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Pride in the Volunteer Management Profession

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

January

2017

Happy New Year everyone!

Sorry if you've had your fill of articles urging you to make resolutions that will only last a few weeks. I also want to suggest a resolution but, ideally, this one should be easy to enact...and maintain.

I receive lots of e-mails from leaders of volunteers asking for volunteer management advice. In most cases, the request begins with: "I've been asked to" Then the person goes on to describe something requested by her/his executive, regarding some aspect of volunteer involvement. S/he finishes with a variation of "So, can you tell me what to do?"

Sometimes the colleague is excited at the new opportunity and mainly wants direction to resources, which is great. Unfortunately, however, most are dismayed or confused at the request and wish they could refuse. They want me to give them "ammunition" for saying no. Or a quick fix!

Almost always, I begin by redirecting the person's attention away from the search for a *solution* and back to the boss's *request* itself. What's behind the request? What perceived problem needs to be fixed? Is someone even higher up in authority putting pressure on your boss and it's getting passed on to you? Is it a suggestion or a demand? Has anyone else in the organization received a similar request? How did your boss come up with this particular idea?



The answers to these questions help to separate legitimate requests from knee-jerk reactions to something else. Once we've determined that there is indeed a need to be met and the proposed course of action makes sense, then we can focus on complying in the most effective way.

But...if we decide this request is as ridiculous as it sounds, what can the colleague do?! And here is where the New Year's resolution comes in. I would love everyone to internalize the following self-

promise:

I will always express my professional skills in volunteer leadership by doing what is genuinely best to support and expand engagement of volunteers towards meaningful service to our organization and the people or cause we serve.

I am talking about *pride* in our profession. If we believe that we have knowledge and skills unique to mobilizing volunteers, we owe it to everyone – and especially ourselves – to stand up for what we think is right. This may occasionally take courage, but it always matters. Speak with the authority that comes from knowing best practices in working with volunteers.

Respect, Not Rebellion

I am not advocating being obstinate or argumentative when someone in your hierarchy directs you to do something. In fact, the whole point is to truly believe that your executives are intelligent, caring people. They are not purposefully being unreasonable or doing something against the organization's best interest. It's just that they are uneducated about volunteer engagement – and don't even realize it. That is precisely why, when they confidently propose something that you know is ill-advised, nonsensical, or needlessly time-wasting, you are being *helpful* when you question the request.

A few years ago I wrote a Hot Topic on "["Why?" Is More Powerful than #@#!](#)". If you haven't seen it, please take a look. I share some practical advice on how to raise questions that ultimately educate your superiors, making it harder for them to push you into something you think is not useful and opening the door to a better solution that you can carry out.

Be Confident in Your Expertise

Volunteer management is a *profession*. If you see it only as a *job*, then your main criteria for success is pleasing your employer. If you are a professional, then you have cultivated a basic knowledge base that can be transferred from setting to setting. It's knowledge expressed both in skill and in *conviction*. You can articulate *why* you do something as well as how to do it best.

Also, while everyone in your organization must weigh decisions based on its mission and the needs of the people or cause you serve, by definition *you* need to add consideration for the support of volunteers. So, you're always within your rights when you examine things through that prism. The point is not to put volunteers first, simply to balance out the effect of actions taken.

Executives should also be considering the effect of decisions on paid employees and how financial donors will react. Interestingly, they do not always follow through with giving equivalent weight to matters affecting volunteers even though they insist on seeing volunteers as "unpaid staff." In the same vein, no executive would do anything to jeopardize the goodwill of those who give money, but feel no similar responsibility to those who give time. It's up to us to point out how detrimental this can be. (Start with this *Nonprofit Times* article: "[Donors and Volunteers - More Alike than Different](#).")

Of course, the opposite is also a challenge. Sometimes you will be told to do something because that's what the human resources department (HR) does or what the development office does. So on the surface, the request seems to treat volunteers "equally." But volunteer management is aligned with, yet *different* from, both HR and fundraising. Again, it's up to us to point out why some things cannot be handled in the same way. (Revisit my recent Hot Topic on "[The Limitations of Seeing Volunteers Only as Unpaid Staff](#).")

Start the Year Right

I trust that you recognize the assumption on which all of the above is based. I believe that you *have the knowledge* to behave like a proud professional.

But, let's face it, many leaders of volunteers have been hired as entry-level employees or have been given the responsibility of leading volunteers as an "add-on" to another role. If you find yourself in the situation of having the job without really knowing what it's all about, start learning now! You can begin with the [A-Z Volunteer Management Library](#) right here on the Energize, Inc. site and go from there. Even better, invest in some [basic books](#). Read a lot of things; look for conferences to attend; find a professional society to join. But don't just ask others to educate you on elementary topics. Give yourself a foundation on the basics and then get specific with your questions of colleagues. We're a pretty generous profession in sharing our ideas.

If you feel you know the basics, are you keeping yourself current? Can you refer to external resources as part of your goal of "educating up"? Do you know the trends and issues affecting volunteerism today?

