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## Volunteers as the "Third Branch" of an Organization

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

August

1997

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.

Do you share Sarah and my view of volunteers as the third component of the organization? If not, where do you think volunteers should fit into your organizational structure?

Thanks, Sarah! Now, let's hear from the rest of you.

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The perspectives offered by Sarah Elliston and Susan Ellis are interesting and thought-provoking. However, it seems to me that they are both assuming that all organizations that involve volunteers are large enough to have multiple paid employees. In many cases, there are only 1 or 2 paid employees. In organizations like this, paid staff clearly understand that their role is to support the volunteers (who are truly unpaid staff) as they perform the "real" work of the organization. In others, there are NO paid employees, so what are volunteers then if not unpaid staff?

***Response from Judi Curley, Volunteer Centre, Centre County, PA***

I found Susan's comments to be very interesting and thought provoking, especially since I have been taught to instruct paid staff to treat volunteers as they would a paid staff person. However, I have had problems with this approach myself and often find that I need to qualify the statement---"treat them as you would paid staff, only different!"

Treating volunteers just as unpaid staff elicits several problems, many of which I have witnessed working with various organizations on a consulting basis. Often staff members are not treated "properly" or, at least they perceive that they are not - where does this leave volunteers? Staff will only treat them well if they, themselves are treated well! Also, by enforcing "treat them like paid staff" we have to be careful that they then receive all of the same benefits as paid staff and are included in all staff activities. This is just not feasible in most organizations.

Susan's approach is a sound one as it promotes a team environment, not an "us-vs.-them" atmosphere. Staff have been confused - do they hold volunteers to the same standards and expectations that they do with paid staff? "Yes!" I tell them, but . . .then they see volunteers offered special recognition that they don't receive for doing the same work. Their work is clearly different, and maybe I've been misleading them. Maybe volunteers need their own, separate standards. In fact, I've been putting standards and expectations into their training manuals for years, and they have been different from staff expectations!

Volunteers enhance the work of an organization and should complement the work of their paid counterparts. Susan is right when she puts the emphasis on quality of customer service and how volunteers can contribute to that mission. The only term I'm not comfortable with is "third branch". "Third" has a connotation of last. Volunteers have long suffered from that status. Can anyone think of any other term for this extension of the organization?

Thanks Susan for your insight. I have shared your comments with the HR professionals I deal with.

***Response from Tina Grant-Mulvey, Consultant, Volunteer Visions, Connecticut USA.***

I think this idea of volunteers as a third branch of an organization is very interesting and fruitful indeed. My perspective is quite theoretical as I am interested in creating new models for learning organizations etc. What I have been thinking about lately is that could we possibly incorporate cutting edge know-how in this manner too or are all the highly paid/busy professionals not interested in doing volunteer work? At least in our different multi-cultural & international projects we have found that at times even a very small input of a true professional has helped us tremendously - could this concept perhaps be explored? Creating a network of talented people would be a good start.

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