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Volunteers

Revisiting the Seven Deadly Sins of Directing Volunteers

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

April

2013

In the early 1980s, Energize produced a mini-poster with the dramatic title of “The Seven Deadly Sins of Directing Volunteers,” which proved extremely popular as a bulletin board item at the desks of many volunteer resources managers. In fact, we tweaked the language and redesigned the mini-poster in 1990 and it continued to sell well. I just found a stack of them in our back room and thought it would be fun to see whether the “sins” have changed now in 2013. And you can help!

Here is the 1990 text:

The Seven Deadly Sins of Directing Volunteers

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1. To recruit a volunteer for a cause or program in which you do not believe – or to ask a volunteer to do a job you wouldn’t do yourself.
2. To worry about the numbers of volunteers you need to the degree that you sign a person up even if he or she is not right for the job to be done.
3. To restrict a volunteer’s effectiveness by not providing adequate preparation, training, or tools.
4. To ask salaried staff to work as a team with volunteers if you yourself do not have volunteers helping with the responsibilities of your job.
5. To be so concerned about your own job security that you do not stand up and fight for the needs and rights of the volunteers you represent.

6. To offer volunteers certain opportunities and working conditions, and then not deliver.
7. To waste a volunteer's time – ever.

Updating Vocabulary

First, knowing some colleagues' aversion to anything negative, I realize we could have made a list of the "Seven Virtues." But really, aren't vices far more interesting? And, of course, we wanted to grab people's attention to make some important points. So even today I'd keep the title, though I'd think about the word *directing*. I'm one of the diehards who does *not* like the current word preference of *engaging* volunteers, particularly when referring to the person whose job it is to be the *leader* of an organization's volunteer involvement strategy.

Question: If you were updating this list, would you keep the word "directing" or choose something else? What word is better?

However, I would definitely replace all mentions of a volunteer "job" with words such as *role*, *assignment*, *activity* or *position*. And I'd change "salaried staff" to *employees* or *paid staff*.

Updating the Sins

I am very interested in your reaction to these Sins, since my overall feeling is that every one of them still speaks to real issues still of concern today. On the other hand, a few might not make the cut for the top seven once some new challenges are added to the list. Here's what I'd do:



Keep

In our time-deprived society, Sin number 7 is an especially vital admonition today. Shame on us for wasting the time of someone we pay, but to waste freely given time is truly sinful.

I'd also keep Sins number 3 and 5.

Number 4 is clearly something I still feel strongly about, having even written a Hot Topic, "[Practicing What We Preach: Volunteers Helping Us, Too](#)," on this theme this past October.

Question: Which Sins would you keep as written now?

Edit

Sin number 1 remains important, but today I'd delete the second part because it is not worded well. As a leader of volunteers, it doesn't matter if you personally want to do every task for which you recruit a volunteer. I wouldn't like financial accounting or software troubleshooting work, nor would I ever coach sports, but such activities are perfectly legitimate for volunteering assignments.

So number 1 can simply state: *To recruit a volunteer for a cause or program in which you do not believe.*

What *does* matter is that every volunteer position be designed well so that the organization benefits the most and the volunteer is never exploited. Therefore, I'd edit Sin number 2 to say: *To sign a person up even if he or she is not right for a vacant volunteer position you need to fill, or to ask a volunteer to take on a role that misuses or underutilizes that person's talents.*

Question: What editing would you do?

Replace

Sin number 6 remains valid, but I'd drop it because I feel that the following has risen in importance:

To be more concerned about satisfying volunteers who resist needed change than supporting those who are eager to innovate and adapt, particularly in the use of new technology.

That would be my new Sin for 2013.

Question: What Sins would you add (and therefore which would you drop)?

So that's what I think. Please share your opinions. And once we get consensus, Energize will post a new version of the Seven Sins on this Web site as a printable PDF – our gift to you. Thanks in advance.

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Submitted on 25 April 2013 by Jayne Hench, Volunteer Services Coordinator, Montgomery Parks Department, M-NCPPC, Silver Spring, Maryland, USA

As more and more of us develop online tracking systems, it's easy to fall into the trap of focusing on process and counting rather than engaging and doing. So perhaps a new deadly sin:

To admire our system over our people

Submitted on 24 April 2013 by Carol Dixon, Director, Volunteer Resources, Providence Health Care, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Thanks for revisiting this - I'd almost forgotten. I'd like to add something about being careless with their information and interest. This would cover not getting back to someone who has expressed an interest in your organization and not respecting the privacy of the information they have shared with you. See you soon Susan!

Submitted on 15 April 2013 by Wendy Haile, Volunteer Program Supervisor, Providence Hospice, Portland, OR, USA

I would change the title to "managing" volunteers because that encompasses the entire role (in my opinion). I'm really looking forward to seeing the final list and sharing it with my coworkers. We all have a lot of work to do to continue to showcase our profession of volunteer management/ administration/ coordination. Great job, everyone!

Submitted on 12 April 2013 by Part time instructor, YMCA, Baltimore/MD, USA

I'm with John. It's important that the other paid staff also sees volunteers as important. It takes time and energy to use volunteers effectively, and the volunteers know when they're not welcomed or productive. Don't know how to say that.

