

Stop Volunteers from Being Their Own Worst Enemies

Susan J. Ellis

As part of a conference in Canada last week I joined a site visit to an historic property with a large, volunteer-run garden estate. Several classic incidents occurred, any one of which could have become the focus of a Hot Topic essay. For example, in the Q&A session following the tour, conference attendees asked one of the property's managers about the demographic profile of current volunteers. In responding, the manager said, "We have about an equal number of men and women." To which the historical site's volunteer manager (a volunteer herself) reacted in great surprise with: "No we don't! It's about 90% women." Now it was the property manager's turn to be surprised and he even tried to press the point. "Are you sure?"

With us for the tour and Q&A was the president of the volunteer association, a very pleasant older woman, wearing her gardening clothes. She listened to the discussions (and agreed with the volunteer manager about the lopsided gender of the volunteer corps she led) and then asked to speak. "I want to tell you how wonderful the administration here is to all of the volunteers. They say thank you all the time and give us teas and lunches." The executive beamed and reiterated how "We just couldn't operate without these wonderful people who give us 17,000 hours a year and save us so much money."

Not fifteen minutes later, the president was taking us on a short tour of the gardens. We marveled at the variety of unusual plants but asked why there was no signage identifying them (as is common in other public gardens). She shook her head and said, "Oh well, we have asked to label things but keep getting turned down." When we pressed for more explanation, she finally said, "They always say no to our suggestions." You guessed it. "They" included the same executive she had just praised to the skies.

Why did she feel compelled to applaud the executive in front of him, then dismiss him as unresponsive behind his back? And why did she feel powerless to implement a reasonable idea?

So what I decided to write about this month is something we don't often discuss: how volunteers themselves are equally uneducated about their value and can contribute to the negative images so often held of volunteers.

Being a Volunteer Does Not Mean Knowing about Volunteering

Whenever I talk about tension between volunteers and paid staff, I remind people that practically no one receives formal training in how to work with volunteers. Nurses, social workers, teachers, curators – all the professionals who are most likely to come into contact with volunteers during their work life – earn advanced degrees but are totally uninformed about volunteer engagement. Then I point out, "and the same goes for volunteers."

We all have had that tear-your-hair-out moment when we hear someone say, "I'm *just* a volunteer." What's so frustrating is that we continue to hear variations of that mindset all the time. Not from paid staff. From the very people who give their time and talent!

Maybe we need to educate *volunteers* about who they are and how they fit into our organizations. If we wrongly assume that volunteers "get it," we open ourselves to potential problems of various sorts. Consider the ramifications if volunteers think the following:

- *I am "helping out" in my own way.*
- *If there was more money available, this organization would not need volunteers. So I'm being charitable to give free labor.*
- *How insulting to do a background check on me when I am donating my time!*
- *Since I don't get paid, I can make this a lower priority in my life and change my schedule whenever I want to.*
- *As a volunteer, I have no say in how things get done around here and probably have no reason to expect to be asked for my opinion or input.*
- *Anything I do will be of some help, so I don't really need to put much effort in.*
- *I like coming here but don't necessarily want to do all the things they ask of me.*
- *They can't order me around because they don't pay me.*

Of course there are many volunteers who take pride in their service and strive for excellence. Not to mention attitudes about disaster response, when it becomes a badge of honor to be identified as a noble volunteer out on the front lines doing anything to be helpful.

To muddy the waters further, there are volunteers who hold the exact opposite opinion of their role. These are the people who want to be treated as special solely because they are not paid for their work. Those who feel that volunteering entitles them to take charge, come and go as they please, criticize the staff, and so on. These volunteers, who often spend countless hours on site (and whom we reward for their longevity, not their accomplishments), also feel more valuable than new volunteers who prefer short-term assignments or generally do things differently (and perhaps electronically).

So let's acknowledge that volunteers can also be their own worst enemies – and can act contrary to all the aspirations we have for them. They reflect what the *general public* thinks about volunteers and simply do not know any better. If challenged, they would be surprised that we react with dismay to their mindset. So let's challenge them.

Building Volunteer Self-Respect

Consciously educate prospective and current volunteers about their true worth. You can do this in various ways (and I hope you will share things you are already doing in response to this Hot Topic). My ideas include:

- Explain the historic role of volunteers in your organization. Most likely citizen activists started the whole thing in the first place (note who signed your incorporation papers, for example). What services and projects valued now were piloted by earlier volunteers? These facts not only add perspective in orienting new volunteers, they also can make your recruiting messages more attractive.
- Distinguish between the concept of “saving money” for the organization and the more accurate one of “stretching the budget.” Also spend time talking about the things that volunteers add to service that are intentionally *different* from the role of paid staff. At the same time, validate the work that employees do by making sure volunteers know the extent of staff responsibilities beyond what a volunteer may witness in only a few hours periodically.
- Urge volunteers to observe and report. They will see and hear things through their work that might not be recognized by paid staff. Stress how important this can be. But outline the way in which such feedback should be offered constructively. In fact, create an effective suggestion process, with a consistent way of reporting observations and ideas, to whom, at what times. Also define a response mechanism through which you and the volunteer making a suggestion follow up on any results.
- Emphasize that the lack of pay does not mean a lack of standards. Remind volunteers that the reason they are donating their time is to serve your clients. Service comes first. High quality service is the goal and mediocre service is unacceptable. This also means that volunteers need to ask for more training, better instructions, and the right tools to be successful, not quietly accept whatever is given to them. Conversely, the organization has the right to request volunteer compliance with goals, priorities and methods that need to evolve in response to a changing world.

We need to be alert to evidence of counter-productive thinking by volunteers. Create a zero-tolerance zone for the word “just” and for evidence of entitlement. This includes not overlooking volunteer actions that make you cringe (you know what I mean, particularly if you have a volunteer corps well over the age of 75 or under the age of 18). We cannot stop ourselves from criticizing volunteers because we prefer to be “nice” to them. Is it nice to allow someone to give their precious time ineffectively? Helping volunteers to be outstanding is really the best recognition we can offer.

Misconceptions about volunteering are inevitable, but we do not have to perpetuate them, nor tolerate low expectations from the volunteers we lead.

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