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Beyond Common Sense: Volunteer Management as a Specialty

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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2003

Two incidents occurred this past week that reminded me yet again of one of the major challenges facing us in this field: the assumption that “everyone knows” how to work with volunteers.

The first incident involved an organization for which I am just ending a two-year extensive consultation. As so often happens, board member rotation recently brought some new volunteers into leadership positions, including the person responsible for implementing the member involvement plan. The new volunteer was fully briefed on the consultation project by the president, executive director, and me, yet she did not take advantage of any of the expertise offered to her. Last week, at the organization’s annual conference, she distributed a survey that no one had seen in advance. It violated every principle of volunteer recruitment, from not defining the things that needed to be done to having no follow up plan to contact possibly 200 prospects who expressed interest.

The second incident was less important, but typical. In a casual conversation with someone who had just introduced herself as a consultant on the new HIPAA regulations in health care (American legislation that tightens the rules on the privacy of medical records), I mentioned that I, too, had seen the ripple effects of HIPAA on volunteer services in hospitals. Clearly surprised, she asked me to explain. Almost immediately she began to speak of volunteers as “unauthorized” personnel, arguing with what I was telling her about the role of volunteer services or the screening and placement techniques employed by an effective director of volunteer services.

Both of these experiences go beyond a benign lack of understanding. They represent various degrees of hostility to the very suggestion that someone can, in fact, have some expertise on the subject of volunteers – an attitude of my opinions on this are equal to yours.

First Know What You Do Not Know

What is it about our field that everyone thinks they know how to do or how to interpret it? Why would anyone assume that working with volunteers is simply a matter of instinct, common sense, and being nice?

One reason is that everyone can *be* a volunteer—and so many people have had a volunteer experience personally. So they somehow extrapolate that “being a volunteer” is the same as “managing volunteers.” A wild leap of logic! In workshops, I always get a laugh when I compare this assumption to saying: “I’ve *had* brain surgery, so I can *do* brain surgery.” Perhaps a tiny bit of education might need to occur first? Well, the same is true about knowing what it takes to be successful in running a volunteer program.

Now extend this faulty reasoning to some very practical issues in our field:

- Executives who hire a volunteer program manager largely based on “what volunteering have you done?” rather than professional credentials or experience in coordinating volunteers. This includes promoting a volunteer program secretary or long-time volunteer to director (unless such individuals can demonstrate management effectiveness).
- Newcomers to our field (who took the job for exactly the same reason as it was offered, see above), rarely spend their first weeks on the job seeking information. I can’t tell you how often I’ve heard: “Wow! I can’t believe all the resources Energize offers! I never knew I could get this sort of stuff.” But did you *look*? Unlike the isolation of practitioners even a decade ago, the Internet makes it so easy today for anyone to do a search on “volunteer management” and find hundreds of sites with worthwhile material. It simply requires a mindset of self-education, if someone recognizes that there is something to learn.
- Volunteers remain the invisible and ignored subject in just about every academic program on philanthropy, nonprofit management, and public administration. Hours of classroom time are spent on fund raising, none on people raising. There is an insidious effect of this neglect: it implies that there is nothing to say on the subject! So why are we surprised that people earn a degree or certificate, move into executive positions, and make uninformed decisions about volunteer involvement in their agencies?
- Every political administration in the US since Kennedy has called for more “civic engagement” (this year’s popular term for volunteering). And this is true in other countries right now, too, including the formerly Communist nations that have been flooded with consultants urging the American nonprofit model. No matter how often we protest, the rhetoric remains focused on recruiting, motivating, or exhorting people to give their time. Yet the real challenge is preparing organizations to be effective in accepting such volunteers. Unless and until government and private funders “get” this basic fact, calls to action will ultimately fail.

You can test this oblivious under-estimating of our work in conversations with your friends, too. Try discussing some issue you’re tackling at work and listen to what and how your acquaintances respond. They will immediately assume that they can help you and often will start explaining something that happened in some volunteering they’ve done. Now, if you were an electrical engineer

and shared a current work problem, do you think everyone would presume their uneducated opinion would be helpful?

What Can We Do?

This is not just another whine (though it's comforting to vent). I think we can each do small things to improve the situation. Here are three of my ideas:

- We should challenge ignorance when we hear it. Whether it's our best friend or our boss, we need to respond to stereotyping or wrong assumptions expressed with some variation of "well, actually, that is not state-of-the-art thinking in my field..."
- Submit reports on volunteer activity that include the work done to facilitate it as well as simply the product. For example, report that you interviewed more candidates than you accepted, how many hours of orientation and training you offered to volunteers, or what types of support you gave to staff to help them be better teammates with volunteers.
- Be proactive in bringing volunteer-relevant issues to the attention of our co-workers. For example, after attending a workshop or conference, send a memo or give a short presentation at a staff meeting about trends you just heard that are likely to have an impact on your setting.

