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Strength in Numbers: Engaging Volunteers as Partners in Program Development

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Every so often I ask participants in my seminars: “How many of you have volunteers working with you to run the program – beyond helping with clerical work?” It always amazes (and dismays) me that only a small number of hands go up.

First, the job of running a volunteer program is so demanding that it seems obvious volunteers would be great help in simply keeping up with the work (and retaining the coordinator’s sanity!). Second, all the rationales we present to other paid staff for why they should create assignments for volunteers apply to us as volunteer program managers – so why are WE resistant to sharing our work with volunteers? Maybe if we consciously become role models for how to design roles for volunteers and how to work with them successfully, we’d do more to bring dubious staff around than just talking the talk.

But today I am concerned with a specific form of volunteer involvement that has great potential as a tool for internal advocacy: activating a visible team of volunteer representatives. This is actually a two-stage process.

Start with Good Advice

A number of programs have what is usually called a variation of a “Volunteer Advisory Council.” An advisory committee is designed to give input into volunteer program planning, procedures, long-range goals, and other work for which the synergy of group discussion will produce a better product than the volunteer program manager implementing something alone. This is a vital contribution to any program, so if you do not yet have such a group acting as a think tank for you, start one!

Here are a few recommendations on making an advisory group effective:

- Only form a group if you want – and will act on – advice! This may sound funny, but sometimes we form “advisory” groups mainly for show. We go to great pains to gather a list of impressive (or at least representative) names for our letterhead, but rarely convene meetings or discuss anything substantive.
- Develop a strategy for whom you’d like to invite to join the group—and be clear *why* each constituency is useful to include.
 - Will it be volunteers only or a combination of volunteers and employees? How about someone from outside the organization, such as a colleague who manages volunteer services in another setting?
 - Will you mix long-time volunteers with a few newbies? Do you need representation from various units or projects? What about gender, age, race, and other diversity criteria?
 - What skills would be best?
- Strongly considering advice does not mean the advisory group has control and makes the decisions – you still do. To make this clear, guess what’s a key tool? Right! Written position descriptions, just as with any other well-thought-out volunteer role. State openly what the advisory council is meant to do and what authority it has or doesn’t. And specify a term of office so that you can rotate new members in on a regular basis.
- Never take a vote. Not only does taking a vote imply decision-making, it distills the perspectives of this representative group into only one opinion. Instead, focus on the best possible discussion. For example, get members to list all the pros and cons of any idea under consideration, or have them generate a list of all the questions they can think of in reaction to a particular issue (sometimes a good question is more valuable than a lengthy statement of opinion).

But Why Only Advisors?

Having an Advisory Council is a good starting point, but it doesn’t go far enough. What about a group that *takes action* as well as *gives advice*? This isn’t an *advisory* council anymore, it’s a Steering Committee or Management Team. (Try to avoid the use of the word “board,” unless this is a group with authority to make actual operating decisions.) There are various ways you can structure such a group, but two things make it different from an advisory body:

- You are willing to see the members as equal partners with you in running the program. This means they will be responsible for actual work and share in decision-making about it.
- You will present these volunteers to the rest of the organization as partners in program management and as representing the point of view of all volunteers.

If you are uncertain as to what you might delegate to a management team of specially-recruited volunteers, Katie Campbell and I have lots of suggestions in our book, [*The \(Help!\) I-Don't-Have-Enough-Time Guide to Volunteer Management*](#). Right now, let's focus on the second element: representing the volunteer perspective.

One of the universal issues confronting volunteer program managers is that they are one person speaking about a corps of contributors who are only seen in "bits and pieces." Agency executives rarely if ever see all volunteers at one time to get the visual impact of their diversity and enthusiasm. Paid staff – even volunteers themselves – generally know only about the volunteers scheduled to work with them. So too often a request from the VPM is heard as an individual opinion and the "yes" or "no" response is seen as affecting only one person.

Further, it is easy for executives to consider the VPM as, well, "managing" volunteers; getting volunteers to do what the organization wants and needs. But it's a two-way street, isn't it? Whether acknowledged or not, the VPM is also there to represent the volunteers to the organization, making sure their needs are expressed and their input delivered. Again, if agency staff interacts only with the VPM, is the message always credible?

Visualize what would happen if volunteers themselves participated in speaking for what is, after all, *their* program. What if:

- The monthly, quarterly, or annual reports were written by volunteers along with the VPM?
- A member of the Volunteer Steering Committee sat in on most meetings with the VPM's direct supervisor?
- A volunteer on the Management Team took the lead in presenting a new proposal to agency execs?
- A member of the Steering Committee accompanied the VPM to every staff meeting (or occasionally attended the meeting without the VPM)?
- The management team provided documentation to support any request from the volunteer program, outlining the rationale for the request and including comments from the volunteers most affected by the decision?
- You periodically asked volunteers – in meetings or through written surveys or listservs – for feedback on a variety of agency issues (client service, public relations, physical plant, whatever) and conveyed the input to decision-makers? After all, most executives verbalize that "volunteers are our community representatives." When was the last time they asked volunteers anything to benefit from this perspective?

