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The Wall of Executive Indifference

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Cancelled again. For the second year in a row, a workshop offered by La Salle University's Nonprofit Management Center on the "Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success," with me as the guest faculty member, garnered just one registrant. Karen Simmons, the NMC's excellent director, expressed the frustration that no one with a national reputation is ever valued at home. But I told her that this seminar was probably doomed from the start. Sort of "it's the SUBJECT, stupid!"

For over twenty years, it has been like pulling teeth to get agency administrators to attend sessions about volunteerism designed for them. No matter how we phrase the invitation, emphasize the executive-level topics, or ply them with elegant breakfasts, attendance is either low, represented by lower-level managers "sent" as substitutes, or the seminars have to be cancelled.

I have been battling indifference to the subject of volunteers by top administrators for most of my career. My book, [From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success](#), directly addresses this subject and, in one way or another, it often surfaces in my articles, columns and even previous hot topics. And yet I still am caught up short with disappointment when the same prejudice confronts me once again. No matter how long I've been in this field, I simply cannot understand the inability (or unwillingness) of otherwise smart, creative leaders to embrace the enormous potential of volunteer involvement.

Agency executives understand that they have a role to play in paid personnel matters, even if there is a human resources department. Or that raising money is a vital executive function shared by the development department. So why is it such a mental stretch to see that volunteers--often greater in number by several degrees of magnitude than employees--require top-level attention as well as the best volunteer program manager?

I submit that this issue is "Public Enemy Number One" for the volunteer field. Individually and collectively, we must find ways to crack the wall of indifference we face. Maybe it begins by recognizing, and then responding to, examples of the problem. Rarely is the absence of the subject of volunteers truly intentional, but it can often be observed. Consider:

- Other than *The NonProfit Times*, for which I have written the bi-monthly column called "On Volunteers" for nine years, no other national publication aimed at nonprofit agency administrators has a regular feature on any aspect of working with volunteers. The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* used to include a table of contents category for articles for and about volunteers, but dropped it a while ago. They still include articles featuring volunteer-related news and models, but their main interest is fundraising. The same is true for the publication *Contributions*. While I have not seen every publication produced by every state association of nonprofit organizations, those that I have read cover the subject on a hit-or-miss basis. Periodicals focused on public administration and government follow suit.
- The academic nonprofit management and philanthropy centers that have evolved over the past decade generally include "volunteerism" in their mission statement, but neglect the topic in their course offerings. A review of registration brochures for both credit and non-credit courses reveals the usual emphasis on financial giving without acknowledgement of the giving of time and talents. It is rare to see even mention of "volunteers" as a bulleted subtopic in sessions about personnel management, community resources, collaboration, fundraising, or networking.
- A similar review of the agendas for professional conferences and meetings aimed at executives (national, state or local) comes up empty on the subject of volunteers. - Foundations and government granting agencies do not usually require a volunteer component to projects, nor do they ask for volunteer involvement data in reporting on the success of work they have funded. The common wisdom is that it is very difficult to raise money to cover the salary of a volunteer program manager, despite the argument of "leveraging" such a cost to produce services of far greater value.

We are talking about the need for a major change in attitude. If executives had the vision to see the power of volunteer involvement, they would welcome information and training to make the most of this resource. I am asking for some collective thinking on this issue. How do we:

- help those executives who truly understand the issues to be effective advocates to their peers?
- demonstrate the continuing "newsworthiness" of volunteering to the media that covers nonprofit and public administration issues?
- develop the capacity of Volunteer Centers and DOVIAs to be speakers and sources of information beyond the internal volunteer field?

I will, naturally, continue to tilt at this ever-present windmill. But I honestly don't know what new ideas to suggest. What do you think? If you've succeeded in educating executives in your community, how did you do it? Is there a way to use the Internet to bypass usual obstacles such as conference planning committees or publication editors?

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Submitted on 2002 July 3 by Colette Mandin, Coordinator of Volunteers, The Support Network, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

What gets the heat going? I want to respond to your statement about executives understanding fundraising but not people raising. This is true in our area as well and is reflected in planning, priority setting and attitudes. And yet, the value of contributed time for organizations often supercedes the financial support.

I'm not sure what the huge leap is in understanding that one is about cultivating relationships, and the other is about cultivating relationships! One is about supporting the organization and the other is about supporting the organization! Because the means to the end are different, there is a sudden leap of understanding. People raising is hugely important to both fundraising and volunteer support.

Volunteers are often donors, donors are often volunteers.

There sometimes, tho, seems to be a black hole between the management of the two. How can we, as volunteer human resource managers, get that message out?

Posted 6/23/00

Submitted by D.G., , B.C., Canada

I have to say this in defence of E.D.s, and please be aware that I am only speaking from my own experience. I do not have time to attend extra workshops on volunteerism, and my organization does not have the funds to pay for these workshops, which, from the ones I've seen offered, often cost a fair whack. Now, I understand when it's said that organizations need to make the investment. I understand the value of volunteers to an organization. I run a very efficient organization on two full-time staff and a load of volunteers. But to say, make the investment, when my co-worker and I are pushed to the wall to meet the requirements of our funders, our boards, and the needs of our clients and volunteers...? To invest money that, let's be frank, is such a struggle to get that we operate at the bare bones and have had to periodically lay off staff or reduce hours? The onus should not be on the E.D.s of underfunded, overworked organizations. We do care. We care very much. But like our very often low-income clients, we are too busy fighting for survival right now.