Submitted on 05 April 2013 by Mary Ella Douglas, Asst Vice President, Field Support, American Lung Association, Chesapeake, VA, USA

Great discussion! I'd add something about our own continuing education or professional development as volunteer administrators. Without making that a priority for ourselves, we don't grow. When we don't grow, we can't be on the cutting-edge of offering the best possible experience to our volunteers.

Submitted on 04 April 2013 by Donna Taggart Johnson, Manager, Volunteer Services, Providence St. Patrick Hospital, Missoula, USA

I believe the biggest mistake is to fail to thank a volunteer for the time, talent and energy contributed to reach shared goals!

Submitted on 03 April 2013 by Peg, Lifestyle & Volunteer Coordinator, Restvale Aged Care, Lobethal, South Australia

"Good" volunteers can sometimes be over used!. Could this be included?? "To allow management to use volunteer/s to do what should be a paid duty". Also to not clearly recognise who is to give instructions to volunteers & therefore allow opportunity for any staff to make requests of the volunteer.

Submitted on 02 April 2013 by Rachelle, Volunteer Resource Manager, Australia

Closely related to number 3, I would add "To not prioritise the induction, ongoing training, support and management of volunteers once they've 'signed on the dotted line'."

I think I would remove number 4. I agree with the idea, but I don't class it as a 'deadly sin'. If I'm to have a volunteer working with me, I want to ensure there is an actual position and fulfilling role for them, I don't want to engage a volunteer just to 'be seen to' work alongside volunteers in my team. That said, I recognise that it's important not to overlook an untapped resource of what a volunteer could bring to a team: it's easy to just say 'no' without thinking creatively.

Submitted on 02 April 2013 by Wendell Moats, EDGE after school tutor, John H. Boner Center, Indianapolis, IN, USA

All this sounds great, but what do volunteers do if paid staff doesn't follow along with these ideas you listed above? Where I am, I feel they think volunteers aren't wanted or even needed. There is an "no volunteers need apply" mentality. I saw the budget for this year and 75% of the money coming in went to paid staff. That's way too much! But they don't seem to be interested in recruiting more volunteers. I never received any training. I was given an employees manual and that was it.

Submitted on 02 April 2013 by Program Coordinator, Phoenix, USA

I'm quite intrigued by your new #6 ...

Submitted on 02 April 2013 by Nicolette Winner, CVA, Volunteer Resources Manager, Community Blood Center/Community Tissue Services, Dayton, OH, USA

I'm with Cathy in that "engaging" is a more appealing choice of words than "directing", but the rest of the list looks great. I love Judy's idea of adding the sentence and the signature to the end of the poster. Imagine the impact of including that in your volunteer handbook and really pointing it out to every new volunteer, as well as working it into employee orientation for anyone who works with volunteers.

Submitted on 02 April 2013 by Kathy Alm, Volunteer Services, River Valleys, Minnesota, USA

I think number two is very relevant to the type of recruiting volume my organization is often doing. I would re-word in this way:

- To be focused on recruiting quantity over quality. Signing a person up even if he or she is not right for a vacant volunteer position you need to fill, or to ask a volunteer to take on a role that misuses or underutilizes that person's talents.

Submitted on 02 April 2013 by Hillary Roberts, President, PLNJ, Inc.-Blankie Depot, Keyport/NJ, USA

#1: To recruit a volunteer for a cause or program in which you do not believe – or to ask a volunteer to do a job you haven't experienced yourself.

#7: To waste a volunteer's time and talents – ever.

I'd consider including a statement that addresses:

- To restrict or pigeon-hole the opportunity to advance in a volunteer role.

Submitted on 02 April 2013 by Judy Swinson, CAVS, Director Guest Relations and Volunteer services, Good Samaritan Regional Health Cente, Mt. Vernon, Ill, USA

Thank you for sharing this once again. I love it, a great reminder. I actually posted it in my volunteer workroom and put a sentence at the end, that stated, As your volunteer director, I promise not to committ these sins and then I signed it.

Submitted on 02 April 2013 by Jennifer Thompson, CVA, Coor of Volunteer Services, Hometown Hospice, Broken Arrow, OK, USA

I would change directing to leading. As a Volunteer Administrator, we are a manager (paperwork),but we lead to accomplish the purpose of our volunteer program and the mission of the organization

Submitted on 02 April 2013 by Chris Gleason, 4-H program specialist, Iowa State University Extension & Outreach, Ames, USA

Number 3 is a "sin" that resonates with me and is definitely a keeper. If we want a quality youth development program then we sure better give our volunteers quality training.

Submitted on 01 April 2013 by Cathy Crosthwaite, Volunteer Services Coordinator, Sacramento Public Library, USA

In general terms, I think your list and revisions cover the "sins" that I have experienced. I do agree that "directing" is a bit dated. "Engaging" is of course, apropos, but "leading", "coordinating" or "managing" might work for the title.

Comments from Readers

Submitted on July 20th, 2015

Charlene Hudson, Volunteer Coordinator, Catholic Charities Diocese Of Charlotte, Winston Salem, United States

I agree that "engagement" would be more current than "directing"

Submitted on January 8th, 2016

Anonymous, Mt Pleasant, IA, USA

This is good information, help is appreciated in volunteer management.

Submitted on March 4th, 2019

Karen Owens, Trainee, PA Master Naturalist + Schuylkill Water Steward, Downingtown, PA, USA

Former volunteer in another organization.

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