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## Give Volunteers a Voice

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Despite the common wisdom that volunteers are "community representatives" to and from the organization, how often does your organization tap them for insight about the community? In truth, many agencies want help, but not input--and useful feedback from volunteers rarely occurs spontaneously.

Volunteers bring a different perspective to an agency than do employees or clients. This point of view may result from being less vested in the professional process, or from being younger or older, or from simply having the distance that a part-time schedule allows. Is there a conscious way to let the volunteer perspective be heard?

**Here are a few simple strategies for getting useful feedback from volunteers:**

- *Ask them.* Informally and formally, be sure to elicit the opinions of volunteers. Their point of view can be valuable on any subject from the proposed new logo design to what clients think about a particular service offered (remember that volunteers often are in a great position to hear what clients are saying).
- *Schedule time* as often as monthly for administrators to *meet representative volunteers* individually and in small groups as a "think tank." This doubles as meaningful volunteer recognition while demonstrating to executives the value of community participation.
- Make sure that *any agency program evaluation includes the surveying of volunteers* as well as employees and clients.
- During orientation, *be sure to explain to volunteers how and when to express opinions*, both critical and complimentary. Do you know what the best method is? How might staff react to unexpected "input"? Maybe this needs to be discussed and strategized, and employees trained in how to make use of the volunteer perspective.

- *Convene all volunteers carrying the same assignment at least annually with the employees of that unit so that volunteers can share their thoughts on what is going well, what needs improvement, and what might be planned for the future.*
- *Be sure that volunteers are tapped to serve on agency planning committees.*
- *Suggest to the communications/public relations staff that the *volunteer perspective be reflected in publications such as newsletters*. This might be done by guest columns written by volunteers or by periodic interviews. Certainly any article featuring a special program ought to include quotes from volunteers involved.*
- *Use the volunteer recognition event as a time to encourage assessment by volunteers as well as thanks to them.* This is usually an event which board members and top administrators attend, so you have an important captive audience listening to what volunteers have to say!

### **How to Make the Most of Volunteer Input**

Not all volunteer ideas will be creative or even realistic (guess what--the same is true of employee opinions!). But they may carry a kernel of insight, especially if the volunteers are more similar to the population served than the staff are.

You may find that some volunteers do their assignments routinely, without much thought, or focused only on their particular unit. Or their assignment may be done off-site so they have few opportunities to connect with what is being done by the rest of the organization. So be prepared to train people in giving input. For example, don't ask vague, general questions like: "What do you think of X?" Instead, guide the discussion with questions like: "Can you identify two positive and two negative aspects to this program?" or "Given your knowledge of this neighborhood, how might you expect local residents to react?"

In order for volunteers to be of greatest help, they need accurate information on which to base their opinions. On a regular basis, keep volunteers informed about new services, changes in personnel, issues impacting your agency. Consider whether periodic meetings to inform volunteers about plans for the future might not yield positive results. Add volunteers to your newsletter mailing list or to in-house memo distribution.

Volunteers are too often the invisible constituents of the organization--affected by decisions reached but not consulted. Establishing channels for input is especially important at times of change or transition, when volunteers may feel affected by what is happening, but "out of the loop." Mergers, change in executive directors, or new major projects may all be opportunities for feedback sessions.

Ideally, your organization will welcome your initiative in setting up a feedback loop. But if you encounter resistance (which may seem as innocuous as someone saying they don't have time for regular meetings with volunteers), be prepared to take action on your own. As leader of the volunteer effort, you can implement many of the ideas above directly. Then record the opinions, observations,

and suggestions made by volunteers into summary reports. Circulate the reports to key decision makers and ask for some written follow up response that can be circulated to volunteers.

### **Now for Your Responses**

Let me practice what I preach! Instead of asking: "So what do you think?" (but I truly do want to know!), here are some specific questions:

- How do you create a forum for volunteer input?
- Can you describe a situation in which a volunteer's idea or comment led to important agency change?
- If you initially encountered resistance from administrators to meeting with volunteers once in a while, how did you overcome it?

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***Submitted by Andrea Nadeau, Brooks Commissioner, Residents Association of the University of Ottawa, Canada***

I believe that volunteers are the most essential element to the success of a not for profit organization. As a full time University student, who seeks help from volunteers who are also full time students, I must always remind myself that they too must respect time and budget restraints which are identical to my own. There seems to be a feeling of indifference in many of my peers, the old idea of changing the world is no longer the typical university ideal. Unfortunately, most young people feel that the primary goal of a university student is not to accomplish anything in four years.

