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# What Leaders of Volunteers Can DO to Gain Executive Attention

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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My August Hot Topic, [I'll Never Understand Why Executives Still Don't Understand](#), reflects my frustrations with executives who haven't got a clue about how important volunteer management is. This month, however, I am turning the spotlight 180 degrees to examine how *leaders of volunteers* contribute to the problem of not getting enough attention from higher-ups. This is not "blaming the victim" because I don't see us as victims – just as people who are not making the most powerful use of the tools we already have.

Think about instances in which you succeeded at increasing support of volunteer involvement. If you have not been successful, analyze the actions of colleagues who *have* obtained more executive attention, funding, authority, etc. I am certain you will find some common denominators that provide an excellent guide to being highly effective. Here are eight approaches I think are essential...and you can add your own favorite practices in response.

## 1. Don't wait to be asked.

If your boss and colleagues already knew the full extent of what volunteers could accomplish on behalf of your organization, you'd be drowning in requests for all sorts of donated talents. But they don't understand the potential treasure trove you've been designated to explore. Surprise them! Listen to what your colleagues say they need and propose volunteer positions that might help in meeting those needs. Then, go out and find the right volunteers with the necessary skills. Over time, people will begin to turn to you as a problem solver and a connector to community resources. This is a powerful role.

Do you add value to management team meetings and staff planning discussions or are you more of an observer? Do you offer to recruit skilled volunteers for new initiatives? Do you ask questions that get everyone thinking about how a decision impacts (or affects) volunteers? Do you remind managers

that volunteers reflect the public and can be surveyed for possible opinions and perspectives a new idea might encounter in the community?

## **2. Advocate on behalf of volunteers, not yourself.**

News flash: *everyone* on staff feels overwhelmed, underpaid, and under-appreciated. True, you may be worse off than the others, but you are not alone in wanting requests granted. The difference is that you seem to be a “small” unit yet you represent the needs of far more people than any other department. Therefore it is vital to explain any request in terms of its impact on the ability of the entire corps of volunteers to be more successful.

If your organization has a space problem and various staff are sharing offices, asking for a larger volunteer services office may not seem unjustified unless you make the case that an average of XX people per day go in and out, store their coats and personal items, need workspace for projects or meeting space for groups, etc. It's not *your* office that has to expand, it's *theirs*.

Need a secretary or assistant? Maybe you do, but not because you are overworked. It's because volunteers are doing so much, seven days a week, ten hours a day, that *they* deserve access to supportive staff whenever they work. Which means that, if you are told there are no funds to hire someone else, you can ask, "Well, then how do you recommend we handle support for volunteers on the weekend?" – being open to other solutions such as designating someone else already on staff and working on Saturdays to at least be available to answer volunteer questions. In other words, saying "no" to you does not alleviate the issue for volunteers. (But you have to be willing to stand your ground.)

## **3. Routinely invite volunteers to stand with you.**

In the current issue of *e-Volunteerism* (which will change on October 15), Steve McCurley and I wrote our *Points of View* article on "[Practicing What We Preach](#)" (free to everyone to read). We note that too often leaders of volunteers do not delegate or share their own work with competent volunteers, recruited specifically to be partners in volunteer management. Be a role model. The more volunteers are visible in your office, doing clearly important and responsible work, the more you show by example what others are missing.

When you have a meeting with someone in management during which you plan to propose something new, take along a well-versed volunteer to add to the presentation. As always, the decision the manager will make is not on your behalf, but on behalf of volunteers. Maybe having to explain "yes" or "no" to a representative of the people most affected will elicit better thinking. At staff meetings or other public forums, always let volunteers themselves report on their own work and respond to questions.

## **4. Make managers in the middle your allies, not your obstacles.**

If you work in a small organization and report directly to the executive, you can try to establish an open, collegial relationship. But if you report to a deputy or someone lower on the food chain, the challenge is greater. You will need this person to represent the contributions and needs of volunteers to top management. How well does your immediate supervisor fill this role? Does s/he actually go to bat for volunteers or simply accept whatever his or her boss replies?

