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When Volunteers Resist Change

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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We all know that the only constant is change. We face this paradox in our personal lives and in our professional work. In presentations about adapting to the ever-increasing pace of change, I often ask: “If everything in the world is changing, how can volunteering be the only thing that stays the same?” The obvious answer is that it cannot and has not.

Then I lead the audience in identifying all sorts of ideas for responding to new situations, usually requiring a fresh approach to volunteer work design. In planning these workshops, I know that I have to stop at some point and address openly what is lurking in participants’ minds: *How will I get past resistance from current volunteers? They like the status quo.*

Unfortunately, leaders of volunteers are often correct in suspecting that one obstacle to meaningful change will be volunteers themselves. Yes, it is also common to encounter resistance from paid staff and executives, but a negative volunteer response can extinguish action, particularly if it is feared that volunteers will leave in protest. While I respect the feelings involved, I think volunteer backlash needs to be challenged and resolved.

We cannot afford to waste the time of any volunteer. And, if we permit old ways of doing things to continue through inertia, that’s exactly what we are doing: cheating the organization from the most needed service and allowing volunteers to misdirect their talents.

Further, the history of volunteers is that of *change agents*. Volunteers have always been on the cutting edge of new approaches to addressing community concerns. No one is paid to start a revolution! Often causes are championed by unpaid advocates because established government, nonprofit, and business organizations won’t or can’t do what is needed. So the idea that volunteers are the ones who resist change is totally contradictory.

Unreasonable Resistance

Always remember that volunteers bring their own perspectives and stereotypes about volunteerism to their service. Here are some ways of thinking that reflect a lack of training or understanding:

- *I am a volunteer and so should only do what I like, in the way I like to do it.*
- *If other people want to volunteer here, fine. But why should I change to accommodate their needs?*
- *Honey, I'm just too old to learn all this computer stuff.*
- *I've been volunteering forever, in all sorts of places, and you just have to accept that volunteers will do their own thing.*
- *But I enjoy the other volunteers and the social atmosphere. If you bring in different people, that will change.*

What makes these sorts of opinions unreasonable is that they are totally volunteer-centered. It is important to remind everyone that the reason the organization exists is to serve clients or work on a cause. That was why volunteers joined in the first place. So, what should motivate volunteers is the constant striving for better ways to accomplish the mission. Mission first, enjoyment second. It's great that volunteers like being part of the organization, but this should *derive from* their meaningful service, not interfere with it.

In some cases, the resistance is a veiled expression of prejudice against diversifying the volunteer corps – whether by gender, age, race, religion, or any other factor. Such attitudes cannot be tolerated and point to the need to create team building opportunities.

Note that it is especially serious when the negativity comes from board members, especially officers. A board volunteer who says “I don't see why things need to change” may be threatened by a perceived loss of power or influence, particularly if he or she has many years of service under the present way of operating.

Legitimate Resistance

There are all sorts of changes that might occur. If it's a major, organization-wide change, the level of resistance from volunteers will increase in direct proportion to how surprised (and possibly shocked) they are to learn about it. Be a “no surprises” leader, especially on anything new that you are initiating specifically for volunteers.

Announcements of change may feel (and be) dictatorial. If volunteers have no opportunity to react, ask questions, or express concerns, they may legitimately feel taken for granted. Are they free help to be “used” at will or valued community representatives? Having an open discussion to air opinions is respectful and may even allow some great ideas to surface (which the volunteers will then own).

Sometimes, volunteers are right! The organization may have reached some decisions because of funding cuts, politics, mergers, or other external factors and the changes may well decrease effectiveness not strengthen it. As a leader of volunteers, this may put you in a quandary. How can

you balance the organization's initiative with the perspective of volunteers? Do you "manage" resistance or channel it into something else, even protest?

Whether paid or volunteer, people resist change not necessarily because they disagree with it, but because they can't envision what will replace the status quo. In other words, they know what today looks like but are not at all sure how to picture themselves after the change. How will things improve? What will each volunteer be doing differently once the change occurs?

Ways to Introduce and Guide Change

As with any volunteer management activity, it is always important to diagnose what is really going on when volunteers resist change. Seek out supporters of the change as well as listen to the detractors, since squeaky wheels are heard the most. Maybe there is not as much resistance as appears at first.

Articulate *why* the change is necessary. Engage volunteers in thinking about the best ways to respond to the new situation, gather their opinions and suggestions, and make sure their points are presented to decision makers. Make change *with* volunteers, not *to* them. Then provide training and support to guide people through the new systems.

