

*From the desk of ...*

*Ginette Johnstone*

*"Words Do  
Make a Difference!"*





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# **WORDS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE!**

Ginette Johnstone

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Ginette', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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JOHNSTONE TRAINING AND CONSULTATION

## WORDS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

### Introduction

The management of volunteer services is a field that has yet to develop a vocabulary of its own. We have adopted words which, in many cases, cause those outside our field to misinterpret who we are and what we do.

By not paying sufficient attention to the words that we use, our recognition as a unique and specially qualified profession has been hampered. Words are symbols that carry with them a meaning, and have certain connotations associated with them. The words we use send out inaccurate messages.

Words can be tools for advocacy. In our journey as an emerging profession, credibility and recognition will come when we develop our own vocabulary to create the images of who we are, what we do, what our status is and how we perceive ourselves.

This booklet contains personal observations about some of the common words in our field. I hope it will assist you in your discovery or confirmation of the fact that **words do make a difference!**

## **Volunteer**

A good place to start is the use of the word “volunteer” itself. Most of the time, when we are using it as a verb, or as a noun to describe individuals who freely give of their time, there is no problem. However, we tend to confuse the noun volunteer with the adjective volunteer.

The Gage Canadian Dictionary defines volunteer (adj.) as *being, made up of, or done by volunteers*”. In other words, when used as an adjective, it modifies the noun which comes next to it. For instance, the term “volunteer manager” means a manager who is a volunteer, who manages without pay. It does not describe someone who manages volunteer services.

It is evident then, that by using the terms volunteer coordinator, volunteer administrator, volunteer manager, volunteer director, we are telling anyone who is not intimate with our profession (and that is far more people than we care to admit) that we are all working for free.

## **The Involvement of Volunteers**

It is unfortunate that the words we use to describe the role of

volunteers in our organizations are often unwittingly demeaning. In particular, I refer to the phrases “using volunteers”, “servicing clients”, and “just volunteers”. To me, both the verbs “use” and “service” are degrading when referring to people.

The word “use” has strong connotations of exploitation and of one way advantage. The phrase “You used me” demonstrates that exploitation very well. The Gage Canadian Dictionary defines use as “*consume or expend; act toward in a particular way or for one’s own needs; exploit*”. What message are we sending to volunteers when we say that we “use” volunteers in our organization? What should be a statement of pride becomes a statement of shame.

It would be more accurate to say that we “involve” volunteers or that volunteers are an integral part of our services. We might even say that the work of our organization is “enhanced by volunteers” or that our organization “counts on the contribution of volunteers”.

I have similar difficulty when I hear someone say: “We service 200 clients a day”. “Servicing clients” always conjures, for me, visions of the oldest profession. The Gage Canadian Dictionary defines service, verb, as “*make fit for service; keep fit for service... to provide with a service*”

*or services. Example: Two trains serviced the town".* The examples associate the verb "service" with things, not people. The verb serve, however, is defined as "*to give service to or help; aid*". I believe that to say we "serve" is not only more accurate, but kinder.

I am sure that we all cringe when we hear the phrase "just a volunteer", especially when it comes from the volunteers themselves. Perhaps, we could encourage a different comment by suggesting that they are "such a volunteer!"

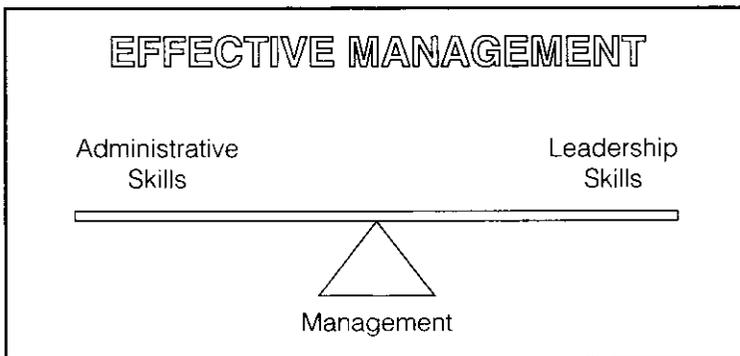
## **Words Used in Our Titles**

The words administrator, coordinator, manager and director are all words commonly assigned to us as titles. Some of these can be misleading, and may give the wrong impression about what we do and the status appropriate to our positions.

I realize that we do not always have control over the titles that are assigned to us. What we do have control over, though, is how we answer the question: What do you do for a living? There is no requirement to use our titles to explain what we do, but we must be able to clearly articulate it.

## Administrator or Manager?

These two words are used interchangeably, and in the dictionary they have similar definitions. Nonetheless, they do not have the same connotations. The term “administrator” is associated with bureaucracies, procedures, and paper work. “Manager” is understood to encompass these but also has the additional element of relationships with people. This becomes evident when you think about theories of management. Have you ever heard of a theory of administration? Have you ever heard of a human resources administrator?



My personal theory of management is that it encompasses two types of skills: *administrative skills* such as planning,

scheduling, budgeting, record keeping, and *leadership or people skills* such as selection, training, supervising, coaching, assessing. Together, leadership and administrative skills make up management.

