

Fighting against Ignorance: Picking up My Sword Yet Again

Susan J. Ellis

I've been writing these Hot Topics monthly since 1997 – which means this is the 217th essay (you can still read them all in the [archive here](#))! I have tried to say something fresh every month, although some issues circle back around over and over again. One of those recurring themes has been, “Why are so many executives clueless about volunteer involvement...and therefore do stupid things that limit volunteer participation?”

The following three real examples all came to my attention in the past week, pushing me over the edge to grab my sword (my mighty keyboard) and tilt once again at prejudice and ignorance limiting volunteers. I am keeping the names of the organizations anonymous, for obvious reasons.

A major health system in a very large city convened more than 100 representative staff members for a day of considering how they might improve service to patients. Missing from the invitation list was the director of volunteer resources or any volunteers, and (no surprise) the word “volunteer” was not mentioned once during the day.

A major national organization, which had eliminated its national office of volunteer services despite being dependent on volunteers to provide program activities, sent a memo to its field offices requiring a new reporting system. They asked for the number of volunteers in key activities and the number of hours they worked. When challenged about the uselessness of this limited data, they did not accept other recommendations and also refused to allow the reporting of preparation time volunteers contributed prior to events. Oh, yes. The method of recordkeeping provided? Microsoft Excel[®] spreadsheets!

A well-established nonprofit home for the aging, part of a national network, hired a new legal counsel. On her first day on the job, she *demand*ed that volunteers be removed from staffing the reception desk because this was a paid job function and was angry that the volunteer resources manager had not complied by day 2. When her opinion was questioned, she quoted a law suit involving a for-profit business fined for involving volunteers. I was asked to give the executive director a quick tutorial on how to “respond” to the lawyer, after which he told me, “This was incredibly useful; could you speak at our next conference?”

Despite having such experiences often, I am never prepared for new examples of de-valuing volunteers. Each incident makes me angry, but there's plenty of blame to go around.

Common Denominators

Let's identify some of the interconnected attitudes that are insidiously at work in all these examples.

Thoughtlessness

Somehow, no matter how much lip service is given to the importance of volunteers, they never seem to make it onto the agenda when serious planning is taking place. Volunteers remain an afterthought, discussed only in terms of "How can they help?" once a staff-driven initiative is underway. This occurs because too often the volunteer resources manager is not included in senior management team meetings and therefore cannot contribute ideas at the beginning of a new project. Further, the subject of volunteers is not discussed on a regular basis in board meetings, their work is not included in organizational evaluations and assessments, and even their financial impact (costs and value of services) is relegated to footnotes.

Lack of Knowledge

Although some academics have discovered how under-researched volunteerism is, volunteer engagement is largely invisible in the degree programs claiming to educate future nonprofit managers, public administrators, and others who will end up running organizations. Lots of classroom hours on raising money; hardly any on raising friends and time donors. In addition, students graduate to become nurses, teachers, social workers, clergy, and other professions in which they will immediately be expected to interact with volunteers on a daily basis and discover they have never been taught anything about how to do this well.

Because so few people are educated about volunteer involvement, they simply extrapolate their personal experiences *as* a volunteer themselves to their agency decision making. (I often note that this logic is akin to saying, "I've *had* brain surgery, ergo I can *do* brain surgery"!) Worse, they do not even attempt to research whether any proper information exists. These days, it only takes a moment to Google something like "software to track volunteers" or "laws regarding volunteer work" to discover a great deal about best practices in volunteer management.

Especially problematic is when the CEO or ED suffers from this lack of knowledge but makes decisions *anyway* or expects the volunteer resources manager to "take care of it" without finding out if that person knows anything *either!*

Arrogance

Some of the nicest, well-meaning people are mean spirited when it comes to volunteers. There is no other way to put it. Again, despite politically-correct recognition event speeches proclaiming volunteers to be the "heart" of an organization, in practice volunteers are too often treated as interchangeable parts, moved around (even stopped from doing long-standing work) without notice or explanation, ignored in terms of their observations and opinions, and basically seen as a "nice" group of helpers to be tolerated. Even with all the recent attention to highly skilled, pro bono service, getting leaders to create assignments that truly utilize what expert volunteers have to contribute is like pulling teeth.

Even though paid staff may feel superior to volunteers (related to the lack of knowledge about who these volunteers are and what they actually are skilled in), insensitive treatment can even be couched in concern for volunteers, such as, "We could never ask volunteers to give us money when they already give us time," or "We wouldn't insult volunteers by evaluating their work." Here's the subtext of such statements:

Volunteers are well-meaning but not necessarily skilled.

Because our staff has degrees and licenses in our field of work, volunteers can't possibly be as competent or dependable as employees. What? You mean volunteers have *different* credentials that expand our services rather than simply assist paid staff with the things they don't want to do?

They must not have any money or influence, since they are volunteering.

Even though many volunteers live in the community where we are located or have a personal connection with our cause, we can't imagine they have opinions or new ideas worth hearing.

Our main vision for volunteering is to get more staff at low cost. And we don't necessarily treat our paid staff all that well, either.

This may be risky, so let's not try it. Oh, you mean there may be consequences to NOT letting volunteers do something? I never thought of that.

So, What Next?

OK. I've vented my newest attack of frustration. Thank you for reading this far.

I have spent my entire career attempting to educate those who need to support volunteer engagement. Some things have improved, but prejudices die hard. We all see examples of the problems here every day. My questions to you are:

Do *you* pick up your "sword" when something negative is done about or to volunteers? How do you "educate up"? What is your "weapon" of choice?

What have our professional associations/networks done to educate others about volunteer management? What might they do moving forward?

How can we involve volunteers themselves in this struggle?

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. (www.energizeinc.com), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the monthly Hot Topic essay for Aug 1997 and has been reposted with permission from (https://www.energizeinc.com/hot-topics/2015/may?utm_source=May+2015+Update&utm_campaign=UA-392700-2&utm_medium=email)