

[News and Hot Topics](#) » We Can Model True Collaboration

# We Can Model True Collaboration

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Despite endless lip service to the subject, very few nonprofits or government agencies engage in substantive collaboration with other organizations. It's too hard and it's too threatening. Successful collaboration requires all participants to carry their share of the work load and resource contribution, while trying to maintain their own distinct identities and, often, compete for funding at the same time.

Volunteer programs ought to be able to overcome the barriers faced by their sponsoring organizations and find ways to work together. There are many reasons to do so:

- Volunteers are often active with more than one community organization and don't understand the complete separation of activities or jurisdictional disputes among agencies. In fact, one of the freedoms of being a volunteer is not having to be bound by the geographic or bureaucratic restrictions paid staff face.
- We are the only people who can think of a great idea to try without having to ask immediately: "How will we pay for this?" This means that volunteers can take a leadership role in experimenting with collaborative projects simply because they are interested in doing so.
- Most volunteer resources coordinators are overworked. Yet we persist in duplicating our efforts all over town, rather than combine forces to get more done with less effort.
- There are countless all-volunteer associations which would be happy to work with us, but not if it means their members have to take on the identity of "our" volunteers.

What kinds of collaboration do I mean?

## ***Community Problem-solving***

One example of an endless list: Smaller communities often have limited public transportation, which is of special concern to several populations, including teenagers. The issue of how young people can get to and from social functions, part-time jobs, and volunteer service – inexpensively and safely – is

of direct interest to all youth-serving organizations in a community. But it is really no organization's "job" to deal with the problem. What would happen if each organization recruited an interested volunteer (adult and/or teen) to serve together on a "Youth Transportation Task Force"? These volunteers, on behalf of the agencies they represent, can spend whatever time is necessary researching possible solutions and developing a response strategy or funding proposal.

### ***Training***

The idea of a training "cooperative" is not new, but it remains rare. The idea is that many organizations have common training needs. These might be client or service-focused (such as all groups working with seniors) or it might be skills-focused (such as developing one-to-one relationships in visiting/mentoring/ tutoring/etc.). With the right mix of organizations in a training cooperative, the entire group develops a calendar of year-round seminars, lectures, or other training programs that meet shared needs. Each member of the cooperative commits to planning and presenting one or two solid educational programs per year, in exchange for all their volunteers (this can work for paid staff, too) having access to all the programs during the year. So a periodic burst of effort results in an annual training calendar and everyone wins. You can even rotate the venues so participants get the bonus of a tour of a new facility each time.

### ***Shared Volunteer Services***

About twenty years ago, many volunteer centers ran "skills banks," in which individuals who wanted to use a specific talent or skill – regardless of the setting being helped – could register centrally and then respond to requests for their volunteer services. Similar programs still exist, some online, but the idea has largely been ignored. Volunteer resources managers can resurrect the concept.

Many volunteers with special talents would be delighted to help a range of organizations. Perhaps a DOVIA or professional network could encourage members to "inventory" volunteer skills and develop an exchange (always with the complete freedom of the volunteers to say no, of course). There are many talents that all agencies need, but only occasionally. For example:

- Photography or videotaping
- Graphic arts
- Translation into foreign languages or sign language
- Performing arts and entertainment
- Ability to teach basic Internet skills

Wouldn't it be great to be able to call on a volunteer with such a skill when the need arose? Why not share the wealth?

A variation on this theme just arose during a workshop I conducted in Adelaide, Australia. We were discussing unique recognition ideas and one of the participants, the volunteer coordinator at the large local art gallery, invited everyone to call her to schedule special – and free – guided tours for their volunteers as a perk...led, of course, by the gallery's own volunteers. Win, win.

## ***Bringing Together the Two Worlds of Volunteering***

I have spent most of my career in volunteerism attempting to bridge the enormous gap between agency-related volunteer “programs” and all-volunteer membership associations. No one argues that both groups are engaged in recruiting and working with volunteers, yet there is practically no communication between these two worlds. Volunteer program managers and the officers of all-volunteer groups do not read the same publications, visit the same Web sites, or attend the same conferences. Yet those of us who speak to each “side” can attest to the fact that the questions raised in each room are the same and, frequently, so are the strategies.

In most cases, if agency-related volunteer programs work with all-volunteer groups at all, it’s as sources of volunteers. The Gift Shop needs coverage on Wednesday nights; let’s get the Rotary Club to staff it for us then. Our fundraising event needs 50 extra volunteers; let’s ask the Soroptimists and the nearest church women’s group to help us.

A true collaboration is another option. Invite the president of the service club, fraternal organization, community group, faith community, etc. to sit down with you and discuss what you have in common. What do their members care about that meshes with your organization’s goals or services? What skills do they bring? What resources do you offer to them? Is there a project you might jointly select that is bigger than each of you separately?

