

The Just-a-Volunteer Syndrome

Susan J. Ellis

It happened again this morning. I was responding to a call-back message and the man who answered the phone said my party was not in. When I asked when my colleague would be available, I was told, "hang on." I then heard the individual yell across the room to someone else: "Do you know when X will be in?" Finally, I asked to leave a message. At that point, the man said: "Wait a minute. I need to find a pencil. I'm a volunteer, you see, and don't know all this stuff."

I had to restrain myself from jumping through the phone to throttle both the volunteer and the other staff member who obviously was nearby witnessing the transaction! The only bright spot was that I didn't hear the famous modifier "just"--as in, "I'm *just* a volunteer."

A few hours later I received a review copy of a new book about speakers bureaus. The author had contacted me in advance to ask if I would consider it for our catalog. Explaining Energize's specific focus, I pointed out that we only carry books that include substantial mention of volunteer-related issues. She assured me that, indeed, she had written the book for both paid and unpaid speakers. The book arrived and I scanned it quickly. I eliminated it on the spot because she spent two pages telling readers that, if absolutely necessary because of lack of funds, it might be okay to schedule volunteers as speakers, but one had to beware of inexperience in front of groups and lack of knowledge of the work of the organization! Guess it never occurred to her that once in a while a volunteer might be competent--or even the best person to represent a cause.

These two incidents have a common root: the self-fulfilling prophecy of expecting, and therefore tolerating, mediocre performance by volunteers. This is based on the assumption that, **by definition**, volunteers don't measure up to paid staff. The fact that it's possible to find employees who can't do their jobs well doesn't seem to matter. We are willing to assume skillful performance of paid workers (until proven otherwise), while assuming the opposite of volunteers. It is treated as a delightful bonus if freely-contributed help turns out to be excellent. Ironically, this attitude is shared by too many volunteers themselves.

Probably no one reading this will be surprised by either anecdote above. Actually, what may surprise you is that this still bothers me after 25+ years in the field and, conservatively, over 100 similar incidents. But bother me it does.

Ivan Scheier, of course, dealt with all of this at length and with humor in his book, [Building Staff Volunteer Relations](#). He had the fictional staff member, Frank Miller, say:

...you know the old saying: "You get what you pay for." Among other things, this means reasonable reliability. Remember, volunteering is--well--voluntary. Volunteers can come and go as they please, take vacations whenever. If they happen to feel like doing what you ask them to do, fine. But what if they don't? In short, it's practically their right to be unreliable.

These hot topics are meant to be a forum for airing volunteer-related issues, not necessarily for presenting solutions. The issue of pervasive and continuing low expectations for volunteer

competency is, to me, the single biggest obstacle we face. And it is made even more difficult by the fact that we seem to fight this battle on all fronts: our executives, paid colleagues, the media, the public at large, and volunteers themselves.

Here's your chance to vent! (We'll all be like Lucy with "the doctor is in" sign open for business.) Share your experiences coming up against this brick wall. Also, what are your thoughts on:

- how this negative stuff began in the first place;
- why all the examples of glowing volunteer achievement are treated as aberrations (as in, they don't remember what we do right but never forget what we do wrong);
- what we can do about it.

Or, just vent a while. If nothing else, Energize will be sympathetic!

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 Feb 1999 and has been reposted with permission from <http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/feb99.html>