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What Would the Perfect Volunteer-Involving Organization Look Like?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

January
2012

This month I'll be recording a podcast with Renee McGivern, the host of Nonprofit Spark* on WebTalkRadio.net. During our preparatory phone call, Renee posed a reasonable question. Taking the perspective of her audience of relatively new executives and board members, she asked: "If organizational leaders followed your advice on being strategic in engaging volunteers, what would the outcome be? *What would it look like?*"

No one had ever asked me that particular question before, but I appreciated the point. After all, if we cannot picture the results of our efforts – and like/want the future we envision – we won't be motivated to do the work necessary. It also seemed to be a meaningful way to start a new year when we tend to look ahead with aspirations and resolutions.

So, here is what I think an organization would look like if it practiced everything we preach about creative, welcoming, and effective volunteer management, led by a skilled director of volunteer involvement with the full participation of top management and all frontline staff. Then I'd like to hear about *your* vision in response.

- The organization would be a busy place because all sorts of people would be energetically focused on projects and services. It would feel welcoming to clients and visitors because of the positive atmosphere and also because the special needs of each individual could be addressed.
- Anyone coming into contact with the organization would be treated as a prospective long-term *friend* of the organization, regardless of the initial relationship. So,
 - Money donors would be cultivated not only for more cash, but also for their time, skills and contacts.
 - Time donors would be valued for their volunteer work and as potential financial contributors, as well as for the many spheres of influence they open in the community.

Volunteers with a predetermined time frame, such as students interning for a semester or corporate employees giving a day of service, would continue to receive updates from the organization and future invitations to re-engage.

- Clients would be seen as partners in service delivery, not just as recipients of service and, once successfully assisted, would continue to be kept informed about the organization and invited to participate in helping others.
- On a regular basis, executives would meet together with volunteer office and development office staff, exchanging leads and planning community outreach to identify as many potential *friends* as possible. The list of names of all donors – money and time – would be compared and people would be invited to become involved in both ways (extending that invitation to family and friends).
- Discussions about resources would never be limited to “where can we find money?” Any new initiative would be analyzed for what would assure the greatest success and then a plan would be developed to generate a *mix* of resources that could include some or all of such things as redeployment of current staff, hiring of new full- or part-time staff, engaging paid consultants, recruiting skilled volunteers, seeking donated goods and services, and raising cash. At the end of the process, the collective value of all these resource components would far exceed what a grant or donation could have paid for.
- Paid staff would see themselves as responsible for assuring that clients and the public receive the best service possible. This means doing the work directly when the employee is best qualified and able, but also requesting and welcoming volunteers able to provide different and additional skills to do more. Staff would be recognized as much for their success as facilitators and connectors to resources as for what they do on their own. (And labor unions would also see that volunteers expand the staff’s ability to serve clients, not displace paid workers.)
- The board of directors (themselves volunteers) would ask as many questions about volunteer involvement as about fundraising, and would actively recruit their friends and contacts to donate skills as well as money. Further, board members would be required to spend a certain number of hours each year in frontline volunteer roles so that they can see for themselves what they are governing.
- Rather than appreciating volunteers mainly as hands (with a heart), everyone would realize that the availability of so many more people with different skills and perspectives enlarges the organization’s *brain*. Challenges faced by the organization would routinely be shared with volunteers who, as representatives of the community, would ask good questions, give suggestions, and brainstorm possible solutions. Any “staff survey” would naturally include volunteer responses.

- Volunteers would represent the organization when paid staff cannot or wouldn't be as effective. As private citizens, for example, volunteers might testify at government hearings, cross geographical and other jurisdiction boundaries to find other resources, and form collaborations with other organizations (possibly through *their* volunteers).

Ah, it's lovely to dream. This bright future is pretty far away in too many organizations, but first we – as leaders of volunteers – need to believe in it ourselves. Now it's your turn: What would the perfect volunteer-involving organization look like to you?

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Submitted on 09 January 2012 by Aimee, Lifestyle manager, Ontario, Canada

This is awesome! I am starting a brand new volunteer program at a seniors retirement home. Can you list some top priorities I should consider?

Submitted on 05 January 2012 by Robin Albert, Director, Volunteer Center, United Way of the Greater Seacoast, Portsmouth, NH, USA

The organization's flow chart showing departments/staff positions would also include volunteer leadership and other volunteer positions. I've seen a great example where paid staff are in rectangles and volunteers were in ovals.

Submitted on 05 January 2012 by Bruce Summers, Principal Consultant, Summers "Engagement" Consulting, Annandale, VA, USA

- What Would the Perfect Volunteer-Involving Organization Look Like?
- Equivalent – rights, roles, responsibility, respected, resources
- Executive/Management Partnerships
- Friend-raisers
- Monthly/Annual Volunteer Statement
- Multiply yourself through volunteers
- Volunteer Philosophy Statement
- Volunteer Satisfaction Surveys

Hmmm.... Susan raises some great points, as usual, I like her vision and would add...

Equivalent – rights, roles, responsibility, respected, resources – all volunteers and employees would have equivalent rights (personnel policies for each should mirror the other). Volunteers or employees could fill just about any role in the organization, lead projects, programs, teams - it would be hard to

tell who is a volunteer and who is an employee. Volunteers and employees would garner equal respect for their knowledge, skills, abilities and experience and the resources they can bring to benefit the organization (note nonprofits usually cannot hire Fortune 500 Level Executive talent as employees, but these same executives or retirees may be very willing to serve a volunteer).

Executive/Management Partnerships – Experienced, talented executives and managers will be invited to serve in volunteer partnerships with experienced employees serving as executives and managers working in tandem/partnership for the good of the organization. One partner can represent the other in internal or external meetings, both may have budget authority if one or the other is on vacation, they would split up who would lead various projects, working groups, be primary or go deeper re: specific key responsibilities...