Lack of acceptance of our special expertise is critical and not just annoying. It goes to the heart of our profession and of the support volunteers deserve. As with so many other things, the solution starts with us. We need to value our skills and confront those who assume their "common sense" equates with our experience.

What ideas for taking action do *you* suggest?

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Submitted on 03Sept28 by Tricia Passuth, Community Medical Center, New Jersey USA

I strongly feel that Volunteer Management needs to be considered a profession. Our field needs more credibility and awareness. I have worked with a large hospital system for 11 years with 8 being the Volunteer Director. My program consisted of 1,200 active volunteers. However with the healthcare crisis rising our hospital, as many had to, resorted to lay offs. My position has been eliminated moreover proving that, as always, the person running the volunteer program is expendable. I will continue my career in volunteer management at some future time. Until then, keep up the fight and let the administrators know this important field's worth!

Submitted on 25Sept03 anonymously from British Columbia, Canada

The issue of bringing professionalism to our field has long been discussed. I believe in using precise terminology to educate. Over the years it has become obvious to me that the perception of "anyone can be a volunteer manager" has come about from our job titles. Being a "volunteer program manager," "volunteer coordinator," "volunteer administrator" or such implies that the position itself is

volunteer (unpaid). It in no way illustrates the expertise involved in running such programs or departments. This is why we, here in British Columbia, have chosen to use the title "Manager of Volunteer Resources". It defines us as managers within our organization and conveys that we work within certain guidelines and professional practices.

Once we start using professional terminology we will be taken seriously.

Submitted on 18Sept2003 by Suellen Carlson, Director of Volunteers, Lutheran Social Service, New York State

What a great topic! I just finished an event with 300 + volunteers who were all trained and supported. At the same event, and without my knowledge, another person recruited some of her own volunteers. Yikes! What on earth is someone thinking to turn loose a teenager with an attitude and a cellphone? Also, a young boy with a volunteer badge was found on the roof of one of our buildings with three of his friends. The staff looked at me like I had lost my mind. The volunteers who work here are second to none. They are professional, competent, and involved. They range in age from 11 to 90+. They deserve to have a supervisor who values them and their contributions. Volunteering is important work. In the same way that everyone doesn't get a job here, everyone does not get to volunteer here. I expect the same things from volunteers that are expected from paid staff.

Submitted on 11Sept2003 by Hillary Roberts, President Project Linus NJ, Inc. NJ/USA

"I encourage everyone to review your job description. Be sure it reflects what you do, and punch it up with action words to describe your duties. We can all do that-and it might begin to make a difference."

Excellent suggestion, I would only add that we then SHARE our job descriptions with others and not file them away for review time. Isolation can keep the wheels of insight from reaching important doorways!

As for experts, never met one. In any profession, shouldn't this be a life journey, with education and opportunity a constant? SHARE what you know, but never stop learning.

Submitted on 9Sept2003 by Marti Sowka, RSVP Director, Portage County Department on Aging, Wisconsin

I agree that we need to change the language we use to change attitudes about our profession. My position is considered program director within the agency. My job description says I have "primary responsibility for planning, developing, organizing and administering a comprehensive program of volunteer service opportunities for people age 55 and over in Portage County. Responsibilities include: recruiting, training, placing, supervising and recognizing volunteers; identifying and developing volunteer opportunities; program development and evaluation; budgeting and fiscal monitoring; writing federal and state grant proposals, providing comprehensive volunteer management assistance to community public and non-profit agencies."

Whew-no wonder I'm tired at the end of the day! I encourage everyone to review your job description. Be sure it reflects what you do, and punch it up with action words to describe your duties. We can all do that-and it might begin to make a difference.

Submitted on 8Sept03 by Marsha Riddle, Retired, North Carolina

Volunteer Management has been my profession for over 38 years. I recently retired and have become a volunteer for a number of organizations in the local community. What an awakening. The management of volunteers is truly nonexistent in many local organizations, even those whose parent organization are national leaders. Managing volunteers is more than common sense.....It is indeed a profession with challenges like no other. The involvement of volunteers to successfully help organizations reach their goals requires constant assessment, training and involvement of staff and evaluation internally as well as the recruitment, training, placement, management, motivation, and mediation necessary to support the volunteer in their day to day roles. The organization I am working with have no job descriptions and do not keep records except for minutes of meetings. The hours of work done is not valued, only the dollars I raise or the money I give.

