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On Being a Dream-Catcher

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Energize is very excited about the Ivan Scheier's book, *Making Dreams Come True without Money, Might or Miracles*. You can learn more about the book in our [online bookstore](#), but its release has evoked a reflective response in me that I've decided to explore as this month's Hot Topic.

On the surface, Ivan's book may not seem directly connected to volunteer management. Indeed, this is a book that I feel has the potential for a much wider audience, including volunteers themselves. Ivan considers dreams: why they so often die and why a few live and prosper. He further examines how anyone can be both a dreamer or a "Dream-Catcher"--a person who nurtures the dream-chaser towards accomplishing the dream. In the book, he gives "rules" for both dreamers and Dream-Catchers, and offers a blueprint for how to support rather than kill off the vision.

Those of you who have met Ivan in person and who have participated in one of his many Challenge Think Tanks will immediately recognize this terminology. But many of you do not know Ivan except through his books and his new online Archive at <http://www.regis.edu/spsmm/dovia/ivan>. All this about dreams may sound very "New Age" and mystical. And when you learn that Ivan is going to be 75, lives in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, and these days is a Reiki practitioner, you'll really wonder whether Energize is off on a cloud somewhere!

The Essence of Volunteerism is Dreams

As we prepare to start 2001 as The International Year of Volunteers, I can't think of a better time to reaffirm that the very essence of volunteerism is, in fact, dreams. Consider:

- Volunteering is inherently an optimistic activity. No one volunteers for a cause they assume is hopeless. So the very act of participation implies a dream: this problem *can* be solved, this cause *can* succeed, this effort *can* make a difference.
- Volunteers have always been--and continue to be--on the cutting edge. They recognize issues and the need for change before anyone else does. Often they have to drag the Establishment kicking and screaming into a new way of doing things. If it hasn't been done before, someone

has to *imagine* it first. The citizen volunteers who founded every organization and institution in most cultures were profound dreamers. Martin Luther King said, “Keep your eyes on the prize.” That’s exactly what volunteers do.

- When work is also one’s livelihood, the job becomes an end unto itself. Yes, it is possible for someone to be very dedicated to a job and to be lucky enough to get paid for working toward a worthwhile social goal. But there’s a lot of interference: pay and benefits, career ladders, overwork and fatigue. Volunteers, on the other hand, escape what Ivan would call such “anchors.” As an activity of choice, unconnected to earning a living, volunteering frees the doer to focus on what she or he *wants* to do, even if there isn’t any money with which to do it. Dream-chasing is limited only by imagination and energy.

In our efforts to professionalize volunteer management, to calculate the worth of volunteer services in the gross national product, to develop policies and minimize risk, it is easy to miss the forest for the trees. We must never become so focused on the nuts-and-bolts of effective “management” of volunteers--doing things the paid staff wants them to do--that we forget our role as *facilitators* of what volunteers want to do.

Here are three examples of how we can all be Dream-Catchers:

1. Welcome mavericks.

In general, very few organizations (including most volunteer centers and even all-volunteer associations) are comfortable with people who march to the beat of a different drummer. How do we react if someone enthusiastically proposes a new idea for how to deliver service or even for what service to deliver? Are we willing to experiment or do we dismiss the different vision as naive, uninformed, or amateur? We ought to make the volunteer program the place that new ideas can be tested.

2. Foster “social entrepreneurship.”

The traditional model is for the organization to define a need or problem, decide how it will be handled, and recruit employees and volunteers to fill predetermined job descriptions. Maybe we can allow creative thinking to thrive. For example, why not recruit volunteers who are concerned about the need or problem and challenge them to “find ways to do something about this”?

3. Give permission to dream.

The volunteer program can dedicate itself to foster dreaming. On a regular basis, hold think tanks or at least “idea discussions” on questions such as:

- If we were to start from scratch, what would you do differently?
- In an ideal world, what would you like to see happen?
- What idea has no one ever tried that you think might work?

- If you were given an unrestricted grant of \$10,000 (or whatever amount you wish), what would you spend it on?

Don't just involve volunteers in these sessions. Paid staff rarely are permitted to dream and there is no reason why the volunteer office can't be the one place they are welcome to do so. And how about involving clients in speaking for themselves about what they'd like? One model of volunteering is self-help. Perhaps instead of always recruiting outside volunteers, maybe we can engage recipients of service in helping each other or at least in steering the organization toward greater impact.

How do YOU think leaders of volunteers can enable dreaming?

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Posted 12/9/00

Submitted by Pat Harrell, Director, Volunteer Programs, Lutheran Medical Center Community Foundation, Colorado, USA

Mavericks of the world unite and we shall prevail! The hospital setting in which I work is not noted for encouraging dream chasing and is, in fact, almost prohibited from doing so by the stifling rules and regulations and regulatory issues which govern our industry. Although my staff members' eyes roll and faces blanch every time I begin a sentence with "What if....?" we have succeeded in converting some dreams to operating services. With the encouragement of Susan and Ivan and the previous responders, I intend to set a 2001 goal of becoming a major dream catcher by recruiting volunteers with the courage to look past the skeptics and eye-rollers and the creativity to make the system work for, not against dream catching. Thanks, Susan, for the affirmation.

Posted 12/9/00

Submitted by Patricia Semark-Jullien, Voluntary Services Manager, NHS, Southampton UK

Mavericks Aren't we all "Mavericks" by virtue of the very nature of our work? I have never yet met a Voluntary Services Manager who is a shrinking violet, - and how refreshing when a whole bunch of us get together! Volunteers come from all walks of life and each one brings in something special, but that is not because they are volunteers, but PEOPLE. The real problem is the bureaocracy many establishments are so enmeshed in and swimming against the tide makes us all look far more rebellious than we really are. the main issue however seems to be that we are "neither fish nor fowl" and don't really fit into the mainstream hospital structure. it's a closely guarded secret that I think that I probably have the best job of the lot!!!

Posted 12/7/00

Submitted by Kate Munro, Mater Community Integration Manager, Newcastle Mater Hospital , New South Wales, Australia

As usual Susan you capture the conversation everyone is having at this time of the year - end of 2000, beginning of 2001. As a manager of volunteers working in an institution (hospital) I have often felt as if

I am swimming in a different stream to my work colleagues but it is often the Volunteers who keep me thankfully swimming in this direction because they truly understand what it is all about and bring such dreams and visions for care to their work environment every day. God Bless dreamers and mavericks as without them we would be living in a very dull world. I wish everyone a very Merry Christmas and a Fabulous International Year Of Volunteers -here in Australia we are starting to wear our shorts and sunscreen and looking forward to spending time on the beach!

Posted 12/7/00

Submitted by Linda Fletcher, Co-ordinator of Volunteers, Brisbane - Australia

I agree with your comments regarding paid workers. Although having a dream also, we do get caught up in the day-to-day administration duties, meetings, management issues etc. We also have to conform to the way the organisation is seeing our roles and the roles of the volunteers. Perhaps that need for a "living" as you put it, restricts us from taking risks too often, not knowing what the consequences may be.

Posted 12/1/00

Submitted by Evelyn Ewing, Volunteer Director, Lenexa, Ks.

Mavericks are misunderstood so many times, and can be classified as rebellious. All of us who fit into that title know that we are the dreamers. We also are the action people, the risk takers, putting our necks on the line for what we believe in. It is so rewarding to envision a program, put it together with people and funding and then watch the happiness unfold before your very eyes as those involved receive the greatest gifts of all the joy of meeting needs, changing lives and peoples situations. Thank God Mavericks have a chance to be who they are and do what they love doing.

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