volunteers who take pride in their service and strive for excellence. Not to mention attitudes about disaster response, when it becomes a badge of honor to be identified as a noble volunteer out on the front lines doing anything to be helpful.

To muddy the waters further, there are volunteers who hold the exact opposite opinion of their role. These are the people who want to be treated as special solely because they are not paid for their work. Those who feel that volunteering entitles them to take charge, come and go as they please, criticize the staff, and so on. These volunteers, who often spend countless hours on site (and whom we reward for their longevity, not their accomplishments), also feel more valuable than new volunteers who prefer short-term assignments or generally do things differently (and perhaps electronically).

So let's acknowledge that volunteers can also be their own worst enemies – and can act contrary to all the aspirations we have for them. They reflect what the *general public* thinks about volunteers and simply do not know any better. If challenged, they would be surprised that we react with dismay to their mindset. So let's challenge them.

Building Volunteer Self-Respect

Consciously educate prospective and current volunteers about their true worth. You can do this in various ways (and I hope you will share things you are already doing in response to this Hot Topic). My ideas include:

- Explain the historic role of volunteers in your organization. Most likely citizen activists started the whole thing in the first place (note who signed your incorporation papers, for example). What services and projects valued now were piloted by earlier volunteers? These facts not only add perspective in orienting new volunteers, they also can make your recruiting messages more attractive.
- Distinguish between the concept of “saving money” for the organization and the more accurate one of “stretching the budget.” Also spend time talking about the things that volunteers add to service that are intentionally *different* from the role of paid staff. At the same time, validate the work that employees do by making sure volunteers know the extent of staff responsibilities beyond what a volunteer may witness in only a few hours periodically.
- Urge volunteers to observe and report. They will see and hear things through their work that might not be recognized by paid staff. Stress how important this can be. But outline the way in which such feedback should be offered constructively. In fact, create an effective suggestion process, with a consistent way of reporting observations and ideas, to whom, at what times. Also define a response mechanism through which you and the volunteer making a suggestion follow up on any results.

- Emphasize that the lack of pay does not mean a lack of standards. Remind volunteers that the reason they are donating their time is to serve your clients. Service comes first. High quality service is the goal and mediocre service is unacceptable. This also means that volunteers need to ask for more training, better instructions, and the right tools to be successful, not quietly accept whatever is given to them. Conversely, the organization has the right to request volunteer compliance with goals, priorities and methods that need to evolve in response to a changing world.

We need to be alert to evidence of counter-productive thinking by volunteers. Create a zero-tolerance zone for the word “just” and for evidence of entitlement. This includes not overlooking volunteer actions that make you cringe (you know what I mean, particularly if you have a volunteer corps well over the age of 75 or under the age of 18). We cannot stop ourselves from criticizing volunteers because we prefer to be “nice” to them. Is it nice to allow someone to give their precious time ineffectively? Helping volunteers to be outstanding is really the best recognition we can offer.

Misconceptions about volunteering are inevitable, but we do not have to perpetuate them, nor tolerate low expectations from the volunteers we lead.

*How do **you** counteract negative stereotypes volunteers hold about themselves?*

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Submitted on 20 July 2013 by B. Lombardo, Vol. Coordinator, Citrus County Animal Shelter, Inverness/FL, US

I use the saying...If you are JUST a volunteer, than I am just a carbon-based life form!

Submitted on 25 June 2013 by LuAnn Heinert, CVA, Director of Volunteer Resources, Goodwill Industries of Northern Michigan, Traverse City MI, US

This Hot Topic generates a whole host of issues that could be expanded upon. One of them that I experience regularly is the challenge of maintaining a "finger on the pulse" of each volunteer's experience with our organization and the caliber of volunteer management actually being delivered. It is particularly difficult with multiple placement sites. Do any of you out there perform unannounced, spontaneous site visits to get a feel for how things are going?

Assuming we all track volunteer gifts of time, do you have incorporated into your monthly system an overview of volunteers whose hours are decreasing or who are not seemingly as engaged as they were earlier in the relationship with your organization? That can sometimes be a red flag that leadership, validation and/or affirmation at the middle manager level are lacking.

Submitted on 05 June 2013 by Cissy Hansen, Principle, The Hansen Co DBA BWC Consultants, Tucson, Az, USA

What a great topic! And I agree with most of the above comments. And yet, I hold us as professional volunteer administrators responsible for much of the problems. We need to mimic our HR training and teach our volunteers all they need to know and more about the history of volunteer support in the organization, begin with this and make it a priority in the trainings. Remind them always of their key place in the organization. And finally, and the most difficult, train the staff and management to understand and support the volunteers as unpaid staff. We as professionals in volunteer management must hold volunteers to high standards, just as you would an employee with a handbook of rules and regulations and why they are in place. And update as things change in your organization. Provide you volunteers an easy method to ask the 'why do we do and I have a concern' questions. Over the years I have had an anonymous HOTLINE number they could call with any questions or concerns. I also had a key locked secure box they could fill out a form and have any questions answered. The answer were sent to all volunteers via the newsletter or if it was an immediate change happening the answer was broadcast via email. Many volunteers have that "I am only a volunteer attitude" and it is sad. So as a fellow professional said above...it is our job to facilitate this recognition of the volunteers for their value and commitment to our Missions. Thanks to Susan for always providing a topic that is current and touches all of us!

Submitted on 06 June 2013 by Alfred Ekakoro Emaidi, Founder, Volunteers for Peace and Green Environment, Nairobi, Kenya

I have been a volunteer for more than five years, actually it needs autonomy for any volunteer to produce positively. But in some cases, they also need to be controlled by the organization, they need to work under the regulations of any organization that they volunteer with.