Our greatest gift to give is ourselves and the management and recognition of our time by professional volunteer administrators is truly essential if the non-profit organizations are to remain healthy.

In the future, my money will go where volunteers are involved and appreciated for more than fundraising and money.

Submitted anonymously on 4Sept03 from Washington, USA

I agree wholeheartedly. I have found in 25 years of working with volunteers, recruiting, interviewing, training, placing and keeping volunteers that Non-profits want someone to handle volunteers in a way that will implement their ideas without having the "Volunteer Coordinator" be a part of the planning. Another thing I have experienced is, "It's easy, people want to volunteer you just sign them up, don't tell anyone no." I also see it as cost cutting, if we let the secretary do the job we don't have to pay a professional.

Submitted on 4Sept03 by Merle Walker, Volunteer Program Manager, Ohio

I agree with you and I also feel that volunteer managers are much of the problem. I never look at myself as just a volunteer coordinator/manager. I think of my work as personnel management for the unpaid employees. This is also how my agency looks at it. Because so many of us started in this business of managing volunteers without a clue or vision of the scope of the job, many have made up things along the way not understanding there is an art and guidelines to management and being a volunteer manager. We have to re-think how we look at ourselves in management.

Submitted on 4Sept03 by Pat Gillis, Director Volunteer Resources, Vancouver, BC Canada

Man! Susan once again you hit it right on! How many times a week does this happen - disrespect for our role as professionals and that of the volunteers themselves? I've lost count!

I am currently enrolled in a Masters Program - graduate level University minds at work with experienced, intelligent middle managers - all in health care!

During our online discussions one fellow discounts the use of volunteers at the Information desk since "some of the information accessed is of a confidential nature".

Since when does a paycheque make a person more respectful of 'confidentiality'? Most breeches I am aware of occur with intelligent medical professionals having indiscreet conversations in the middle of the hall or lobby areas!

Thanks for the opportunity to vent.

Anonymously submitted on 4Sept03

Pray to God for guidance, patience and humility, and don't get so hung up on these issues. I agree with many of your points, but your tone is very defensive, even hostile. There are just as many people out there who DO understand the challenges of volunteer management. Perhaps you haven't met enough of them.

Submitted on 4Sept03 by Ben Young, Education and Research, Scotland

Thank you for the guidance from everyone, especially Judy and Susan. I am particularly grateful as I have been engaged to provide training in volunteer management for a network of voluntary organisations in China, and I wanted to be able to provide something more than generalisations based on experience. The material on the Energize website is excellent, particularly the Scheier archive. (*Ben's earlier response is at the [end of this page](#)*)

If any of you want to send me Confucian-style wisdom on volunteer management for me to include in the training I'd be really glad to hear from you! (You could reply off list to ben_young@postmaster.co.uk.)

Thanks again; great discussion.

Submitted on 4Sept03 by Debbie Anderson, Coordinator, Volunteer Resources, Niagara Health System, Ontario, Canada

The on-going battle to educate other employees within our organizations, potential volunteers and other community members about our role as VPM can be daunting. My philosophy is that I must present myself as a professional to be regarded as a professional. We need to pave the path to educate others. Take advantage of internal communication processes, involve others from our organizations in our teams, advertise our results - that's the way to spread the word. I manage more than 500 volunteers at 2 hospitals within an 8 hospital health system and raising the profile of my programs and our dedicated un-paid staff is one important responsibility of my position.

I also teach Volunteer Management, a post-diploma program at our local college for those who are considering this profession as a career or are already working in the field and realize that "related"

education doesn't cut it. In response to the comment about college courses on volunteer management being "pretty cursory," I don't believe this to be true. In my opinion, these courses, if facilitated by professionals working in the field, offer a new-comer the required knowledge and skills to effectively manage a team of volunteers in any setting. Continuing education, however, is key, regardless if you have been a course participant or a facilitator. Our profession is in constant evolution, and to be successful we need to be prepared to be learning constantly too.

Submitted on 4Sept03 by Nancy Barros, Former Director American Red Cross, now in Alaska

One way I got paid staff to appreciate and understand volunteer issues was to "encourage" each one to give 4 hours of paid time off per month to volunteer with another organization. They would have to have their position covered (by volunteers) and they were required to report back to the group what they learned. What happened was some organizations did a great orientation, some did not; some found a place for them to work, some did not; some treated them like staff, some treated them like slaves. The lessons were endless. It gave each person a unique perspective of how they might be treating their volunteers or what they weren't doing. It was like managing by mirrors. The lessons were obvious - which helped me as a Director to spend more time with other issues, because the most important issue was being acknowledged.