I suggest that we always refer to ourselves as managers. This argument is supported by a close examination of the functions that we perform. In 1990, the Ontario Association for Volunteer Administration completed some research that identified the core competencies required by managers of volunteer services. They identified thirteen areas of performance:

- plan programmes
- develop and maintain systems
- market volunteer services
- staff volunteer services
- train volunteers and staff
- supervise volunteers and staff
- motivate/recognize volunteers, staff, community
- interface with other internal staff
- administer programmes and systems
- manage finances
- conduct public relations
- interface with community
- pursue professional development.

Marlene Wilson, in The Effective Management of Volunteer Programmes, referring to the “actual functions of a manager”, states:

*“There are various opinions among management theorists as to how to list these. The most commonly accepted are planning, organizing, staffing, directing, controlling.”*

It is not difficult to see that the functions of a professional working with volunteers are in fact management functions. It is interesting to note that in the core competencies identified by the Ontario Association for Volunteer Administration, only one of the functions is actually to administer, indicating that much more is involved.

Finally, since the function of management encompasses much more than simply “working with people”, it may be more accurate (and less offensive to some) to say that we manage volunteer services, not volunteers.

### **Coordinator**

“Coordinator”, to me, has come to suggest ambivalence. It seems to be the favoured word used to describe any position when we don’t know what else to call it.

Furthermore, it recognizes no inherent authority. The Gage Canadian Dictionary defines the verb coordinate as “*make equal in importance; arrange in proper order or relation, harmonize, adjust*”. Although this definition has appealing aspects with regard to the status of volunteers in an organization, the definition falls far short of describing the role of a manager of volunteer services. Too often, we create coordinator positions in which the incumbent is required to perform management functions, but is seldom given the authority to make the necessary decisions.

### **Director**

Director is often used as the title for a manager of volunteers who is part of a senior management team. It denotes a position of power, a position among the top decision-makers of an organization, and usually refers to an individual who has others reporting to him/her. The term director is very useful when volunteer services have within them several levels of management.

## **Terminology From the Domain of Paid Employment**

When I first became involved in this field, I often wondered why we were having so much difficulty clarifying, for labour unions, the unique role of volunteers within an organization. It seemed clear to me that volunteers had a totally different function from paid staff and I failed to understand why staff were reluctant to accept that we had no intentions of taking over their paid positions.

Then I took a long hard look at the words we were using: job description, hiring and firing, contract, performance review, performance evaluation. I realized that, if I were not familiar with the philosophy of volunteerism, and I heard these words used with reference to volunteers, I too, as a paid staff, would become very defensive.

I believe that as managers of volunteers, we could develop a vocabulary of our own. Only in the health field is there the beginning of a realization that we can no longer use "labour" terminology. However, changing our ways is not easy, and it requires a change in our thinking.

The biggest offender is the term "job description". Thanks to the health field, the term is gradually being replaced by

“position description”. Yet, even it leaves something to be desired. It may be more accurate to refer to volunteer tasks as “description of volunteer contribution”, or even “volunteer involvement description”.

Instead of “hiring” volunteers, it may be more accurate to say that we “involve” or “match” volunteers. We do not “fire”, or worse, “terminate” volunteers; we “release” them or “refer” them. Perhaps “performance review” could simply become a “review of volunteer contribution.” These may not be ideal alternatives, but they are a beginning and I am certain that there are some very creative and useful ideas out there.

## **Volunteer Programme and Volunteer Services**

Programme is yet another word that takes away from the philosophy of volunteerism. First, the term programme implies a service or activity that is unto itself. If you refer to a volunteer programme, then you are giving the impression that it is separate from other organizational activities, rather than indicating a service that is integral to all or at least many services and departments within an organization. Compare it with human resources; you would not hear of that

department being referred to as the human resources programme.

Programme denotes a single activity or service, while the term “volunteer services” allows for many programmes. Again, to compare with human resources, it may host a training programme, or an employee assistance programme, but is not itself referred to as a programme.

It is more accurate to speak of “volunteer services”, “volunteer resources”, or the “department of volunteer services”. Remember, it is the services which are “volunteer”, not the department.

### **In Conclusion...**

In conclusion, if we are to become a recognized and credible profession, we must seriously reconsider the vocabulary we use when speaking of our work, our volunteers and our services. It won't be easy. We must first become aware of the words we use. But most difficult of all, we will need to “unlearn” the words we have come to use so naturally over the years, and replace them with more accurate ones. It's up to all of us.

**Some Suggestions...**

<i>Instead of....</i>	<i>Use...</i>
administrator	manager
coordinator	manager
fire a volunteer	release a volunteer or refer a volunteer
hire a volunteer	involve a volunteer or match a volunteer
job description	description of volunteer contribution volunteer involvement description
just a volunteer	such a volunteer
manage volunteer	manage volunteer services
performance review	review of volunteer contribution
programme	service or activity department or resources
servicing clients	serving clients
use volunteers	involving volunteers enhance with volunteers count on volunteers

## **Ginette Johnstone - Bio**

Ginette Johnstone is a graduate of Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, with a B.A. in Psychology. She has a diploma in Business Administration, and Certificates in Criminology, Volunteer Management, and Adult Education. Ginette has over ten years experience as a trainer and consultant specializing in the voluntary and public sectors. Her experience is broad, covering management of volunteers, board development and voluntary sector administration. In the past, she has been Executive Director of a Volunteer Centre in B.C. and a Coordinator of Volunteers for a juvenile justice programme in Manitoba. Currently, Ginette is Owner and Senior Consultant of JOHNSTONE TRAINING AND CONSULTATION.



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