## ***Partnerships among Diverse People***

An extension of the idea of collaboration with all-volunteer groups is to use such partnerships as a conscious step toward diversity. Over two decades ago Ivan Scheier and I were invited to speak at a volunteerism conference in the Deep South co-sponsored by the local chapter of B’nai B’rith (Jewish men’s group) and the Junior League (Protestant women). The night before the event, Ivan and I sat on a couch enjoying a private conversation while all around us the Jewish men and their wives were meeting – for the first time – the Protestant women and their husbands. A small but meaningful evening of understanding.

What population are you having trouble attracting as volunteers? Stop trying to get one “different” person at a time. Instead, seek out the Cambodian Civic Association, the African-American men’s club, etc. and start collaborating, as equal partners, on projects of mutual interest. This is a legitimate way for a volunteer program to meet needs, does not ask the other group to give up its identity, and allows you all to meet each other and evolve a natural relationship.

We can show our organization leaders the way to effective collaboration...and make our own work easier, too.

*What collaborations have you been part of?*

*What ideas do you have on this subject?*

*What is holding you back from collaborating?*

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**Submitted on 30 April 2005 by Anne Fuller, NSN (as well as public radio, folk festival), State Liaison (volunteer), Juneau AK USA**

About the mandatory orientation: I wonder if you can schedule it for the same day or time that the volunteer will be serving. Just thinking that if I've decided I can help at the hospital on Wednesday afternoon, being told that first I have to arrange to attend a long Monday night session could discourage me.

**Submitted on 15 April 2005 by Hillary Roberts, Project Linus NJ, Inc., President, Keyport/NJ USA**

Is collaboration standing still? Not according to industry articles, reality tv offerings and magazine ads touting cause marketing and its innovative place in non profit programming. I'd like to see more non-profits join their for-profit brothers in taking a look at this topic and offering workshops to educate professionals. It's important that charities excel in marketing their own services before taking a bite of the collaborative pie.

At the heart of many major non profit agencies is the soul of a smaller, worker bee idea that knew how to expand services through collaboration. A variety of programs, now funded, began as one time events. Collaboration was key!

If agencies are slow to merger perhaps it is inexperience showing rather than a lack of enthusiasm for door opening opportunities. We can all welcome confident collaboration with shared focus and determination once we understand the benefits, the bells and whistles.

**Submitted on 12 April 2005 by Robyn Cooper, Volunteer First Aid Service, St John Ambulance Australia (WA) Inc, Executive Officer, Perth Western Australia**

In 2004/05, 12 government and non-government agencies in Western Australia (who had developed strong links through an action research project being conducted by Dr. Judy Esmond into Volunteer Recruitment) formed a coalition to develop a funding submission to state government aimed at delivering a series of high quality, interactive professional development for volunteers from across their organisations, which would address the 6 most critical volunteer training needs identified by the participating organisations.

In working together on a joint training initiative, the agencies were successful in obtaining a far greater level of funding than would have been available to them individually. This pooling of resources enabled the delivery of training that:

- Was recognisable by and transferable across the participating organisations
- Enabled volunteers from different organisations to interact with each other and share experiences and skills
- Was of a high standard and delivered by experts in the field
- Was reflective of the range of tasks undertaken by volunteers and the skills and values required to perform in their roles effectively;

- Acknowledged that volunteers had pre-existing skills and experience and recognised the importance of personal development for volunteers
- Could be delivered within a manageable timeframe and recognised that their available time for training and development activities was limited
- Was tailor made for the volunteers of the participating organisations

This synergistic approach has created a model for a new, collaborative and highly successful way of working on joint volunteering initiatives in Western Australia, for the maximum benefit of volunteers and their organisations.

***Submitted on 7 April 2005 by Jason E. Camis, Franklin County CVB, Director, Ottawa, KS USA***

Our collaboration is around National Volunteer Week. We're doing a community-wide volunteer celebration for National Volunteer Week and inviting over 40 organizations from food bank to hospital to visitor center (& their 900+ volunteers) to come celebrate. In addition to recognizing them, they are all getting "I'm Special" cards with discounts and freebies from local businesses during that week.

In addition, our visitor center volunteers often help other volunteer driven events in the community when we're asked. They really enjoy doing something different once-in-a-while. And when we do something fun with our volunteers (like a trip), we invite other organization's volunteers to come along.

***Submitted on 5 April 2005 by Jo Eells, IMA NW Region, Community Life Specialist, Rock Island, IL USA***

Totally agree with the concept of collaborative volunteer management. We do have limited resources but with partnering that limit is raised so much higher.

Have one suggestion. When using an acronym, i.e., DOVPM, you might want to explain it the first time it's used. The Army makes that a rule, just so that everyone knows precisely what they're referring to when they use an acronym in any document. I believe that the VPM = Volunteer Program Manager/ment but don't have a clear idea of what DO means! Could you elaborate?

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