Submitted on 3Sept03 by Judy Tymowicz, Executive Director, Volunteer Centers of Michigan MI, U.S.

Ben, Thank you for asking the question. (See his response [below](#).) Because of your position, and your work area, it further corroborates Susan's contention (not that she is ever contentious :-), of course) that volunteer management is not recognized as a professional body of knowledge and skills needing practitioners who read and study it as a worthy professional interest. One of the issues is that organizations, aside from some of the larger agencies, do not value volunteer management, have no tradition to pass on and see it only as a cost-cutter. I have been doing a lot of volunteer management training lately, and am ever surprised by the eagerness that participants have to learn even the very basics of the issues. Most often they are unaware of the literature, have not heard of the most prominent researchers, authors and speakers, and are not connected to listservs, electronic publishing, or national, state or local organizations that serve our field. We must upgrade the field by educating each other and insisting the people hired know how to learn and where to find that information. Energize, Inc. and others have been most generous in pointing out the directions that our field must take. We all need to be just as generous in following that lead and educating others, particularly board members. In the U.S., Points of Light and the Volunteer Center National Network have a new curriculum that many Volunteer Centers are using to teach the basics of volunteer management. Check with your local Volunteer Center by calling 1-800-VOLUNTEER, and ask when the next sessions are taking place. Many colleges also offer a course (often pretty cursory, however) that would help you know how to continue as a self-learner.

Note from Susan: Thanks for your response, Judy -- I hope Ben finds it helpful (I'm also e-mailing with him off-list). However, as he is from Scotland, I wanted to make sure that he and any other non-Americans realize how many resources on volunteerism exist outside the US. In fact, right there in Scotland he has one of the best national volunteer centers in Volunteer Development Scotland, as well as the extremely active SAVM -

Scottish Association of Volunteers Managers. To see other international resources, go to our [Information and Exchange](#) area.

Submitted on 3Sept03 by Rosanna Tarsiero, Volunteer Manager and Coordinator, Bipolar Dream

I think that one key factor of this attitude (ie: VPMs need no particular expertise) is that everybody has human relationships. Be they successful or not, people think that they are entitled to advise and VPMs think they don't need training for the very same reason: because "after all it's a matter of human relationships". It's a tough topic, because nobody likes to be reminded that s/he could not know enough about communication without feeling stupid. So, many VPMs simply overlook the problem and blame it on a "difficult" volunteer. Learning how to manager volunteers never ends and takes personal introspective efforts, willingness to never stop learning, exploring our limits, acceptance of our mistakes and seek for knowledge. Unfortunately, if you don't have such a drive, it's a very hard job. But if you have it, it's very rewarding.

Submitted on 3Sept03 by Brenda J. Greenberg, Director of Vol. Services, Northern Services Group, Rockland County, New York, USA

I think it is most important for volunteer directors to keep our own supervisors informed on what we are doing. I do a weekly report on my activities, a monthly report on contacts I have made either via the Internet or responses to media releases and the results of interviewing possible volunteers, a semi annual and an annual report showing the types of volunteers I have recruited, their placements and the dollar value of the volunteer hours served during the various periods of time. The dollar value is based on the determination of Independent Sector, and the totals become very impressive. This, being a concrete measure, shows those who have doubts of the value of volunteers, what precious material they have.

Submitted on 3Sept03 by Susan Peacock Reehl, Program Director, WestArk RSVP (Retired & Senior Volunteer Program), Arkansas, USA

Amen! It is disheartening to work with non-profits who rely heavily on volunteers - but appoint the secretary to coordinate volunteer activities. They never understand why they don't get the volunteers they want - but they refuse to take the time to develop volunteer job descriptions. They are appalled when volunteers leave - but never consider asking volunteers for input on their jobs.

I've spent the last several months trying to arrange funding for specialized training (Certified Volunteer Management training-CVM) for Volunteer Coordinators - without success because the community doesn't see the need. United Way prefers to train board members. If I raise the funds for the training only half the organizations will take part because the Executive Directors won't allow their Volunteer Coordinators 12 days of training within a year. We formed a local chapter of the Arkansas Volunteer Coordinators Association attendance is great every month but turnover rate is 50% among the volunteer professionals.

Locally we can't seem to make people connect the dots. The need for volunteers is greater than ever. I've got a corps of retired professionals willing to volunteer and 25 requests from non-profit

organizations for someone to answer the phone!