Submitted on 05 June 2013 by Jane Scripps, Manager of Volunteer Services, North Haven Hospice, Whangarei, New Zealand

How interesting, and how topical for me. Just this week I have enjoyed conversations about the expansion of who is volunteering at North Haven Hospice and what they come with in their CV and experience. I am interviewing people from a wider range of countries, often highly qualified and who I try to find the right kind of role for. This can depend on what they want to do and also on what will fire their zeal. My experience says that the organisation and the volunteer both need to win and it's my job to facilitate this.

Submitted on 05 June 2013 by Caroline Crowell, Director Volunteer Serv., Inland Hospital, Waterville, ME 04901, USA

This is very note worthy. How many times have I heard "I'm just a volunteer" - personally I cannot stand this and correct it everytime. They need to know how valuable they are and how important

their role is to this company. Another issue with employee vs volunteer is often the employee feels that a volunteer is positioned to take their job. How unfortunate.

Employees need to be educated in how volunteers actually make "them" shine, they have the opportunity to do their job better. It give them more time. Thanks for this article. I have been reading these for several years and get a lot from them.

Submitted on 05 June 2013 by Daniel Bassill, President, Tutor/Mentor Institute, LLC, Chicago, IL, USA

Thanks for this article. I think volunteers represent an untapped potential in the social sector, but they need to be coached and encouraged to take on greater roles, and they need to take on active "learner" roles to support their own growing involvement. We now have libraries of information on the internet that volunteers can browse to know more about the cause they serve and about ways they might help the organization they volunteer with constantly improve their impact.

The responsibility for training volunteers to take these roles can be the NPO where they volunteer, the schools and universities where they learn how to learn, and intermediaries who share a concern for the cause the NPO focuses on. One of my volunteers created this animation to show how the impact of a volunteer can grow the more he/she stays with an organization and the more he/she learns about it's mission, strategy and needs. <http://www.tutormentorexchange.net/chicagoland-volunteer-recruitment/177-volunteersleaders>

Submitted on 05 June 2013 by Bruce Summers, Principal, Summers "Engagement" Consulting, Annandale, VA, USA

Hmmm... Great Hot Topic Susan. A few related thoughts...

- Make sure each volunteer has a supervisor (who cares, and who hopefully has been provided some training/coaching on the scenarios mentioned in your article, it does not matter whether they are volunteers or employees).
- The supervisor can go a long way toward...
 - Helping to create a proactive volunteer engagement culture.
 - Helping volunteers better learn how their unique skills and talents can be matched to key needs of the organization.
 - Listening to and asking for unique insights from volunteers, then empowering them to solve problems or to develop win-win solutions (like putting name tags on the plants) that employees may not have the band-width to address.
- The supervisor can also ensure their volunteer(s) gets adequate orientation, onboarding, and job specific training.

- Hopefully the supervisor will provide to and ask for feedback from the volunteer(s) and provide situational coaching, or....
- Perhaps a great referral of the volunteer to more significant responsibilities matched to their skills, experience and expertise.

Plan B: Establish a focus group or convene a meeting with all/most of the volunteers to discuss how to improve the volunteer program (and how to mitigate potential negative stereotypes they hold about themselves).

Submitted on 05 June 2013 by Senior Volunteer Manager, San Diego/CA, US

AMEN!!! I just had a sit-down meeting with a volunteer yesterday, where we had written him up and were explaining what behavior we needed to see. I said, "we greatly appreciate your service, and we do need your service to be as effective as possible for all parties involved." There will always be some folks who think their 'doing us a favor' outweighs our needs as an organization. The more effort we place on proper education/preventative measures, and also reign in these attitudes early on, the more respect we receive from the rest of the corps. I love how you word it above - thank you!!

Submitted on 05 June 2013 by Adult Learning Manager, Tampa, Florida, US

This is a great article! it appeared at the right time. I am an advocate for a volunteer management training for volunteers. Negative stereotypes sometimes happen when volunteers perceive lack of accountability on their role and when they have grown tired about their volunteer role. When negativity creeps in, it is time to have an honest conversation with the volunteer and find out the root of the issue.

Submitted on 05 June 2013 by Chris Gleason, 4-H volunteer specialist, Iowa State University Extension & Outreach, Ames, Iowa, USA

Thanks, Susan! This is a great article for me to share with staff and volunteers to begin some conversations. I especially liked the observation that too often we reward volunteers for their longevity, not their accomplishments. My brain is afire with ideas on how to recognize volunteers and the young people they serve!

Submitted on 05 June 2013 by Donna, 'All of the above', GSUSA, Cresson, PA, USA

Thank you for sharing this. I am a Volunteer and it is what I do best. I don't need to work a paying job but I need to have a 'purpose' so volunteering is my outlet. I am a Girl Scout leader, Service Unit Manager, Registrar, Finance Coordinator, Cookie Manager, Fall Product Manager, Trainer/mentor and fill many other hats as needed. I don't feel the need to be paid, but the need to be appreciated is there. A simple thank you is the best paycheck ever! I don't have to water it, dust it, drive it to the bank - yet I can cash in on it anytime by simply recalling it. I know it didn't cost the giver anything and yet I know the giver got a rebate if it was given in sincerity. I know not every volunteer in GSUSA is

gonna have my love and dedication (if my daughter drops out I will continue), but needed to read this to realize a different way of approaching them. I need them to feel the value I do. I didn't need anyone to tell me, but realize now that others may need told so they strive for excellence too!!! Again Thank You for sharing your wisdom on this matter.

Comments from Readers

Submitted on May 18th, 2017

Anonymous, Harrison, Arkansas, USA

I totally agree with Donna. Just because you are a volunteer, doesn't mean that you should not care and love what you do. Everyone would love a volunteer like her.

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