

# Volunteers as the "Third Branch" of an Organization

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Susan J. Ellis

Last month, Sarah Elliston, Professional Development Associate at the United Way Volunteer Resource Center in Cincinnati, Ohio (and friend), shared the following thoughts in an e-mail:

"My newest insight and struggle in the field is explaining how volunteers are not like paid staff, and how we probably shouldn't say: 'Treat them like paid staff.' As I learn more about organizations with volunteers, I realize that volunteers are like the third branch of the organization and should be considered as such. I wonder if we are doing a disservice to be suggesting they are like paid staff."

"In the 'third branch model,' volunteers bring all that we have said before (energy, creativity, flexibility, skills, etc.) AND are treated as importantly as the other two branches: paid staff and clients/people being served. As the third branch, volunteers need to be administered with as much professionalism as the other two-- and that means reminding the politicians and corporate executives that there is a focal point for volunteering in every organization with whom they need to dialogue: the administrator/manager/ coordinator of volunteers."

Sarah raises an important point. Often volunteers are defined in terms of the paid staff. This approach begins with the "given" of employee roles and proceeds to craft volunteer job descriptions from tasks the staff identifies as helpful to them. That's how we get the notion of "volunteers as unpaid assistants".

I think a much better way of approaching volunteer assignment development is by asking: "What needs to be done that will be of most help to the clients/people we serve and that, in turn, will make the services provided by paid staff more effective?" This question elicits responses above and beyond the roles we now pay people to fulfill and places volunteers in a unique position within the organization. Here are two real-life examples to show what I mean:

- Volunteers making sure pets are fed and exercised while someone is in the hospital. This certainly helps the patient to recover with less stress and would never be a job given to, say, a nurse.
- Volunteers providing telephone contact to young single mothers at 7:00 a.m. to support the mom's morning duties of getting up herself, getting the kids off to school, etc. Again, vital to helping the client and never something a caseworker would do daily.

Other ways volunteers are unique in the assistance they provide include:

- Being available on days and at hours the paid staff is not.
- Being able to focus on one client or one issue to the exclusion of all else.

- Donating a special talent needed by a small percentage of clients and therefore unlikely to warrant a paid job: various foreign language ability; financial budgeting help; performing arts talent; etc.
- Not being limited to helping the individual client; can assist the client's family in ways the paid staff cannot (which, in turn, helps the client).

It is clear to me that we all gain when we conceptualize volunteers as a third (and equally important) component of the organization.

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 Aug 1997 and has been reposted with permission from <http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/aug97.html>