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# Spring Cleaning: Take a Fresh Look at Your Volunteer Program

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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It's Spring in the Northern hemisphere and we're opening windows, letting in fresh air and sun. As is traditional, this is the time for closet cleaning, fix-up projects, and other winter's-over activities. Why not apply the same mindset to volunteer management?

Volunteer programs tend to take on more and more tasks without ever stopping to consider whether "more" makes sense without divesting from older, less useful work at the same time. If we buy new clothes we have to make room in the closet for them. When was the last time you "made room" for fresh volunteer activities - or for allowing yourself space to think, dream, and plan?

**Here are some strategies to consider.**

You are not alone with your dust cloth! The more people you can engage in the "fresh look" process the more likely real change will occur. Form a "Spring Cleaning" task force of 6 to 8 volunteers (some who've been around a long time and some new ones) and paid staff supervisors to help steer the assessment process. Invite a volunteer management colleague from another agency to sit in, too - maybe you can exchange your services and help two volunteer programs in the process.

The task force will help you determine how you will collect evaluative feedback from program participants: what you want to know, who are the best people to ask, and how you will obtain and then analyze the information. If you like the "Spring Cleaning" theme, focus your attention on identifying areas or issues that have gotten stale, musty, and in need of change. Work on formulating questions that will reveal useful information about those areas.

Take each volunteer assignment area and really examine it. Why was this role created in the first place? Is this still a vital need? What is the impact of this work and on whom? Can we recommit to its value or have circumstances changed enough to question if this is still the best way to ask volunteers to contribute their time?

Consider the work of your organization and the needs of the people you serve. What are the most pressing concerns today? Assess whether volunteer activities are addressing the most critical needs or the peripheral ones. What else might volunteers do that would be of greater help?

Even if you determine that current volunteer assignments are still valid, ask volunteers: "If we had to cut one activity out of your assignment, what could we eliminate with the least amount of negative impact?" Then ask the paid staff the same question from their point of view: "If we had to cut one thing that volunteers do in their assignment...."

#### **Other good questions to ask volunteers:**

- What skills or talents do you have that we have never asked you to apply on our behalf?
- What needs do you think our clients have that we don't seem to be addressing?
- What would make volunteering here even better?

And it's always ok to ask respondents: "What else would you like to tell us?"

Now get out that "back burner" list of new program ideas that has been sitting around for a long time. Toss these out to your Spring Cleaning Task Force and see which ideas generate enthusiasm. How might some of these possibilities become reality? What might you stop doing to make room for something new?

It's also important to ask *yourself*: "What tasks am I doing now that I'd love to remove from my to-do list?" (Then assess whether you still, in fact, need to do each of these, or can stop doing them, or could recruit a volunteer to do some or all of it instead.)

Finally, invite a colleague to your office and together take a look at your shelves and files. As you explain what you have in the office, think about whether you really need items at your fingertips out in the open. Or might some go into files, be boxed for storage, or even--gasp!--be thrown out? What about your books and reference materials? Are any still unread that you might schedule to read soon? Does your colleague want to borrow anything? Then go and visit your colleague's office and reciprocate!

So, are you ready to grab that mental broom? Please share how you've done program assessment (any tips?) and what you did as a result. Have you ever eliminated a volunteer assignment? Why? How?

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***Submitted 17 July 2007 by Andrea Hildreth, Volunteer Manager, Bread & Roses, California, USA***

I came to the web desperate for help with one or two volunteer issues. Your article led to my realization that I do not need help with one or two issues, our entire volunteer program needs review and redesign. I plan to employ your Spring Cleaning system with enthusiasm, omitting only the

inclusion of a colleague. Thank you for aiding me in this vision and providing the format to make it happen.

***Submitted 2002 May 28 by Colleen Kelly, Executive Director, Volunteer Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada***

I think this hot topic is too limited. It's about more than spring cleaning the volunteer program - it's about spring cleaning the entire organization. We have to flip-flop everything we're doing in all our organizations to involve volunteers more effectively. And that means (non-violently!) getting rid of staff as well as volunteers. How many of us are up for that challenge?