Friend-raisers – all volunteers and employees will be asked to be friend-raisers for the organization. They should be kept informed of targeted resource needs and encouraged to tell their friends, family and connections about the organizations people, financial, or client services needs. You never know who is connected to...

The Monthly/Annual Volunteer Statement would be equally important to the board and the executive director to the monthly/annual financial statement.

Multiply yourself through volunteers – each new employee would be coached on how he/she needs to multiply themselves through volunteers. Many organizations involve 10, 30 or even 1,000 volunteers for each employee; by design these organizations could not be successful if the primary constraint on capacity was limited by the number of FTE employees available to do the work. Our budget would provide for the needs of multiplying resources and efforts through volunteer engagement.

A Volunteer Philosophy Statement – should be an organic basic building block for all organizations, it ties into why do we engage volunteers, their role - how do we get work done, by whom, how do we effectively and efficiently partner to...

Volunteer Satisfaction Surveys – ask volunteers at least annually or as they complete their assignment, how are things going, what worked great, how can we do things better, solicit information that is “actionable” so the organization can improve its volunteer engagement systems and processes. Ask questions about the volunteer intake experience, about training and supervision. Ask a few demographic questions, this is very helpful for analyzing the composition of your volunteer cadre and how it evolves over time.

Think about... is this the type of organization you would want to volunteer for, does it engage volunteers that you would like to partner with, are volunteers integrated organically, treated equivalently and considered invaluable resources and partners.

Submitted on 04 January 2012 by Annastasia Palubiski, Director, People Engagement, Vantage Point, Vancouver, BC, Canada

LOVE this post Susan. Here's what I'd add to the list:

- I totally agree we limit our organizations by always looking at money first. Here at Vantage Point, our people-first philosophy means we always ask "who" before we ask "how much" – from board-level to management. Our perfect organization knows money is a limited resource, and people and talent are unlimited!
- In our "perfect organization" there is One Workforce. Paid staff and external talent, our knowledge philanthropists, work side-by-side as equal yet different contributors to the organization.
- The "perfect organization" would be a learning one – where the input and ideas of external talent (volunteers) are welcomed and considered. Too often we see ourselves as the "experts" therefore we make all the decisions first and then ask people to carry out the work. Rather, true engagement means asking people to contribute before the plans and decisions are made. Ask external talent from the start, "How would you approach this? What do YOU think? Are we asking the right questions? What have we not considered?"
- The last thing I want to add is related to your comment about staff recognizing the limits of their skills and connecting/facilitating additional skills (i.e. very talented people!) in order to do the best job possible. This would be turn-key in the "perfect organization." In fact, staff's key skill would actually be connecting/facilitating and they would spend most of their time leading others vs. doing it all themselves. At Vantage Point these people have the informal title of Chief Talent Wrangler! Feel to borrow that one :-)

Great discussion and I'm excited to hear what others have to say.

Submitted on 04 January 2012 by Joan Roth, Coordinator, Volunteer Services, Excelsa Health Hospice, Greensburg, PA 15601, USA

In the perfect world every organization should be represented by volunteers who are excited and joyous in their volunteer task. They would show others the good in the organization and they would be lead by staff who truly care, are passionate in their work and outwardly communicate their thanks for the volunteer work accomplished because, all volunteer work is valuable regardless of the amount of time or money invested.

Submitted on 04 January 2012 by Liz Adamshick, Volunteer Services Manager, Hospice of Central Ohio, Newark Ohio, USA

Provocative topic and discussion! I'd like to echo Penny Grellier's comment and add that successful organizations make a commitment not only to cultural diversity, but also cultural competence among their paid and volunteer staff members. Strategic volunteer involvement is more effective when it's

inclusive of myriad cultural elements (beyond race and ethnicity: socioeconomic status, education, sexual orientation, religious and spiritual beliefs, gender, age...), AND when organization's leadership support every staff members's professional skill development in this area. It's more than awareness-- it's knowing how to interact with people from diverse backgrounds and learning from them how to make our organizations' work relevant in their lives.

Submitted on 03 January 2012 by Penny Grellier, Program Manager, Catholic Community Services, Tacoma, WA, USA

On the wish list, I would also include volunteers from a variety of cultural backgrounds, volunteers with functional needs, as well as multigenerational volunteers. An organization that is truly inclusive not only lives out the broad appeal and wide reach of its mission, but is better equipped to meet client needs more completely and garner support from a vast pool of resources. It would also mean the agency has a very effective volunteer recruitment strategy.

Submitted on 03 January 2012 by H. Roberts, Pres., PLNJ Inc. - Blankie Depot, Keyport/NJ, USA

Interesting stuff. Sometimes somebody has to state the obvious to make us really see deep changes. And this months hot topic sheds light on a vexing mystery: why are the folks at the top so eager to suppress the middle when that's the worst possible move for volunteer growth and leader unity?

Leaving my crystal ball aside for a moment, the volunteer organization I would gladly cultivate or work for would be bold enough to end "grandfathering" practices immediately and recruit solely on merit. Board members would earn their spot at the long table by first fulfilling assignments in the field and in the office. Board seats would be three years maximum.

Staffers and volunteers would attend the same workshops quarterly. Understanding that we all have different but equal roles to play at the organization is not only key but the basis for mission and in our clients eyes THE SAME.

Perfection is something we should take with a grain of salt. Most of us realize by the time we're of a certain age that the devil is in the details and we should look inward to achieve lofty goals that require the cooperation of many.

"Change your thoughts and you change your world." -Norman Vincent Peale

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