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Why Do We Love Volunteer Satisfaction Surveys?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

June
2012

In any discussion of evaluating volunteer services, someone inevitably will point to the results of a “volunteer satisfaction survey” as ostensible evidence that things are going well. How did we arrive at this particular method of assessing success with volunteers? Do such surveys reveal anything meaningful about the value of volunteer contributions?

Determining if volunteers are satisfied is not wrong, but doing so in a vacuum without gathering other information and feedback leads to doubtful conclusions. I believe that the most important subject to evaluate is whether the effort contributed by volunteers has *a meaningful effect* on the primary work of the organization...and whether volunteers are able to see that meaning.

The Limits of Determining Satisfaction

Volunteer satisfaction surveys are based on customer or client satisfaction surveys, through which a business or organization attempts to learn how recipients of a service feel about their interaction with the service provider. It may be nice to make sure that volunteers feel positive about their work with us, but *volunteers are not our customers* – they are team members (alongside the paid staff) providing service to *others*. They are one of the organization’s *stakeholders*, insiders not outsiders.

Take a look at any volunteer satisfaction survey and critique it honestly. I’ll bet you will find questions about such things as:

- Whether the volunteer feels busy enough or likes the assignments offered
- How the paid staff treats volunteers
- Physical comfort of the work environment
- The usefulness of training provided

The tone is most likely based on a hospitality perspective: Have we been nice to you? Met your needs? Are you happy with us?

There are two potentially serious problems with these kinds of surveys.

First, assessing how well volunteers like what they are doing may be missing the point. Their satisfaction equates to... what? Success? Impact? A volunteer might *enjoy* an assigned role for all sorts of personal reasons, whether or not the work itself is of real use to anyone! This is often why some organizations find it hard to institute change if volunteers have grown accustomed to spending their time pleasantly on tasks that are no longer needed. Asking about satisfaction, therefore, may be the wrong question.



Second, traditional volunteer satisfaction surveys can seem like report cards given by volunteers to the paid staff. After all, who is implied to be at fault if the survey results show that volunteers are not treated well? Given the delicate dynamics of employee/volunteer relationships, we should not frame questions that concentrate on what happens *to* volunteers, as if the action is all one-way. This issue might be diffused if you also ask employees about their satisfaction with volunteer performance (and treatment of *them*) but, again, what does degree of satisfaction really tell us?

Assess What Volunteering Means, Not What It Feels Like

A more revealing set of questions might get volunteers to reflect on the content and purpose of their work on behalf of your mission. This will elicit information about how they are being treated by the organization, but shares responsibility with volunteers for increasing their own effectiveness. Here are some possible questions that lead to such mutual assessment:

- Are we asking you to do significant work? If you don't think so, please explain what might add meaning to your assignment.
- What do you think are the most important things you do for the recipients of our services? How do you know these are valued by our clients?
- What do you think are the most important things you do to support the paid staff?
- Did you encounter any problems this year in doing your work? Please describe briefly and explain how (if) the situations were resolved.
- Is there any need or gap in service you have noticed that might have potential for additional volunteer work (not necessarily by you)?
- Have you been given feedback or overheard comments by our clients – positive or negative – that you wish to pass on to us?

- Have we asked you for advice on anything? Have you provided any suggestions or input to us? (If not, why not?) How was this information received and/or used?
- What can we do to be more supportive to you in accomplishing your work?
- What training or access to information would help you to be more effective as a volunteer?
- In just a few sentences or phrases, please tell us how you describe our agency and its work to your friends and family.
- Do you have a talent or skill that we have never asked you to put to use in your work for us (but would be happy to do so)?

These sorts of probing questions are not conducive to easy multiple-choice check boxes and require some thought to answer. But the responses will be much more meaningful, both to help volunteers be thoughtful about the value of their time and effort, and in giving you information to improve volunteer involvement.

