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Us, Too

Practicing What We Preach: Volunteers Helping Us, Too

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One of the enduring mysteries of the volunteer management field is how often those who lead volunteer efforts do not build a team of volunteers to help them in their important work. Here we are, trying to get our paid staff colleagues to develop creative assignments for the right volunteers – and being frustrated when we encounter resistance to this idea – while we miss the opportunity to be role models in demonstrating how valuable volunteers are to building the organization's volunteer involvement strategy! Not to mention that we could be getting some great, talented, and much-needed help.

To start, answer the following questions (this is not a test; it's a private thought-provoker):

1. I see volunteers as:

1. My staff
2. My responsibility
3. My charges
4. Allies
5. Partners
6. My bosses
7. Helpers
8. Advocates
9. Consultants
10. Other _____

1. How many volunteers work specifically with me now in coordinating volunteer involvement (not in clerical roles) and do not hold any other assignment in the organization?

2. Do I have a functioning advisory committee or management team comprised of representative volunteers to give me solid input and share the decision-making about volunteer involvement?
3. I strategically involve volunteers in the following activities (For each choose from *always, often, once in a while, never, or never thought to do it*):

1. Designing new roles/positions for volunteers
2. Strategizing and carrying out recruitment campaigns for new volunteers
3. Interviewing prospective new volunteers
4. Orienting and training other volunteers
5. Evaluating the program overall
6. Assessing the performance of volunteers themselves
7. Going to meetings (with or without me) with executives or the board to report the volunteer perspective on a topic being considered
8. Educating paid staff about working with volunteers
9. Representing me on online discussion forums

Are you satisfied with your responses? If so, that's great!

But if your answers reveal that you are currently not partnering with volunteers to accomplish the work of volunteer management, can you identify what has been holding you back from sharing your work with volunteers? Often the reasons will give you important insight into why other paid staff are reluctant to take a chance on donated talents. But *you* have no real excuse!

Volunteers Let Us Do Extra Things

I can't explain why it always came naturally to me to recruit volunteers to help me do things I wanted to do, but it has always been my philosophy that we have the most incredible job in the world: we go out and tap the community for any resource we need!

Apart from finding people who can partner in running any volunteer involvement activities, we can simply ask them to do new, experimental, creative, or unusual things for us. For example, I always involved volunteers in my professional association work – especially whenever I ran a conference. The volunteers (often students exploring careers) loved the pace and experience, and especially enjoyed being at the ultimate event. But having their help meant I could help my colleagues while not cheating my employer out of endless hours of my time. Everyone won.

Some managers have formed special volunteer video teams that produce short videos for YouTube and recruitment gigs, record presentations made during orientation and training sessions, create how-to clips of routine tasks for new volunteers, and more. This is a super idea for any organization. So is finding someone to write and design a great annual report on volunteer contributions. What



would it mean if you knew this important task was the main focus of an interested volunteer, rather than something you need to squeeze into your schedule in time for the recognition event?

We are the only people in the entire organization who can dream up a project and start on it without first raising money! So why aren't we maximizing this ability? And note that these types of assignments will definitely be attractive to a whole new corps of volunteers.

Finding the Right Volunteers

I am not recommending taking the "cream off the top" by diverting excellent volunteer applicants who are interested in other assignments. Instead, intentionally recruit volunteers for whom working with you will be genuinely appealing. However, that doesn't mean you can't tap current volunteers in some ways:

- Do a skills and interests inventory of active volunteers (and maybe recently lapsed ones). Who has additional talents you have not yet tapped?
- Position the work as a promotion into agency-wide volunteer management (but be sure this is what the volunteer really wants).
- Offer a leave of absence to work on a special project for you.
- Find out who is already active on social media and 1) ask them to tutor you in how they use their chosen sites, and 2) engage them in posting and liking your messages, retweeting them, etc.

Keep in mind that, if you like your job in volunteer management, so will other people! You can recruit:

- Students and career changers who want to explore volunteer management. In fact, consider creating a formal *internship* which allows someone to learn about the profession. You can even post an available internship for free in the special section of the [Energize Job Bank](#).
- People with demonstrated skill in coordinating volunteers, even if they do not realize they are "in" the volunteer management field, including:
 - Officers of all-volunteer associations
 - Leaders of political campaigns and advocacy efforts
 - Alumni coordinators
 - Special events coordinators

It is your goal to run the best possible volunteer effort for your organization to support its mission and expand available resources – this is a vital role with which many people will be happy to help, if you *ask*.

How are you partnering with volunteers in your work as leader of volunteers?

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