Once you are confident in your solid professional knowledge, it ought to be easy to keep to the New Year's resolution I suggested. Respond to requests in the most skilled, responsible way, pushing back when something is demanded that does not move volunteering forward in your organization. You don't have to say "no," just suggest a different way to accomplish something even better.

Here's to pride in profession for 2017.

What do you think?

Related Topics: [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on January 2nd, 2017

Sheryl Luebke, Supervisor/Senior & Volunteer Engagement, JFS, Richmond, United States

Thank you, Susan, for the timely message. When my agency re-branded last year, I proposed a new title for myself and got it. Now I have to live up to it. I am very fortunate to have the resources locally to make that happen.

Happy New Year!

Sheryl

Submitted on January 2nd, 2017

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

Bravo, Sheryl!

Submitted on January 5th, 2017

Jo Gibney, London, United Kingdom

"If you are a professional, then you have cultivated a basic knowledge base that can be transferred from setting to setting."

I love this definition of professional: I've not seen one before that I felt resonates with me.

Submitted on January 5th, 2017

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

Thanks, Jo. Anyone can be oriented to a setting, but someone first has to have the knowledge and skills to do the core work. So, for example, a social worker can move from healthcare into the justice system and still be a social worker. Same with volunteer management.

Susan

Submitted on January 5th, 2017

Laura, Volunteer Coordinator, LifeBridge Community Services, Bridgeport, CT, USA

A wonderful article and I couldn't agree more. I feel very fortunate to work at an organization that values the contributions of volunteers and recognizes that it has to devote resources in order to have a well run program.

However, I think as a profession we need to do a much better job of advocating on our own behalf. Most agencies wouldn't hire a Director of Development with no prior fundraising

experience but don't seem to look for the same level of experience when hiring someone to manage a group of hundreds or even thousands of volunteers.

Following the advice of this article and placing a premium on one's own skills and professional standards is a great way to start changing that dynamic.

Submitted on January 5th, 2017

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

Precisely right, Laura. Too many executives hire their volunteer resources manager on the basis of "have you done volunteering in your personal life?" I compare that to the logic of: "I've had brain surgery; so I can *do* brain surgery"! In other words, you have to KNOW something as well as be familiar with it from another perspective. :-)

Thanks - Susan

Submitted on January 5th, 2017

Alana Knoppow, Volunteer Program Manager, Southeast, Hospice of Michigan and Arbor Hospice, Southfield, United States

Wonderful post, I couldn't agree more. Thank you for reminding us that our role is a profession, with best practices, and that we must empower ourselves to promote this.

Submitted on January 5th, 2017

Courtney, Volunteer Coordinator, MA, USA

Thank you, Thank you, Thank you!!

This past year I have found myself struggling to find the right approach to advocating for the role of volunteers in my organization, specifically explaining best practices & trends and identifying possibly detrimental or misguided motivations of superiors. At times it is can be quite challenging to demonstrate (re:prove) that my views are not just a different "opinion", but actual professional expertise based on years of experience and training, without coming across as negative, argumentative, insubordinate, or not supportive of our mission.

I vow to embrace your self promise in 2017 and do all that I can to express my professional skills to support and enhance volunteer engagement while sharing my pride for our profession :)

Submitted on January 5th, 2017

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

Thanks, Alana and Courtney! Occasionally we need a revival meeting to say *Hallelujah!* and confirm our professional faith. :-)

Susan

Submitted on January 6th, 2017

Sally, Sally, UK, UK

Thanks for this reminder Susan, we don't all / always find ourselves in organisations where our expertise is recognised or valued.

My only comment about this would be around how we engage volunteers in this too. There can be just as much influence, pressure, requests from volunteers as from colleagues for us to do what they would like us to. It is clearly a different scenario but one I feel requires as much consideration to ensure we get the balance right of support and leadership.

Submitted on January 6th, 2017

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

Really good point, Sally, thank you. I agree that challenges to what we know to be right in volunteer management can come from a number of sources and not just executives. For one thing, your ED may be very supportive, but middle managers and line staff may be the ones who choose to disregard policy and think they know "better" in how to (or not to) deal with volunteers. We need to educate everyone by explaining best practice and why we disagree.

Volunteers, too, as you point out, can challenge us. They figure that, as volunteers, they are the expert in what should happen with volunteers. Well, no.... In most cases, the place to start is not asserting ourselves as "professionals" who should have the last word, but steering the conversation to such things as: *What do the people we serve need most? Are we truly doing what they need? Let's look at the big picture of all volunteers here, not just this one project.... Let's consider what other, similar organizations do....* Again, let's trust that no one volunteers to do a bad job! So if they unintentionally are spending their time wastefully or even causing problems, **that's** your starting point.

The resolution to firmly act in the best interest of volunteer engagement holds. If you really know more than the person raising objections, prove it by showing alternatives that are more helpful. A volunteer who refuses to learn from you may, unfortunately, not be giving time to the right organization.

Thanks again. - Susan

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