Focus on the Results

We can take this all a notch higher by focusing on the *results* of volunteer service. In other words, make an attempt to prove the impact or effectiveness of volunteer efforts. Such questions would have to be setting specific, of course, but here are a few generic ideas:

- What have you observed or heard from clients this year that indicates your services made a difference to them or changed their behavior or circumstances?
- Can you tell whether or not your efforts have had results? What are the indicators?
- Did you meet the goals we mutually set for your work this year? How do you know? Do you think they were the right goals?
- Did anything unexpected occur as a result of your volunteer activities (something that was important to our clients) this year?

The answers we receive to these sorts of questions have far-reaching implications. They will help to position volunteers in everyone's mind as true contributors to the essential work of the organization. This, in turn, improves volunteer/employee relations. The information can also be used in recruiting new volunteers, as it is appealing to get involved with a successful effort.

And here's the kicker: When we can demonstrate that their volunteering makes a difference, guess what? We vastly increase volunteers' *satisfaction* with their service!

- *If you disagree and like your volunteer satisfaction survey, debate me! But please explain why you feel it is a useful tool – and what else you do to assess the meaning and impact of volunteer involvement.*
- *If you agree on the limits of volunteer satisfaction surveys, can you add any arguments against them to my list?*

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Submitted on 23 August 2012 by Jay Haapala, Minnesota Children's Museum

Self-directed service: at Minnesota Children's Museum we take project proposals from volunteers who want to get involved but don't want to do one of our pre-packaged volunteer opportunities. Based on what I read, self-directed volunteerism is a growing trend (as will be people self-directing themselves to start their own competing nonprofits) and it's one that our sector needs to figure out.

Why doesn't volunteer management capture the imagination of organizational and governmental leaders? In my opinion, we promote the value of volunteerism but we hide the value of professional volunteer management. What volunteer manager wants to take credit for the great work of their volunteers? Maybe we should more often. Also, it's cheap! It's easy for an organizational leader to pay less attention to a small line-item like their volunteer program budget. It's easy for a governmental leader to encourage more people to volunteer even when the infrastructure to manage those volunteers can't handle the additional capacity. They're still in favor of volunteerism and can take credit for promoting it.

Why not combine volunteer management with HR? I believe in separating the two functions and I certainly understand the differences, but even I would have a hard time arguing against this. When I think about how, it just sounds self-preservationist and whiny.

If Reimagining Service can capture the imagination of funders and leaders, even if their model may be off-base and amount to some duplication of existing systems, more power to them. Who has a better idea? Who has a better idea and the capacity to pull it off?

Submitted on 06 June 2012 by Carrera-Leigh Spence, Miss, CRI, London, UK

How timely that you should publish this right as I'm about to launch a national Satisfaction Survey for our volunteers. I'm happy to say that my questions fall mostly into the 'Assessing What Volunteering Means' category. I will now use this article when returning to work tomorrow to help me draft up an improved survey before sending out for results.

We will be using the results alongside feedback from exit interviews, the feedback I receive from regular volunteer support meetings (and staff meetings focussing on supporting volunteers) and everyday feedback to hopefully build an accurate picture of whether our volunteer programme is succeeding in providing meaningful opportunities to our wonderful volunteer supporters.

Just a quick question before I go....do people typically ask volunteers to fill in these surveys anonymously?

Night all!

Susan replies, 07 June:

As with any decision about anonymous responses (whether from volunteers, employees, or clients), the answer is: it depends. Yes, you will probably get more honest answers if people do not have to identify themselves, so this is important if the issue you are examining is already causing tension. One method I like is to ask general questions at the start (how long have you volunteered with us? which unit are you in?) that will help you to interpret the answers with some context, and then to wait until the end of the survey to have a section marked "Optional" where you ask for the respondent's name and maybe e-mail or phone number. I also usually add checkboxes for "Is there something you would like to discuss with us privately?" and "May we contact you for additional information?" or "Would you be willing to help in implementing the results of this survey?"

Anyone else want to comment here on what you do?