Honor and celebrate those who contributed to the old way. Just because things must change does not mean that what was done before was wrong or useless or unvalued. Mark the transition between old and new with appropriate applause and respect – a party, a plaque on the wall, a photo album of memories.

Finally, accept that some people will never agree with the changes and may stop volunteering. While this may be poignant, the goal is to have them leave feeling that it is their choice and that what they accomplished to that point was recognized. Ultimately, however, the only way to move forward is to remove anchors from where you are now.

- *Have you been frustrated by volunteer resistance to change? How?*
- *What changes have you introduced successfully (or not)?*
- *Do you have any tips to share on this subject?*

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Submitted 20 November 2010 by Kristen Hoplin, Store To Door, St. Paul, MN

I think this gives some good examples of legitimate and illegitimate reasons for resistance to change. I typically have been able to engage the volunteers in the change by getting their feedback and making them an important part of the process. It's important to identify key volunteers who are influencers, and work with them to support the change and help present it to fellow volunteers. Resistant volunteers are much more likely to accept change when it's supported by other volunteers, rather than just staff members.

Submitted 16 November 2010, Anonymously

The key point in this article is that organizations, whether they are a for profit business or a non profit that partners with volunteers, exist to provide goods or services for their clients, they do not exist to provide work for their employees or volunteers. I worked for a non profit radio station for many years and I had to remind staff, board members and volunteers that all decisions had to come back to what was in the best interests of fulfilling our mandate and satisfying our listeners not what was necessarily best for the volunteers. In fact I lost my job because the board hired someone else because they thought volunteers would like his ideas better than mine. Listeners - our clients so to speak - were not even a consideration for their decision. As it turned out my replacement was fired after 13 months, and the station experienced a significant decrease in listener donations during their annual fund drive. Change should always be in the best interests of the end user, not necessarily in the best interests of the people who provide the service.

Submitted 5 November 2010 by Betty Acheson, Chief, Voluntary Services, Dept. of Veterans Affairs, White River Junction, VT USA

When I have a volunteer who is hesitant about change, it is not unusual to discover that what they are afraid of is that they have performed so well for so long, they are fearful that they will not be able adapt to the "new way." I have them help me design the assignment to fit their needs/qualifications and the needs of the facility. Their input is very important to us and very helpful.

Submitted 5 November 2010 by Linda Fites, Lakeland HealthCare, St. Joseph MI USA

This past year we merged the three separate auxiliaries in our organization into one. One auxiliary was 65 years, the other 2 were both over 50 years old. It was the right time, we solicited the input of each of the boards collectively in the development of a new mission statement, name, and in the development of a new board. Our new fiscal year began October 1. It has been a very rewarding process.

Submitted 2 November 2010 by Penny Aulston, Manager of Volunteer Administrative Programs, Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, IL USA

2010 marked huge changes for our volunteers and the strategies you outlined were used with successful results. The positive enthusiasm of most of the volunteers made it difficult for the unhappy minority to develop a following. We are all adjusting to a new structure including volunteer team captains, new strategies, scheduling with vic-net and new office space, but we continue to try to make it fun for all.

Submitted 2 November 2010, Anonymously

We've had to integrate volunteers with paid staff at an Information Desk position. This is because we are making visitors, vendors, etc. entering our organization sign in and out which was not the previous custom. This has become a situation where several volunteers have already quit and several are dissatisfied. I have attempted to make sure they feel valued, however others in the organization are not as grateful for their support up to this point. This places strain on our position in the organization because we need these volunteers to support us as liaisons in the community as well.

Comments from Readers

Submitted on June 22nd, 2016

Anonymous, Flat Rock, Mi, USA

We are going through a change in our 95% volunteer nonprofit. Volunteers are very resistant to changing ANYTHING and many have already quit. The others don't volunteer as much as they used to, and are not willing to try new things. It is very frustrating.

Submitted on June 23rd, 2016

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

Sorry you are going through this situation, but it seems pretty clear that you are dealing with a volunteer corps that came on board when your organization itself was different -- and now that the organization is changing, you may well have the **wrong** volunteers for moving forward. Allow people to "retire with honor" and without guilt at not being willing to change. But do NOT keep them on because you can't accomplish what is needed without finding new people who are **right** for the work and want to volunteer for it. Please also look at a more recent Hot Topic that contains some specific ideas for introducing change and helping people to come to grips with it: "[Do You Stick Your Neck Out When Advocating for Volunteers?](#)"

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