

What Would the Perfect Volunteer-Involving Organization Look Like?

Susan J. Ellis

This month I'll be recording a podcast with Renee McGivern, the host of [Nonprofit Spark](#)* on WebTalkRadio.net. During our preparatory phone call, Renee posed a reasonable question. Taking the perspective of her audience of relatively new executives and board members, she asked: "If organizational leaders followed your advice on being strategic in engaging volunteers, what would the outcome be? *What would it look like?*"

No one had ever asked me that particular question before, but I appreciated the point. After all, if we cannot picture the results of our efforts – and like/want the future we envision – we won't be motivated to do the work necessary. It also seemed to be a meaningful way to start a new year when we tend to look ahead with aspirations and resolutions.

So, here is what I think an organization would look like if it practiced everything we preach about creative, welcoming, and effective volunteer management, led by a skilled director of volunteer involvement with the full participation of top management and all frontline staff. Then I'd like to hear about *your* vision in response.

- The organization would be a busy place because all sorts of people would be energetically focused on projects and services. It would feel welcoming to clients and visitors because of the positive atmosphere and also because the special needs of each individual could be addressed.
- Anyone coming into contact with the organization would be treated as a prospective long-term *friend* of the organization, regardless of the initial relationship. So
 - Money donors would be cultivated not only for more cash, but also for their time, skills and contacts.
 - Time donors would be valued for their volunteer work and as potential financial contributors, as well as for the many spheres of influence they open in the community. Volunteers with a predetermined time frame, such as students interning for a semester or corporate employees giving a day of service, would continue to receive updates from the organization and future invitations to re-engage.
 - Clients would be seen as partners in service delivery, not just as recipients of service and, once successfully assisted, would continue to be kept informed about the organization and invited to participate in helping others.
- On a regular basis, executives would meet together with volunteer office and development office staff, exchanging leads and planning community outreach to identify as many potential *friends* as possible. The list of names of all donors – money and time – would be

compared and people would be invited to become involved in both ways (extending that invitation to family and friends).

- Discussions about resources would never be limited to “where can we find money?” Any new initiative would be analyzed for what would assure the greatest success and then a plan would be developed to generate a *mix* of resources that could include some or all of such things as redeployment of current staff, hiring of new full- or part-time staff, engaging paid consultants, recruiting skilled volunteers, seeking donated goods and services, and raising cash. At the end of the process, the collective value of all these resource components would far exceed what a grant or donation could have paid for.
- Paid staff would see themselves as responsible for assuring that clients and the public receive the best service possible. This means doing the work directly when the employee is best qualified and able, but also requesting and welcoming volunteers able to provide different and additional skills to do more. Staff would be recognized as much for their success as facilitators and connectors to resources as for what they do on their own. (And labor unions would also see that volunteers expand the staff’s ability to serve clients, not displace paid workers.)
- The board of directors (themselves volunteers) would ask as many questions about volunteer involvement as about fundraising, and would actively recruit their friends and contacts to donate skills as well as money. Further, board members would be required to spend a certain number of hours each year in frontline volunteer roles so that they can see for themselves what they are governing.
- Rather than appreciating volunteers mainly as hands (with a heart), everyone would realize that the availability of so many more people with different skills and perspectives enlarges the organization’s *brain*. Challenges faced by the organization would routinely be shared with volunteers who, as representatives of the community, would ask good questions, give suggestions, and brainstorm possible solutions. Any “staff survey” would naturally include volunteer responses.
- Volunteers would represent the organization when paid staff cannot or wouldn’t be as effective. As private citizens, for example, volunteers might testify at government hearings, cross geographical and other jurisdiction boundaries to find other resources, and form collaborations with other organizations (possibly through *their* volunteers).

Ah, it’s lovely to dream. This bright future is pretty far away in too many organizations, but first we – as leaders of volunteers – need to believe in it ourselves. Now it’s your turn: What would the perfect volunteer-involving organization look like to you?

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 Jan 2012 and has been reposted with permission from <http://www.energizeinc.com/hot/2012/12jan.php>