

Part-time Volunteer Management Means Equally Limited Volunteer Involvement

Susan J. Ellis

It is hardly news that the majority of people who lead volunteer involvement are expected to do so part-time. This means they may be full-time employees, but they are tasked with one or more major responsibilities in addition to volunteer management. This was the situation 40 years ago when I started in the field; unfortunately, it seems to be getting worse rather than better.

The struggle to devote undivided attention to volunteers is worldwide. The problem is being discussed across North America and in every country I've visited this year, including last month's European Conference on Volunteering. Although there is a general calling for greater engagement of volunteers – especially by politicians – we are moving backwards in terms of allocating resources for staff leadership of volunteers. It is getting close to a professional crisis.

Why this Is Happening

There is a serious disconnect between an organization's desire to engage volunteers and an understanding of how much expertise and *time* are needed to assure success. Even in the best economy, what a volunteer services manager actually does is only vaguely understood by colleagues and executives – and rarely valued. So when budgets are cut back, this position is quickly on the list of less "essential" staff, more of a luxury than a necessity.

This attitude was illustrated for me years ago when I was scheduled to speak at a volunteer recognition luncheon for a large hospital. About a week before the event, the DVS called me to say that she had been laid off in a general staff cutting action, but had been forbidden from telling anyone of her imminent departure. During the luncheon, she was expected to be bright and cheerful in front of the volunteers, although the hospital had not yet decided on who would be assigned the responsibility for the volunteer corps! I called her boss to express my concern, she responded with some irritation: "I don't understand why you think there is a problem; clearly we *have* the volunteers already." (And clearly, I decided not to speak at this event!) It goes without saying that they laid off no one in their HR department, as they did not apply the same logic to paid staff.

Executives frequently draw wrong conclusions from too few facts. Here are some examples of what they think:

- *Because most volunteers only work a few hours a week or less, managing a workforce of even several hundred "sporadic" volunteers is seen mainly as a scheduling task, not genuine leadership.* Of course, the fact that every one of the several hundred volunteers needs to be brought on board, oriented, trained, kept motivated, thanked, evaluated, and more is overlooked. Not to mention that the person in charge of volunteers cannot decide simply to do this work on Thursdays. *Because* they give several hours on widely varying schedules,

volunteers must be attended to when *they* are on duty. The volunteer resources manager works in a fishbowl of constant availability.

- *Volunteers are thought of as "interchangeable parts," who can be welcomed and assigned in a uniform manner.* Not so. Although most organizations want a diverse volunteer force, the effort needed to create effective roles for individual volunteers (teenagers, people over 80, graduate students, corporate employees serving in groups, etc., etc.) is simply underestimated.
- *Volunteer resources managers are perceived as support staff, not strategic planning staff.* This misconception stems from seeing the volunteer office as on stand-by to "help" when asked (which, in turn, means that even requesting volunteers takes up limited staff time). It is seldom understood that an energetic and creative volunteer resources manager can proactively determine agency needs and innovate a wide range of solutions with highly expert volunteers.
- *Most organizations prefer gifts of money over donated skills.* So all attention focuses on fundraising efforts, while volunteers are seen as "nice" but secondary. The connection between money donors and time donors is rarely recognized, nor are volunteers placed centrally on the continuum of an organization's *supporters* (friends, members, advocates) in the community. In other words, if the consequence of limited staff attention to volunteers is to have fewer volunteers, that is more acceptable than having less money.
- *While volunteers may provide direct service to clients and consumers, the volunteer office is thought of as an indirect service.* Reducing or refocusing its staff therefore seems as if it is not hurting clients or the public. Except, of course, that it inevitably leads to minimal volunteer contributions.
- *Other professional offices seem to have a similar mandate, so it is assumed that there is already staff having sufficient expertise to manage volunteers.* Public relations and marketing people can surely do recruitment, right? Human resources personnel know all about job descriptions and personnel policies, right? The development office raises financial support from the same community, right? Yes, but the special skills required to attract, screen, and motivate unpaid workers are not considered. Let alone the skills to encourage smooth collaboration between paid and unpaid staff.

So, are we surprised that decision makers cut back on volunteer management when trying to trim the budget of anything nice but not essential?

All of this faulty thinking applies whether the leader of volunteers role is eliminated, cut back to a part-time role, added as a secondary assignment to someone's existing job, or divided up among several staff positions. None of these options gives the professional courtesy of enough time to develop and implement a volunteer engagement strategy effectively. Inadequate staffing reveals a lack of organizational vision of volunteer participation as a powerful resource, leveraging focused leadership attention into far-reaching results.

Accept or Challenge?

A frequent theme of these Hot Topics is to advocate for common sense when faced with wrong-headed executive actions. Quietly accepting a cut in time devoted to managing volunteer resources (whether all or part) is the worst response! Acquiescence can easily be interpreted as agreement. Always remember that the main reason to stand up to a bad decision is on behalf of the volunteers who will ultimately be affected (rather than fighting a battle for yourself personally).

So, what can you do?

1. Write your own detailed position description that goes beyond the terse overview you were given when hired. This should go into detail about the activities involved in each area. For example, "recruit new volunteers" may sound like a single task! In reality, it includes a long list of actions from developing community contacts to giving speeches at very different places to maintaining current postings on online registries. (Katie Campbell and I developed a *generic* "task analysis" of the role of volunteer resources manager in our book, [*The \(Help!\) I-Don't-Have-Enough-Time Guide to Volunteer Management*](#). It is 13 printed pages long!) By the way, if you are willing to share your own task analysis, please also submit it to www.oursharedresources.com, the growing repository sponsored by Volunteer2 of these sorts of real-life documents others can use as templates.

[This is something *everyone* should do right away! First, you'll learn why you are so tired all the time! You will also begin to see how you can share your work with qualified volunteers, how you might make the case for a raise or an assistant, and also have started to prepare for a successor some day. It's an invaluable tool if you are asked to report to someone new who really has no idea what the scope of your role is.]

2. Report *your* activities, not just those of volunteers. For example, a monthly report should include a list of speaking engagements, explanation of meetings to form collaboration agreements with community organizations, the number of screening interviews in the time period (which should be a larger number than how many new volunteers came on board), etc. In other words, explain what you do all day!
3. Get your local network of volunteer administrators (whether a DOVIA, a state association, or other professional society) to develop a "position statement" on the limitations of part-time volunteer management. Do this in collaboration with your volunteer center or Hands On affiliate, if you have either. Bring in any academic who teaches volunteer management classes. The point is to create a public document with some credibility that goes on record about why volunteer management requires both a professional skill set and undivided attention by a designated staff person.

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 Nov 2011 and has been reposted with permission from <http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/2011/11nov.php>