

The Moral Obligation of Volunteer Recruitment Promises

Susan J. Ellis

Recruiting volunteers to contribute their time and effort to your organization puts *you* in the middle of an implied promise. By issuing the invitation to participate, you are representing that volunteers 1) will be working towards a meaningful mission and 2) will be valued partners in that work. When new people agree to volunteer, they initially commit because they believe in the genuineness of that invitation. Which means they believe you and respond to your sincerity.

So recruitment sets up a moral obligation for each of us.

What happens, therefore, when a little voice in the pit of our stomach nags at us with thoughts such as: “Oh, dear, what if this volunteer ends up in X department where the staff is so negative?” or “Will the risk manager argue against allowing volunteers to do it the way they want?” or “What will they think when they realize volunteers are taken for granted here?”

It’s probably safe to assume that each of us believes in the mission of our organization – that its ultimate goal is truly worthwhile and its services of benefit to recipients. (If not, it’s time to change jobs. Really.)

But it’s not enough to engage volunteers solely because of the importance of the long-term goal. For many organizations that goal is decades away, if attainable at all. None of us will wipe out all diseases or hunger in our lifetimes. And not all missions are to end something. A museum or a park expects to continue forever, give or take a century. But *how* an organization treats its participants (employees, volunteers, and clients) matters every single day, right now.

This means that it’s imperative to create the most welcoming and productive environment for everyone – for the long haul. That’s why a leader of volunteers is ethically bound to tackle any issue that violates the promises made in recruitment.

In my opinion, we have an ethical dilemma whenever we find ourselves:

- Working around resistance from paid staff (or veteran volunteers) rather than confronting and changing it.
- Seeing that there are no consequences when employees are unsupportive of volunteers and, maybe worse, that there are no rewards for doing a great job with volunteers.
- Accepting restrictions on what volunteers can and can’t do that are created under negative, outdated, or otherwise wrong stereotypes about who volunteers are and whether they can be trusted.
- Allowing volunteers to be invisible or of lowest attention on organizational charts, in agency brochures, in annual reports, on Web sites, etc.

- Watching donors of money receive adoration while donations of time and talent are undervalued – except for members of the board of directors, who are rarely acknowledged as volunteer.

These sorts of concerns – which are rampant – ought to trouble us not just because they are frustrating and irritating to us in our jobs, but because they are symptoms of a disconnect between the organization’s stated desire for volunteers and its basic attitude towards them.

If you’ve worked at improving these sorts of fundamental indicators of whether an organization values volunteers and you’re making progress, fine. But if these issues continue or multiply, can you in good conscience continue to recruit new volunteers into the organization? If your values about community engagement are clearly in conflict with those of the organization (or its leaders), are you not being dishonest in the promises implied in recruitment? Is it time to change jobs?

Most of us need our jobs. I am not being cavalier in suggesting that resigning is an easy thing to do. And I’m not recommending that anyone threaten to resign as a strategy to get attention to frustrating problems. I am, however, urging honest advocacy. We can make it clear to our executives that we will not mislead potential volunteers nor place them into unreceptive units. We can point out the consequences when lip service about wanting volunteers is not backed by tangible support. We can even be up front when we recruit, telling prospective volunteers about the challenges they may face and offering them the chance to partner with us in changing the organization for the better.

A volunteer can find many organizations with which to affiliate and do good in the world. What right do we have to ask people to choose our organization if they will be unfairly limited or have to navigate an obstacle course? We are cheating them by wasting the full potential of their time. And, ultimately, we are cheating our whole society by squandering talent resources. I truly believe that this is not a grandiose overstatement. What do *you* believe?

- Have you had to confront a personal ethical dilemma in your work with volunteers? How did you handle it?
- What else might place your values in conflict with those of the organization?
- What are some other suggestions for handling such situations?

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 Oct 2007 and has been reposted with permission from <http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/2007/07oct.html>