

# Strength in Numbers: Engaging Volunteers as Partners in Program Development

---

Susan J. Ellis

Every so often I ask participants in my seminars: “How many of you have volunteers working with you to run the program – beyond helping with clerical work?” It always amazes (and dismays) me that only a small number of hands go up.

First, the job of running a volunteer program is so demanding that it seems obvious volunteers would be great help in simply keeping up with the work (and retaining the coordinator’s sanity!). Second, all the rationales we present to other paid staff for why they should create assignments for volunteers apply to us as volunteer program managers – so why are WE resistant to sharing our work with volunteers? Maybe if we consciously become role models for how to design roles for volunteers and how to work with them successfully, we’d do more to bring dubious staff around than just talking the talk.

But today I am concerned with a specific form of volunteer involvement that has great potential as a tool for internal advocacy: activating a visible team of volunteer representatives. This is actually a two-stage process.

## Start with Good Advice

A number of programs have what is usually called a variation of a “Volunteer Advisory Council.” An advisory committee is designed to give input into volunteer program planning, procedures, long-range goals, and other work for which the synergy of group discussion will produce a better product than the volunteer program manager implementing something alone. This is a vital contribution to any program, so if you do not yet have such a group acting as a think tank for you, start one!

Here are a few recommendations on making an advisory group effective:

- Only form a group if you want – and will act on – advice! This may sound funny, but sometimes we form “advisory” groups mainly for show. We go to great pains to gather a list of impressive (or at least representative) names for our letterhead, but rarely convene meetings or discuss anything substantive.
- Develop a strategy for whom you’d like to invite to join the group—and be clear *why* each constituency is useful to include.
  - Will it be volunteers only or a combination of volunteers and employees? How about someone from outside the organization, such as a colleague who manages volunteer services in another setting?

- Will you mix long-time volunteers with a few newbies? Do you need representation from various units or projects? What about gender, age, race, and other diversity criteria?
- What skills would be best?
- Strongly considering advice does not mean the advisory group has control and makes the decisions – you still do. To make this clear, guess what’s a key tool? Right! Written position descriptions, just as with any other well-thought-out volunteer role. State openly what the advisory council is meant to do and what authority it has or doesn’t. And specify a term of office so that you can rotate new members in on a regular basis.
- Never take a vote. Not only does taking a vote imply decision-making, it distills the perspectives of this representative group into only one opinion. Instead, focus on the best possible discussion. For example, get members to list all the pros and cons of any idea under consideration, or have them generate a list of all the questions they can think of in reaction to a particular issue (sometimes a good question is more valuable than a lengthy statement of opinion).

## But Why Only Advisors?

Having an Advisory Council is a good starting point, but it doesn’t go far enough. What about a group that *takes action* as well as *gives advice*? This isn’t an *advisory* council anymore, it’s a Steering Committee or Management Team. (Try to avoid the use of the word “board,” unless this is a group with authority to make actual operating decisions.) There are various ways you can structure such a group, but two things make it different from an advisory body:

- You are willing to see the members as equal partners with you in running the program. This means they will be responsible for actual work and share in decision-making about it.
- You will present these volunteers to the rest of the organization as partners in program management and as representing the point of view of all volunteers.

If you are uncertain as to what you might delegate to a management team of specially-recruited volunteers, Katie Campbell and I have lots of suggestions in our book, [\*The \(Help!\) I-Don't-Have-Enough-Time Guide to Volunteer Management\*](#). Right now, let’s focus on the second element: representing the volunteer perspective.

One of the universal issues confronting volunteer program managers is that they are one person speaking about a corps of contributors who are only seen in “bits and pieces.” Agency executives rarely if ever see all volunteers at one time to get the visual impact of their diversity and enthusiasm. Paid staff – even volunteers themselves – generally know only about the volunteers scheduled to work with them. So too often a request from the VPM is heard as an individual opinion and the “yes” or “no” response is seen as affecting only one person.

Further, it is easy for executives to consider the VPM as, well, “managing” volunteers; getting volunteers to do what the organization wants and needs. But it’s a two-way street, isn’t it? Whether

acknowledged or not, the VPM is also there to represent the volunteers to the organization, making sure their needs are expressed and their input delivered. Again, if agency staff interacts only with the VPM, is the message always credible?

Visualize what would happen if volunteers themselves participated in speaking for what is, after all, *their* program. What if:

- The monthly, quarterly, or annual reports were written by volunteers along with the VPM?
- A member of the Volunteer Steering Committee sat in on most meetings with the VPM's direct supervisor?
- A volunteer on the Management Team took the lead in presenting a new proposal to agency execs?
- A member of the Steering Committee accompanied the VPM to every staff meeting (or occasionally attended the meeting without the VPM)?
- The management team provided documentation to support any request from the volunteer program, outlining the rationale for the request and including comments from the volunteers most affected by the decision?
- You periodically asked volunteers – in meetings or through written surveys or listservs – for feedback on a variety of agency issues (client service, public relations, physical plant, whatever) and conveyed the input to decision-makers? After all, most executives verbalize that “volunteers are our community representatives.” When was the last time they asked volunteers anything to benefit from this perspective?

All this would demonstrate clearly that we never speak for ourselves alone. And it's a lot harder to dismiss a request or a report that comes from several united people, including community members. Such power is latent in every one of our programs. It's time to use it.

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. ([www.energizeinc.com](http://www.energizeinc.com)), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the monthly Hot Topic essay for Nov 2005 and has been reposted with permission from <http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/2005/nov05.html>