Submitted on 3Sept03 by Christy Trudo, Lay Leadership and Ministry Coordinator, Ohio, USA

As Coordinator of Lay Ministry for a Protestant denomination I see this attitude strongly in the church. Pastors are not trained specifically to deal with this unusual hybrid organization which is not only "staffed" but led by volunteers. One assumption which may contribute to this casual attitude applies to other organizations as well: that when people volunteer, they are automatically motivated positively, and are motivated to act in a way that accords entirely with the organization's purpose. They thus simply have to be "plugged in".

Larger churches which have a position of Volunteer Coordinator (which is likely to go by a number of different names) will frequently not hire a person with professional expertise, no doubt often because of finances. The senior pastor often does not expect this staff person to be a true colleague but simply to execute the church's plans. (It's hard to tell which of these facts causes the other!) How much better off churches would be to hire a highly trained person, if only part time or as a consultant.

Thanks for your good work and "witness".

Submitted on 3Sept03 by Ginne Hendrickson, Patient and Family Services Coordinator, Jamestown Hospital, Jamestown, ND

I agree with you, Susan. It is a constant battle to educate EVERYONE on the special skills of volunteer management.

I'd like to add that one of the things we need to change, in my area at least, is the title of Coordinator. Organizations want to call us Coordinators. What does that imply? Why, we simply make sure this person is here at that time and that person is there at that time. That is all they think we do. Sadly, that IS all some organizations allow their paid volunteer staff to do. With all the regulations like HIPAA that we have to deal with, we are far from coordinators.

It is up to us to be sure we receive the respect we deserve. I'm working on it and I hope others are too.

Submitted on 3Sept03 by Mary Ryan, Manager, Community Resources, Southlake Regional Health Centre, Newmarket, Ontario, Canada

I totally agree with Susan's thoughts regarding "Beyond Common Sense." In my four years as manager of a hospital-wide volunteer program, I have come across this attitude both in and outside the organization on occasion. I have chosen to try and positively affect thinking regarding volunteers by continuously and consistently using language and methods that align with human resources management expertise. I have found that people in my organization can more easily relate and understand to my role and the role of my department when asked to think of us as an HR Department focused on our unpaid or unsalaried staff i.e. volunteers. I have also found it helpful to develop a Scope of Services document to enable staff to see the range of services we offer but more importantly so that they are aware of what we are not responsible for and therefore their duties and

responsibilities as staff. Sometimes it has truly been an "ah ha" moment for people. My career in volunteer management has been relatively short compared to some but I have found that the difference between the role of the HR Manager and myself is that she does not have to continually educate others re: her role - HR management is seen as a legitimate and worthy profession - no explanations required! It can get tiring but I believe worth the effort to persevere.

Submitted on 2Sept03 by Marjorie Moore, RISE Project and Volunteer Development Coordinator, Radio Information Service for the Blind and Print Handicapped, Illinois- USA

Like many other Volunteer Directors (or Volunteer Development Coordinators as I am called) I fell into the position. I took another position in our organization and the volunteers were added to make my position full time. When I accepted the challenge, I had no idea that I would be responsible for managing 150 people. I had no idea that each of these people would want vacations or that they all had different needs. I had no idea that the volunteer files had fallen to shambles and would need to be completely overhauled. I didn't know that we would need to constantly recruit to make up for our constant turn over and growth.

I agree that volunteer directors need to be more educated, but it was not until I spoke to another volunteer director that it even occurred to me that there were resources and organizations out there for us. Before that I stumbled along just doing it as we had always done it, which come to find out was the wrong way, but we had survived for 30 years doing it the wrong way. Now we are flourishing with the right direction, the staff is more responsive to volunteer involvement, and we have created more volunteer positions and I believe our programs are more fulfilling. I think a big thing is the network of volunteer directors. I would have never known about the resources if a more experienced director had not have mentioned it to me. I say seek out novices and show them the information. If they are like I was, they are too overwhelmed to begin looking for help.

Submitted on 2Sept03 by Ben Young, Education and Research, Scottish Civic Forum, Scotland

I totally agree that having been a volunteer is not enough to know how to manage a volunteer. But what more is involved? I had assumed that the role of Volunteer Manager involved a combination of general skills such as personnel management, conflict resolution and project management. I did not think that there could be any skills specific to Volunteer Management. After reading the article I feel ignorant, as if I have found out about a new subject I wasn't previously aware of. What what are the main principles of this subject, if they are not the ones I listed above?

Comments from Readers

Submitted on May 11th, 2017

Anonymous, Clute, TX 77531, USA

My employer was looking for a volunteer, volunteer coordinator. They couldn't find one. I had been working here for many years and wanted to cut back to part time, so it is working well

for both of us. I am very thankful that the new Director and board sees the value of a coordinator. Though my only professional schooling on volunteering is a 24 hour class class at Rice University in Houston, which was excellent.

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