

# I'll Never Understand Why Executives Still Don't Understand

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Susan J. Ellis

I was searching for something in the [archives of my Hot Topics](#) and found myself amazed that I have written 172 of these since 1997! I've commented on many different events, initiatives, successes, failures, and puzzlements in our volunteer field. But one theme keeps recurring: lack of enthusiasm about and true support for volunteer contributions from those in charge of organizations.

I will never understand the inability of executive-level decision makers to "get" how important volunteers are to the health and success of their organizations – or how important volunteers *could* be if approached in a strategic and creative way.

It is inexplicable to me that the subject of volunteering is simply omitted from the board room, long-range planning, funding applications, financial accounting, and anything else perceived as critical organization management. Even worse, volunteer involvement is often handled at a level far below the top – as a sub-unit of the department willing to house it (not necessarily the most logical one).

In many ways, this is the vital windmill at which I have been tilting throughout my career. Yet the call for attention needs to be repeated again and again. Why does nothing seem to change?

## Powerful Sound Bites

Those readers familiar with my writing, especially [From the Top Down](#), will not find anything new here as I've said it all before. But I want to highlight the key points in an effort to give each of you some "sound bites" or "elevator speeches" to use in your own advocacy for our work. Unless we are united in how we articulate our vision, we cannot expect executives to come up with these points themselves.

So, in the hope that these bullet points will be useful, here is the most succinct set of arguments I can make for not ignoring volunteer involvement. And then I want *you* to add some more of your own.

- **Volunteers are an essential part of an organization's network of supporters.**  
Every organization needs *friends* in the community – people who feel a sustained relationship with the cause and the mission, which they express in different ways over many years – even over a lifetime. These supporters move in and out of different roles at different points in their lives (sometimes doing several at once): they give money, time, and talent; they provide access to information, valuable contacts, and in-kind goods and services; they spread your message and educate the public.

- **Volunteers are time donors with limitless potential for contributing energy and a world of skills. But that potential will not materialize without a strategic plan to attract and engage the *right* volunteers for each organization.**

When hiring new employees, organizations spend time and energy combing the community, expecting to find the most qualified applicants. That same community is also a treasure trove of prospective skilled *volunteers*. Expect to find them by also putting some effort into that search.

- **Volunteers expand the *brain* of an organization (as well as its heart).**

This thought was expressed by a colleague in Perth, Australia last month after attending one of my workshops there. He realized that he had understood the “hearts and hands” gifts volunteers offer, but had not before recognized the addition of greater skills and perspectives volunteers bring to the thinking of an organization (if we welcome them to do so).

- **Even though the staff is highly educated and well trained, it cannot be assumed that they have ever been taught anything about working with volunteers.**

What’s my vision of utopia? That someday curriculum explaining the role of volunteering in society, the scope of citizen participation, and the basic principles of effective volunteer management is taught widely – at all levels of education and especially within the professional training of any occupation that will, upon graduation, definitely be expected to interface with volunteers on the job (examples: nurses, teachers, social workers, clergy).

- **Poor volunteer management costs more money (and effort) than doing it right in the first place.**

Signing on anyone who steps forward to “help” in vague ways, without clear objectives and coordination, simply wastes time – for the paid staff and for the volunteers. Who can afford to waste time? Worse, it can hamper achieving what really needs to be done for your clients or the public, making the engagement of volunteers a drain on resources rather than value-added.

- **It is not self-evident that “having” volunteers means an organization is supported by the community – and adding “more” volunteers is not necessarily a meaningful objective.**

Some volunteers are loyal to the clients or the cause, not necessarily to the organization. Executives ought to find out what volunteers are really thinking and saying in public. And, in some cases, focusing on *fewer* volunteers who are truly committed (and qualified) might be better for everyone.

- **When we value something, we plan for, fund, oversee, and evaluate it. So if we do not do these things for volunteer involvement, what’s the message?**

When we value something, we designate someone to be responsible for it (someone with the skills and interest to do it well). Organizations should have someone in charge of volunteer involvement, not assign it as a sideline activity for someone who really isn’t interested or qualified.

- **“Volunteer” does not mean low-level (no matter what word you use).**  
Board members are volunteers, as are most advisory councils, student interns, pro bono consultants, and loaned executives! They may describe themselves with different terminology, but the common denominator is that a wide range of people contribute their expertise and time without going on the organization’s payroll. Surgeons volunteer vacation time to perform operations in poor countries. Never assume a “volunteer” is unskilled.
- **It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes an entire organization to support volunteers.**  
Even with a highly-competent director of volunteer involvement, every single staff member shares responsibility for daily interaction with volunteers, partnering to accomplish goals. And the expectation for this is set *by top management*. How senior administrators demonstrate their commitment to involving volunteers determines how most staff will perceive it.
- **The key to unlocking the opportunities presented by volunteers is to pay attention.**  
As with any other management function, the success of volunteer involvement is directly proportional to the amount of time spent thinking about, reaching the right decisions on, monitoring, and improving it. Volunteers should be on the executive agenda for the same reason that client services, money, and employees are.

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