Submitted by Ellen Reaves, Program Coordinator, Friend Advocate Prog., NJ

Susan, this topic has frustrated me for years. I also believe that there is an issue with the salary levels in this profession. I don't understand why the boards of these agencies don't advocate more than they do because they are volunteering as well! I truly believe that if these Executive Directors personally contributed their time to a worthy cause, we would see a difference!

Submitted by Deborah Perkins, Director of Client Services, Boston, MA

In our non-profit organization (a pregnancy resource center), we have only five people on paid staff and over 100 volunteers. Volunteers do everything from answering phones to counseling to administrative and project-based work. But our staff - even the Exec. Director - is completely "pro-volunteering" because ALL of the staff have been in volunteer positions themselves at some time

(either with us or with other organizations). Our Exec. Director began working in another center as a volunteer receptionist and now (eight or ten years later) is running the show! Nothing will convince an executive of the value of volunteers more than personal experience as a volunteer. Perhaps the corporations who are requiring volunteer participation from all employees - even for one day each year - are onto something. It's hard to mistreat or overlook volunteers when you know what it's like to be one yourself! Leaders who SERVE become good and trusted leaders ("whoever would be great among you, let him be your servant" - Matthew 20:26).

Submitted by Sarah Elliston , Professional Development Associate , Cincinnati, Ohio USA

I guess I feel the same way - I am constantly educating managers of volunteer programs to educate their organizations, and the managers usually leave the organizations out of frustration and isolation before the educating can get done. I had one thought and that is that Nursing Homes and Hospice Programs, for profit, ARE required to involve volunteers if the organizations receive Medicare funds. It is the only government funding that DOES require volunteers, that I know of. We have had workshops for Ex Directors which were poorly attended, too, so I am afraid I haven't much wisdom there either. Sorry - I look forward to other readers' responses.

Submitted by Patricia Ann Salberg, Volunteer Resources Manager/The Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada Ottawa Carleton chapter, Ontario Canada

It is time that we managers of volunteer resources face facts. The bottom line is where it is at and it is an uphill battle raising awareness about volunteer management. More specifically to executives who are pre-occupied with the bottom line and who can blame them. In the eight years I have been working in this field I have felt at times elated and at times very discouraged, however I look back and see that my efforts to enlighten have not fallen on deaf ears but definitely are not moving in the fast lane.

We change peoples' attitudes by continuously educating and advocating. We must not get discouraged. We must acknowledge the status-quo but never accept it as a 'fait accompli'. We may never benefit greatly as a result of our efforts but our sons and daughters will. So like the pioneers of old each of us in our own way must forge ahead and do as good a job as possible. We each have the ear of our executive and we must bend it from time to time. If the mountain will not go to Mohammed etc... I always circulate your monthly hot topic to my director and all the board members. I just slip it in their mail slot. Thank you, you are reaching some and you don't even know it... keep up the good work. I don't know what I would do without your support.

Submitted by Mary Jo Harris, Volunteer Manager, Wisconsin Public Television, Madison, Wisconsin, USA

I belong to the Dane County Administrators of Volunteer Services (DCAVS) located in Madison, Wisconsin. We have started taking steps that will enable us to send "thank you" letters to the CEOs, Presidents, Directors, and Executive Directors of our member agencies. These letters will highlight

the involvement of the DCAVS member throughout the past year and "thank" the executive for the knowledge and foresight they had in encouraging their employee to participate in DCAVS. Of course, we will also stress the importance and value of volunteers in their agency and that the continued professional development of their managers will only enhance the agency's status and visibility. This letter is a beginning attempt at educating agency executives of the valuable, professional resource they have in their volunteer manager. Any ideas or suggestions for additions, enhancements, or more advanced education efforts are welcomed.

Submitted by Betty Stallings, President, Stallings and Associates, Pleasanton, California

Yes, Yes, Yes!!! For years I have thought if we are unable to capture the attention, understanding and support of executives we will continue to struggle with the same issues that have plagued this field since its inception. Frequently, after presenting a workshop on volunteer management, I hear a lamenting chorus, "I wish my E.D. had been here!"

The most innovative approach I have seen to focus on the partnership we need with ED's was sponsored by the excellent volunteer center in Calgary, Canada. They obtained foundation funding to sponsor a two day seminar on the team approach to a volunteer program. The team, as I remember, came as guests of the foundation and were to be represented by the ED, the Manager of Volunteers and a board member. (Minimally two had to be in attendance.) They had nearly 200 attend! After the seminar each team walked away with their own organizational plan to enhance their volunteer program. The foundation was so interested in this approach that they did periodic follow-up evaluations to determine its impact. I was privileged to be the facilitator of the event and personally left feeling that it was the most exciting (potentially impactful) workshop I had ever been a part of— primarily due to the involvement of the ED's, the support and attendance of funders and a very innovative and connected volunteer center.

I believe education of funders (an initiative has begun), and concerted efforts by Volunteer Center Directors (peers of ED's) must be mobilized. In terms of influence, we (volunteer managers) do have what administrators need (a means of enhancing the mission of the organization) and thus we should have success if we strategically think through our approach. I believe this issue is so important that there should be a think-tank on the subject. Something for you to set up in your spare time, Susan!

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