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In the Middle: The Leader of Volunteers as Intermediary

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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One of the greatest challenges of the role of leader of volunteers may also be the least discussed: that we are responsible for the effective engagement of volunteers but most often are not the person directly supporting their work. Most organizations – especially larger ones – operate on a decentralized model. You recruit, screen, and orient new volunteers, but then assign them into many different units of work, with all sorts of paid or volunteer staff taking over their training, integration into daily activities, and ongoing supervision.

The truth is that you do not have control over what happens once volunteers are placed into roles supervised by others. Nevertheless, you are expected to be informed about the contributions of volunteers and how well they are performing. You must maintain standards and keep bringing in qualified and diverse volunteers. You're also responsible for recognition activities, consulting with other departments about new projects that might involve volunteers, and being available to volunteers and employees who may have concerns.

So leaders of volunteers are *in the middle*. Accountable but with limited power. A key question therefore is, as intermediary, *when do you have the **authority** to act if you feel something needs to be done differently?* This, in turn, raises related questions:

- How much authority *do* you have? When can you require something from a colleague or, for that matter, from a volunteer assigned to an area of work you do not control?
- How clear are you and the others involved on exactly who *does* have authority in different situations?
- When must you *persuade* or suggest, rather than request?
- Who has the final say about how volunteers are treated?

Chain of Command

The situation is further muddled by organizational charts and whether or not you are considered a department head and therefore a peer of other managers.



To create assignments, place new volunteers, and monitor activity, you probably deal directly with each frontline staff member about the volunteers assigned to him or her. But if a problem arises, or the two of you differ about an approach to a situation, who breaks the tie? The other staff member will go to her or his own supervisor or department head, as that is the usual chain of command. What is your role in this chain? Must you be consulted or does the other manager feel that anything that takes place in that area of work is solely the concern of that unit?

You, too, may decide to contact the middle manager to discuss your concern about a staff member or volunteer in that unit. Are you doing so as an equal, peer-to-peer, or are you seen as overreaching boundaries? What if the two of you don't agree on the problem or the course of action needed? Who breaks *that* tie? (You might want to read my 2006 Hot Topic on "[The Middle Management Barrier](#).")

And what if it's the *volunteer* who is trying to problem-solve an issue? When should volunteers go up the chain of command in the unit to which they are assigned and when should they come to the volunteer office for support?

Step one is deciding exactly what you want to institute as the volunteer-related line of authority and then work towards that being accepted, understood, and practiced throughout the organization – by both employees and volunteers themselves.

Using the Power You Have

Being in the middle comes with the job of volunteer management whether a problem arises or things are going really well. After all, you are probably the only person in the organization who is focused on successful volunteer engagement as well as on getting work done. You are also the primary spokesperson for the needs of all volunteers, regardless of role. The hard part is whether everyone else accepts and respects what this means in practice.

Start with what is unquestionably in your control. This includes:

- Approval or disapproval of requested volunteer positions
- How volunteer position descriptions are written and therefore making sure that there is clarity about the role of the volunteer resources office in any placement
- Where you go to recruit the best applicants
- How you interview and screen candidates
- How you orient new volunteers to the organization and what you present to new staff hires about working with the volunteer resources office

- What you report to the powers that be about successes and concerns
- What you say at volunteer recognition events

Consider how powerful this list really is.

Now, what resources do you, in your position as leader of volunteers, bring to the organization and to each staff member?

- Knowledge of best volunteer management practices. Given that almost no staff ever receives formal training in this vital subject, this alone gives you a status few others in the organization have.
- A commitment to recruiting and preparing the best volunteers who fulfill the criteria each staff member is seeking.
- Creativity in identifying ways to get work done that no one expected, especially creating volunteer roles that save the staff time, free them from things they don't want to do, or help them to increase their own skills (by finding people who are happy and qualified in those very things).
- The ability to jump start and test new service ideas before funds are sought to institutionalize them – ideas which you can offer proactively rather than waiting to be asked for help.

Do executives, middle managers, frontline staff, and even volunteers understand the uniqueness of this skill set?

Establishing Expectations

I have always liked the notion that, “if you want someone to get off their pedestal, you have to get off your knees.” So being an effective intermediary begins with fully accepting the responsibilities and challenges of that role. If you take action in the knowledge that this *is* your job, you will be less intimidated if someone else questions why you are acting.

What can you do to define everyone's expectations and then act on them consistently?

- Get your responsibilities as a liaison specified in your job description. Find out if other staff job descriptions require them to work with your office effectively and, if not, ask why.
- Be willing to advocate for what is right – as high up the chain of authority as is necessary. You are fighting for support of *volunteers*, not of yourself personally.
- Troubleshoot the *first* time a problem occurs so that you demonstrate your role in a natural way. Making an appearance after a situation has festered raises more questions than answers.

- Create reports on overall volunteer engagement in your organization that educate those who receive them – and make sure everyone gets a copy, not just your own boss. This includes volunteers, too, since the report is about them! But also expect that each unit will include information about the volunteers working side-by-side with their paid staff in reports *each unit* files with those above them.
- Refocus your recognition activities on both volunteers and the paid staff, since it is a team effort.
- Invite volunteers to speak for themselves with you.
- Welcome the role of in-house educator and offer both formal and on-the-spot training about volunteer/employee teamwork when you can.
- When you are in the role of third-party liaison, listen both to what is being said and to what underlies the comments. Try not to leap to conclusions and don't assume who is "right" based on their pay level. Diagnose what is really going on and then act to fix *that*.

How have *you* established your role in your organization?

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Comments from Readers

Submitted on August 3rd, 2015

[Liz Adamshick](#), Volunteer Services Manager, Hospice of Central Ohio, Newark OH, USA

Great topic, Susan! All of the tips for defining everyone's expectations are also professional behaviors that build trust. I claim my role as the internal consultant on volunteer resources management, and make sure that my follow-through on these matters is timely, solid, research-based where applicable, and gets measurable results. When I make a mistake, I own it and work to correct it.

I also have the privilege of working with an excellent team that "gets it" when it comes to my role in the organization, and the inherent value that unpaid staff bring to our mission. Including paid staff in shaping the volunteer engagement vision is essential to establishing the kind of authority that needs no hierarchical place on the ladder to be deemed credible. One of my favorite truisms is "You can pretend to care, but you can't pretend to be there." Show up for the work at hand. It builds productive relationships based on trust and impact.

Submitted on August 3rd, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Thanks for sharing your positive situation, Liz. Trust is indeed key -- and it takes time to build that. I appreciate your point about acknowledging mistakes we make, too.

Submitted on August 7th, 2015

William Henry, Executive Director, Volunteers Insurance Service Association, Woodbridge VA, USA

Susan, thanks for drawing attention to these real-world "tie-breaker" authority situations. I would add that volunteer managers who have worked this out in their own organizations also need to be careful if they joint-venture with another organization for an event. Make sure the chain of command regarding volunteer engagement is agreed upon by both groups in advance. At a recent professional golf tournament, I witnessed a PGA official interfering with volunteer marshals who had been trained by the organization sponsoring the tournament -- creating confusion and disruption. This official never even introduced himself; he just took control. No volunteer (or staff member, for that matter) should have to take orders from a stranger.

Submitted on August 7th, 2015

Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, USA

Great additional point, Bill -- thanks! There's no end to the complexity of our role -- or the diplomatic skills needed.

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