Submitted on 08 June 2012 by Hillary Roberts, Pres/Founder, Blankie Depot/PLNJ, Keyport, NJ, USA

Susan, I'm not clear as to whether you are recommending surveys at the end of a volunteer assignment or during a long term opportunity but

I would recommend asking about privacy and comfort level with surveys at the beginning of a volunteer's placement, during interview, because during the course of a volunteers post and certainly during exit interviews the individual might keep the surveying of their experience in mind DURING the actual time giving rather than as an after thought on the way out. I have often found that being upfront about every aspect of an individuals volunteering is important to them. Surveys presented without knowing in advance that they are part of the organization experience can even taint perceptions about them.

I especially like the practice of handing a survey to the volunteer along with their welcome packet and guidelines. This way, volunteers can give greater thought to their answers.

Submitted on 04 June 2012 by Colleen Kelly, Executive Director, Vantage Point, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Think this truly is an interesting topic, Susan – as I agree with you. A volunteer survey often is about ensuring we are keeping our volunteers happy, when truly the volunteers' roles have to be about furthering our mission. Often that idea has been lost.

At Vantage Point we work with up to 300 External Talents (Knowledge Philanthropists) every year in more than 300 different roles. We survey the Talents currently working with us twice during the year to determine if they feel they have been able to work effectively with us to deliver our mission. This External Talent Engagement Survey and the Salaried Employee Engagement Survey are two pieces of the information the Board takes into account in my Annual Performance Review as the Executive

Director. If ALL of us believe we are delivering our mission, we are on track! If not, then it clearly is the role of the Executive Director to ensure everyone working in the organization is aligned and moving in the same direction. All the data the Board collects is meant to tell them that story: are we delivering our mission?

Submitted on 01 June 2012 by Hillary Roberts, Founder/Pres., Blankie Depot, Project Linus NJ, Inc., Keyport/NJ, USA

This is a timely topic for me to ponder, Susan. I agree that conducting volunteer entrance interviews and volunteer exist interviews should be completed by two different but involved VRM organization representatives and in each case the volunteers assessment of their own experience should be a part of both meetings; either in written form or video interview or both.

Recently, I had the pleasure of volunteering in another state. The front side of the application required filling out specific information about myself. The backside was completed during the interview; including talking points the Volunteer Manager went over with me and had me initial confirming each step. The last page was a series of questions for me to complete after their assignment was done during the exit interview. My welcome interview and exit interview, during this short-term assignment, were in fact conducted by two different people and my input was part of the entire volunteer assessment. I left the opportunity with dozens of new ideas to apply to my own volunteer recruitment practices and by taking off my own Manager hat for two weeks and enjoying the role of a volunteer field correspondent I gained valuable insight and reminders into the roles we all play.

The take away for me remains: walk the walk from time to time and volunteer elsewhere to get a fresh perspective. Volunteer satisfaction exists far beyond the printed page, far outside the office and there are dozens of unique ways to include volunteers in the overall assessment and still capture valuable teaching moments to bring to the organization at large.

Comments from Readers

Submitted on January 24th, 2017

Anonymous, Boscawen, NH, USA

Hi Susan,

I appreciate this article as I am getting ready to make up an evaluation to be approved by my supervisor. I was headed in the direction of volunteer satisfaction. Using your questions I may gather so much more truly valuable information. I'd like to use your set of questions, all 15. May I and if so how shall I credit you?

Sincerely,

Lynne

P.S. I already receive your newsletter.

Submitted on January 25th, 2017

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

So glad you like the sample questions above. You certainly may use them as you wish -- but I advise considering each of them and only asking those that truly matter to *your* organization. Also, reword them to resonate with volunteers in your setting.

No credit is required, but if you wish to say something, you are welcome to say "adapted from" this Hot Topic article, mentioning Energize, Inc., and giving the URL. Thank you!

Submitted on May 8th, 2019

Alayne Unterberger, ED, Florida Institute for Community Studies, Inc., Tampa, USA

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