All this would demonstrate clearly that we never speak for ourselves alone. And it's a lot harder to dismiss a request or a report that comes from several united people, including community members. Such power is latent in every one of our programs. It's time to use it.

- *What do you think?*
- *What has been your experience with either advisory groups or management teams? Any tips for others?*
- *What might happen differently if we elevated volunteer partners into such representative roles within our organizations?*

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Submitted on 10 December 2005 by Katie-Jay Scott, "I Have a Dream" Foundation Oregon, Volunteer Coordinator, Portland, OR USA

I have recently established a Volunteer Program Advisory Committee to help guide the creation of the volunteer program I am in charge of. It has been very successful. Things that have worked:

- 1) Do not meet constantly but consistently and let them know when the next meeting is. We set goals for 3 months out so meetings are quarterly.
- 2) Give them the option of the communication method. I work with different members of the committee face to face, over the phone or through email.
- 3) Get a volunteer and client of your program to be on the committee!

Submitted on 4 December 2005 by Daniel F. Bassill, Tutor/Mentor Connection, President, Chicago, IL USA

I lead the Tutor/Mentor Connection, based in Chicago and on the Internet. I've lead a volunteer-based program for almost 30 years and have always focused on engaging volunteers as leaders, organizers, capacity builders, in addition to providing direct service. In fact, I feel that volunteering in a long-term tutor/mentor program is a form of civic engagement and service learning that changes the life of the youth, and the volunteer. You can learn more at <http://www.tutormentorexchange.net>

Submitted on 14 November 1005 by Todd Martin, University of Illinois Medical Center, Volunteer Services Coordinator, Chicago Illinois

We have approximately 130 volunteers at the University of Illinois Medical Center (Chicago) in 16 departments. About half are pre-health undergraduate students. I found, early on, that some volunteers have more energy and ideas to contribute than only their weekly service assignment on their unit. They also have energy that begs for leadership roles and development.

We started a Volunteer Leadership Committee three years ago to initially assist me with activities for National Volunteer Week. I am a one-person office, so I knew it would be impossible to do anything very substantial without volunteers' help and ideas. From that group came the Volunteer Leadership Committee. Their role is advisory to me, and to the staff who manage them. They are now almost completely responsible for planning the activities for National Volunteer Week and a related event,

Volunteer Coordinator Appreciation Day, which is conducted the third week of November. This is to recognize the staff members who manage the volunteers on the units.

In addition, I have asked the Volunteer Leadership Committee to take co-ownership of a couple of things we are trying to develop: building community among volunteers, and addressing universal volunteer training needs. They have taken on these new assignments with vigor and substance, holding a series of "open forum" meetings on building community, and inviting clinical staff to meet with volunteers to see how more teamwork could be built between clinical staff and volunteers. The Committee meets monthly, has officer roles, and even requires of members a \$50 annual cash or in-kind contribution. That was their idea, not mine. :-)

Submitted on 14 November 2005 by Jayne Cravens, Coyote Communications, Consultant, Sinzig Germany

To me, involving volunteers in this way is the BEST form of volunteer recognition, much more meaningful than a pin or a tea cozy or whatever. That's right -- more work, and challenging work at that, can be seen as a reward by many volunteers!

Submitted on 7 November 2005 by Judy Albers, Dennon Museum Center, Assistant to the Director, Traverse City, MI USA

Just returned from the ICVA and decided that this is needed in our volunteer program. It's nice to have my idea affirmed.

Submitted on 7 November 2005 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA

As a 100% volunteer organization, PLNJ is fortunate to have many individuals of varied skills and backgrounds organizing all of our day to day operations. At the grassroots level its always about networking well.

PLNJ's advisory panel is comprised of volunteers who have at one time been the recipients of our handmade blankets. A parent whose child received an afghan while in the hospital; a family who received bedding after a house fire; a sister who lost her brother to cancer. These volunteers have first hand experience at the recipient level with passionate insights and the desire to support a cause that made an impact in their lives. They help identify the need in a community and share their strength with families going through very difficult and personal choices.

We also have a steering committee for our youth program made up of educators, high school students and textile artists. This particular group has enhanced the quality of our programs and broadened our ability to engage hundreds of youth volunteers. Creative, innovative and smart.

But, the group we are most proud of is our youth board. PLNJ's mission is to provide comfort, hope and healing to fragile NJ kids. Who better than young adults to inspire and educate us on what would make their fragile peers feel safe and secure. Our youth board is bright, honest and real!

Volunteer engagement at every level keeps our doors open. I hope all non profits who recruit volunteers will think in terms of skills and training individuals bring to the table before filling short term slots.

Submitted on 5 Nov 2005 by Dave Gynn, Coleman Professional Services, Volunteer Coordinator, Kent, Ohio USA

Our volunteer Advisory Council helped develop [Volunteer Survey](#).

Submitted on 3 Nov 2005 by Lisa Coble, Newport Hospital, Director of Volunteer Services, Newport, RI USA

I created an "advisory council" a couple of years ago to be sure that the direction of our programs were being steered with volunteer input. I find having their support and opinions make for more successful programs. The members also write newsletter articles, help plan social, educational and recognition events.

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