It is essential for myself and other active student leaders to constantly encourage feedback from volunteers. If you don't keep them involved, they often slip away. Students love getting free stuff, but ask them to give a little of themselves and forget it. The trick is to convince them that their work is appreciated and that they are getting something back in return.

Our association organizes an annual charity ball, the volunteers are the ones who decide on the charity, they are given pizza at fundraisers, or taken out for a beer, they make new friends and gain great practical experience. Our association may have a limited budget, but we never limit our thanks or appreciation to those who sacrifice study time to make a difference!

***Submitted by Joy Golliver , President/Founder of Ignite The Community Spirit and the I CAN Newsletter, Washington***

At the present time we have a very small corp of volunteers, so we use outside "volunteer consultants" to give us a hand. We call these "meetings" ICS Forum's. We send out our question or need to a large group of friends and experts across the nation and ask them to give us advice or input.

They can give this advice by attending a brainstorming session on the topic, or by sending us an email or fax. This allows us to hear from a wide range of volunteer supporters who want to see Ignite The Community Spirit succeed.

**Submitted by *Pat McCarthy, Northland Public Library, Pennsylvania***

In my opinion evaluation and feedback is an essential ingredient in a structured volunteer program. Part of the structure of the volunteer program that I coordinate includes the following:

Probationary evaluation form for both staff and the volunteer to complete at the end of the 3-month probationary period.

Yearly evaluation form for both staff and the volunteer to complete. Upon receipt of both forms I then have an informal conversation with the volunteer to acknowledge their thoughts and any concerns. I assure the volunteers that any problems or concerns will be resolved. If there is an organizational change that is required, a meeting is scheduled with the director, the volunteer and myself.

We take their suggestions seriously and actively solicit input since they are a part of the organization. In addition they are our goodwill ambassadors to the community at large.

If there are program changes being considered, we involve the volunteers who are a part of a particular program for a brainstorming session to get their ideas and feedback. If they have valid reasons for not making changes, it will not happen.

Lastly a Volunteer Committee is an integral part of the structure of our volunteer program. The committee members consist of a staff person from each department as well as a volunteer from each department. The volunteers are also selected to represent different demographics. Meetings are held quarterly to discuss problems, concerns, recognition events, etc.

**Submitted by *Sarah Elliston , Professional Development Associate , United Way Volunteer Resource Center , Ohio***

I couldn't have even gotten organized with Volunteer Cincinnati when I first started without input from volunteers. I had volunteers in my office with me, helping me do the coordinator's job, so I would regularly ask, after an initial orientation, "What feels awkward to you? Can you think of a better way?" and often their suggestions for systems in the office were implemented. The system developed to follow the steps from application to data entry after orientation and placement are still in place after an intern developed them in 1986.

Thanks to a visually impaired volunteer at the reception desk, the maps of city hall started having Braille on them so visually impaired people could read them.

Our entire board training content has been revamped by a subcommittee of volunteers because they got tired of delivering an out-of-date package. They also deliver the training so they had a strong interest in getting it current.

My rule of thumb has always been: what do you want out of the experience (paid or volunteer staff) and then ask for input that relates to the goal. For paid staff who get defensive about suggestions, I suggest the vol mgmt professional spend some time identifying the goal of involving volunteers, and if the input will make that easier and help meet the goal, resistance will diminish.

We have recently done a major survey of the volunteers in our United Way and the response has brought some needed changes to light. Stay tuned as our structure attempts to make some changes. I'll keep you posted.

**Submitted by *Bob DeHaan, Retired, Pennsylvania***

Just a small point. Just asking for suggestions or comments is not enough, as you hint at. The person asking for suggestions needs to communicate a receptive, non-judgmental attitude. I have had a superior ask for my opinion or suggestions only to give me defensive explanations of why the situation is the way it is, or why it can't be changed. That may all be true. But at a minimum the suggestion or comment needs to be accepted with the assurance that it will be given serious consideration, without necessarily promising anything, and that the superior will get back to the person making the suggestion at a later time.

## Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on August 5th, 2016*

*Missy Miller, Manager of Volunteer & Media Resources, Seton Center, Inc., Emmitsburg MD, USA*

I work for a religious non-profit, social service organization. We struggle over including clients as volunteers (due to confidentiality & "ownership" concerns). We do not currently have a policy concerning a "probationary" period for volunteers - a time for the volunteer and the organization to be sure we're a good fit for each other.




Anyone willing to share evaluation forms, ideas, thoughts, I'd happily welcome your input!  
Thank you!

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