

# Should Volunteer Program Managers Be Volunteers, Too?

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One of the discussion threads last month on one of the volunteer management listservs revolved around the question of whether it was important for volunteer resources managers to do some sort of volunteering themselves – in essence, practicing what we preach.

This got me thinking.

It's rare to meet a colleague who does not have some history as a volunteer, somewhere, sometime. Like every other citizen, we care deeply about some cause or burn on some issue and step forward to do something about it. Like others, our children or spouses raise our hands for us to do committee work, or we multi-task by joining a food co-op (getting our own groceries while we work for the benefit of all members), or we expand what we like to do for fun by volunteering with the National Ski Patrol.

But it's also true that we experience all the same obstacles to finding time to give service that our prospective recruits use as excuses for not joining our agencies. The question, it seems to me, is whether we view *making* time to volunteer a professional development activity.

## Philosophy, Ethics, and Education

Here are a few of the arguments for every volunteerism practitioner to engage in volunteer work personally each year. Which do you think have merit? What's missing? Do you disagree:

- Ethically, how can we ask people to give their time and talent without monetary remuneration if we do not do so ourselves? (Note that this means volunteering somewhere *other* than the organizations for which we coordinate volunteers.) Volunteering is a value as much as an activity and we ought to hold it as such. Our own community service demonstrates our belief in volunteering and sets an example for both unpaid and paid staff.
- It's experiential learning. Knowing directly how it *feels* to volunteer elsewhere leads to more enlightened management practices you control. If you get frustrated at the way you're treated when volunteering in another agency, or if you love the welcome you get, you will have role models to avoid or emulate.
- It's a reality check. It's one thing to read about or espouse trends such as family volunteering or virtual service, but what happens when you try to do such things? Do you find other organizations open to experimentation? What unexpected problems crop up?
- One idea is to partner with one or more colleagues and agree to volunteer at each other's agencies (of course, only pick organizations that you truly want to support with your time!)

– in any sort of volunteer role. The deal, of course, is that you regularly meet together and discuss your experiences. Such “undercover” service can benefit your agency as a form of quality control, highlighting what is being done really well and where improvements may be needed. For you personally, watching a colleague in action can be a form of apprenticeship, particularly if this manager is already involved in a program activity that you’d like to try yourself.

- You can expand your horizons by volunteering in a setting totally different from where you work and in a type of service completely unlike what you ask volunteers to do daily. It’s easy to get into a rut and assume that all volunteer programs everywhere face the same challenges as you do or use similar procedures. Changing your perspective often elicits creative new solutions and approaches to your usual situation. It’s also fascinating to see how the principles of frontline volunteer management apply to, say, serving on a board of directors or organizing a college alumni reunion.

## **Serving the Profession**

As regular Energize Web site visitors know, one major crisis occupied my volunteer time last year: the demise of the Association for Volunteer Administration and subsequent efforts to pick up the pieces and form something new to fill the gap. Although this effort came during a particularly demanding time for my business, I contributed however many unpaid hours were required without counting them – as did others on the planning team. The urgency of the work seemed self-evident to all of us and the goal too important to our field. The Congress of Volunteer Administrator Associations ([www.COVAA.org](http://www.COVAA.org)) held at the start of December passed the torch to a new group of volunteer leaders, all of whom knowingly accepted great responsibility on behalf of our profession.

Again, this makes me think.

Unfortunately, in many places, it has become harder and harder to recruit colleagues to take leadership roles, whether in a DOVIA or state association, on a conference planning committee, or for any project requiring intensive time. It is here that the argument, “every volunteer resources manager should be a volunteer,” resonates clearly.

Strengthening our field ultimately is a contribution to every worthwhile organization we touch, and is one of the most effective things we can do to support volunteers. So service on behalf of a professional association is a powerful act. Thriving networks of volunteer administrators increase the skills of their members and educate agency administrators and the public about the work we do. In turn, this leads to greater involvement of volunteers – more and innovative roles for a wider spectrum of citizens – which means additional attention paid to important causes.

Remember the two men hammering away at a rock pile: One explains he’s “cutting stone,” but the other says “I’m building a cathedral.” When you are approached to volunteer for a professional association you can look at it two ways, too:

### What's in it for me?

Not everything under discussion is relevant to me now.

I am looking for help in *how* to do my job.

I'm too busy to spare the time.

I feel that helping with a professional association is too much like my daily work and I'd rather help some social cause.

My organization won't give me permission to do this on agency time.

I can't afford the dues or any out-of-pocket expenses.

Someone else will do it.

### What's in it for the field?

Some day, when one of these issues ends up affecting me, I'll be in the know. I might even prevent a problem for my agency by acting now.

I am developing myself for a career in this field and want to know *why* things are done in certain ways.

Making this network more effective will ultimately save me time through collaboration.

I believe so strongly in the importance of my daily work that I welcome the chance to strengthen this field (and I can take on a role that allows me to learn something new). It also ultimately affects every cause, since volunteers are everywhere.

I will do this on my own time because I will learn so much and contribute something valuable.

I can't afford NOT to participate and, besides, no one will buy me my career.

I want to do it and I can do it.

There's never been a better time to volunteer for a volunteer management network – and that's true in a range of countries around the world, many of whom are nurturing embryo associations right now. Make it a new year's resolution. It's self-help through helping us all. Can you think of a better reason to give your time?

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