

Revisiting the Seven Deadly Sins of Directing Volunteers

Susan J. Ellis

In the early 1980s, Energize produced a mini-poster with the dramatic title of “The Seven Deadly Sins of Directing Volunteers,” which proved extremely popular as a bulletin board item at the desks of many volunteer resources managers. In fact, we tweaked the language and redesigned the mini-poster in 1990 and it continued to sell well. I just found a stack of them in our back room and thought it would be fun to see whether the “sins” have changed now in 2013. And you can help!

Here is the 1990 text:

The Seven Deadly Sins of Directing Volunteers

© Energize, Inc., 1990

1. To recruit a volunteer for a cause or program in which you do not believe – or to ask a volunteer to do a job you wouldn’t do yourself.
2. To worry about the numbers of volunteers you need to the degree that you sign a person up even if he or she is not right for the job to be done.
3. To restrict a volunteer’s effectiveness by not providing adequate preparation, training, or tools.
4. To ask salaried staff to work as a team with volunteers if you yourself do not have volunteers helping with the responsibilities of your job.
5. To be so concerned about your own job security that you do not stand up and fight for the needs and rights of the volunteers you represent.
6. To offer volunteers certain opportunities and working conditions, and then not deliver.
7. To waste a volunteer’s time – ever.

Updating Vocabulary

First, knowing some colleagues’ aversion to anything negative, I realize we could have made a list of the “Seven Virtues.” But really, aren’t vices far more interesting? And, of course, we wanted to grab people’s attention to make some important points. So even today I’d keep the title, though I’d think about the word *directing*. I’m one of the diehards who does *not* like the current word preference of *engaging* volunteers, particularly when referring to the person whose job it is to be the *leader* of an organization’s volunteer involvement strategy.

Question: If *you* were updating this list, would you keep the word “directing” or choose something else? What word is better?

However, I would definitely replace all mentions of a volunteer “job” with words such as *role, assignment, activity or position*. And I’d change “salaried staff” to *employees or paid staff*.

Updating the Sins

I am very interested in your reaction to these Sins, since my overall feeling is that every one of them still speaks to real issues still of concern today. On the other hand, a few might not make the cut for the top seven once some new challenges are added to the list. Here’s what I’d do:

Keep

In our time-deprived society, Sin number 7 is an especially vital admonition today. Shame on us for wasting the time of someone we pay, but to waste freely given time is truly sinful.

I’d also keep Sins number 3 and 5.

Number 4 is clearly something I still feel strongly about, having even written a Hot Topic, [“Practicing What We Preach: Volunteers Helping Us, Too,”](#) on this theme this past October.

Question: Which Sins would *you* keep as written now?

Edit

Sin number 1 remains important, but today I’d delete the second part because it is not worded well. As a leader of volunteers, it doesn’t matter if you personally want to do every task for which you recruit a volunteer. I wouldn’t like financial accounting or software troubleshooting work, nor would I ever coach sports, but such activities are perfectly legitimate for volunteering assignments.

So number 1 can simply state: *To recruit a volunteer for a cause or program in which you do not believe.*

What *does* matter is that every volunteer position be designed well so that the organization benefits the most and the volunteer is never exploited. Therefore, I’d edit Sin number 2 to say: *To sign a person up even if he or she is not right for a vacant volunteer position you need to fill, or to ask a volunteer to take on a role that misuses or underutilizes that person’s talents.*

Question: What editing would *you* do?

Replace

Sin number 6 remains valid, but I’d drop it because I feel that the following has risen in importance:

To be more concerned about satisfying volunteers who resist needed change than supporting those who are eager to innovate and adapt, particularly in the use of new technology.

That would be my new Sin for 2013.

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 April 2013 and has been reposted with permission from <http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/2013/13apr.php>