***Submitted 2002 May 24 by Sue Kelley, Coordinator of Volunteer Services, United Community Ministries, Virginia***

A really great topic. Like many others, I have been super busy with spring activities. This article comes at just the right time. My goals and objectives for the new fiscal year beginning in July are on target with this "Hot Topic". We have grown really "stagnant, musty, and in need of change" (and those words are hard to admit to). I have been working on a tool to use to begin the "spring cleaning" process and your article is a great resource.

***Submitted 2002 May 20 by Laurie Pagel, Income Development Specialist American Cancer Society, WI/US***

It has become glaringly obvious to me that I do need to eliminate the chairperson on one of my committees along with most of her friends who are also on the committee. They plan a special event which helps raise funds for my organization, but none of them like to fundraise! I'm positive if my chairperson leaves, the other volunteers will go with her as she is the one who brought them all on board. While she isn't a good fundraiser, she is influential in the community and I need at least some people to run the event this year. The question here is how do I "fire" some volunteers and still keep my event going in the community?"

***Submitted 2002 May 17 by Diane Liepper, Leipper Management Group***

I think Susan's ideas regarding Spring Cleaning are great. It seems we spend all our time getting programs up and running and getting volunteers to fill needed positions then breath a sigh of relief, go on to the next project, and let the program sink or swim on its own. The responses seem to indicate the two major reasons why more people don't appear to be enthused about spring cleaning - time and fear of opening Pandora's box.

I think if we would choose to make the time to get a Spring Cleaning committee up and running, using Susan's suggestions as a starting point for developing the structure, it would save time and volunteers in the long run. It is a great way to catch any trouble spots before a program fails or a volunteer leaves and we wonder why. A lot of the suggestions could fit right in with accountability and documentation needs that we already have to do for our agencies.

Most concerns about opening Pandora's box can be minimized by a well structured committee, clear goals, and good communication. Getting volunteers involved in assessing, evaluating, and implementing changes not only brings in new ideas, it enhances ownership, and provides opportunities for growth and new skill development. That in addition to taking a hard look at your programs and weeding out, revamping, and/or enhancing duties and opportunities all help keep your programs fresh and up to date which tends to build stronger volunteer commitment.

***Submitted 2002May15 by Janet Hayley, Manager of Volunteers, Ontario***

I liked the topic! I am very surprised it did not strike a responsive chord with other readers (see [Susan's comments](#)) Perhaps they, like myself, are caught in the spring whirlwind - the flurry of spring events & workshops, Volunteer Appreciation events, end-of-year deadlines etc. I scanned and printed your article but had no time until now to respond to it. Besides the above activities, this is the time of year when we update volunteer records, and I found the suggested questions to ask volunteers VERY helpful. Though forming a committee is unlikely (nice if you have the luxury of time) I have been inspired to take a fresh look "to identify areas or issues that have gotten stale, musty, and in need of change. Another point that I considered to be relevant: "Consider the work of your organization and the needs of the people you serve. What are the most pressing concerns today? Assess whether volunteer activities are addressing the most critical needs or the peripheral ones". These are good challenging thoughts. Even if I do not attack the Spring Cleaning in the manner suggested, I hope the inspiration received will be evidenced in my thought process and actions.

***Submitted 2002Apr08 by "Procrastinator"***

Seeing that there were no responses made me re-read this article. At first, I did just skim because the suggestions you had were ideas I have been pushing off until another time. It's that problem of getting the time to "clean" the vol. program or recruiting and training a volunteer to take over a job I don't necessarily have to do but still needs to be done. So, I have printed the article and placed it in my 'to-do' file at least and that will keep these much needed tasks close-at-mind, at least. Also, I sometimes hesitate asking too many volunteer's opinions about the program because then I just open up over 200 floodgates. But I know that one of those floodgates will be a wealth of new ideas. It's just taking the plunge and dealing with it.

*Sincerely, the procrastinator*

***Submitted 2002Apr8 by Susan Ellis***

Hi again from Susan. It's been several years since we did not receive a response by now to a new Hot Topic. Wasn't this provocative enough? Does it seem like advising, rather than pushing hot buttons? Maybe I wasn't obvious enough about what I thought was "hot" in this suggestion.

OK. I'll focus the possible controversy or issues to respond to:

- When was the last time you eliminated a volunteer assignment and why?
- Would you like to eliminate some activity but feel you can't? Why?
- Feel like eliminating someONE (non-violently, of course)? What's stopping you?

If you don't like these questions, tell us why this topic didn't interest you!

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