On the premise that your requests are to boost volunteer accomplishments, not benefit you personally, here are some practical ways you might get your voice heard by higher-ups through or past your supervisor:

- Put all new ideas or requests in writing, with a brief summary and possibly with endorsements attached from key volunteers and staff who would be affected, too. Ask your supervisor to share this upwards, rather than relying on him or her to paraphrase what you want.
- Ask your supervisor to schedule a meeting for both of you to speak to the top administrator together on an important volunteer-related subject.
- If your supervisor has many priorities other than volunteer engagement (in other words, s/he didn't necessarily want to supervise you), try to acknowledge the problem and work around it – saving him or her time while still maintaining a communication loop. Suggest that you openly schedule at least bi-annual meetings with any of the department heads or top managers you feel are directly concerned with the success of volunteers in their work areas. Your supervisor must agree to this for the other managers to be comfortable, but if volunteers are placed in their department, you have every right to open discussion about those team members with them.

## **5. Report more than statistics.**

Formal written reports (ideally monthly) are not a task most volunteer resources managers relish, but they should. Reports are an opportunity every month to educate up. If you created the format of your report, make it more effective; if you were given a format created by someone else, you can still add additional material (no one was ever fired for giving more than minimal information).

Think about what management wants and needs to know and make sure you tell them. Always apply the "so what?" measure: is it clear why a statistic or fact reveals something important about volunteer impact?

## **6. Make sure all paid staff receive training and support to partner with volunteers.**

As we all know, it can't be assumed that paid staff – no matter how educated in their professional fields – have ever been trained in basic volunteer management. Who better than you to assess what your colleagues may need to learn and then recommend topics and resources to teach them?

Offer to help the person responsible for staff development to run training sessions in working with volunteers, perhaps on topics such as how to partner with student interns or pro bono corporate volunteers. Further, explain how you can recruit experts in any subject under the sun to donate a few hours to speak to the staff on anything they'd like to learn more about. And be sure to get time on the schedule for new employee orientation so that you can start new hires off on the right foot about engaging volunteers.

## **7. Put volunteers on the agenda as often as possible.**

Keep volunteers visible, particularly to top decision makers. Ask for time on meeting agendas (departmental, unit, and those of the board of directors) to discuss a volunteer-related issue and then facilitate a useful discussion. Not something vague like "I'd like some feedback about volunteer participation," but rather something specific such as: "We have just contacted nearby Business Y and have arranged for their employees to take a longer lunch period each week to volunteer here. Their skill set includes \_\_\_\_\_. How might this unit/department benefit from such contributions?" Or, "Let me share an incident that occurred here last month (keeping the people involved anonymous) so we can discuss what might be ways to prevent it from happening again or how to handle it more effectively should it recur."

Find teachable moments. If you read about some trend in volunteering, circulate excerpts of the news item to department heads and ask if it has potential to affect your organization. Use external events such as National Volunteer Week to compare the data about volunteers in your setting to national statistics. In other words, keep demonstrating that volunteering is evolving and you are keeping up with what's important.

## **8. Open a conversation with your executive.**

This month, Energize is running a contest. You can win training and consultation prizes, but we've designed the contest to give you a powerful opportunity – if you want to take it: to open a conversation with your executive. To enter the contest, you must answer a questionnaire reflecting on what would be different if everyone was trained to work with volunteers. If you don't have direct access to your executive, ask your supervisor if s/he will help set up a meeting for you to discuss the questionnaire (see action #4 above!). Step through the door we've opened and your prize may be more intentional support for volunteers and, by extension, for you as their leader.

*How are you proactive in keeping volunteers visible to decision makers and everyone else in your organization?*

Related Topics: [Executive Director, Role of](#) | [Recognition](#) | [Recordkeeping and Reporting](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

**Submitted on 25 October 2011 by Wendy Moore, Volunteer Coordinator, , Brisbane, Australia**

Thank you for your hot topic Susan. It provides valuable insight in how we can gain attention for our sector. I would like to perhaps extend your first point to include – Shamelessly Self-promote!

In the very competitive promotions industry, "shamelessly self-promote" was the catch cry of the printing franchise of our home based printing business. While my career may have changed, I have continued this mantra as I feel it works for any industry including the volunteer management sector.

Volunteer Management is about having well designed and managed volunteer programs, which utilize the skills, abilities, intellect, passion and time of volunteers, to address community needs or value adding to an existing service. However, as you suggest Susan, there may be some people within an organisation or in the general public who may be unaware of the extent of the volunteer programs and the role which volunteers play within an organisation.

To capture the attention of executive within an organisation or the general public outside an organisation, there is always opportunity to shamelessly self-promote; whether it is a chat with the CEO at a morning tea, a chance meeting with an old friend, talking to other parents at a school function or speaking with attendees at a community event.

Depending on a person's response to a casual mention of volunteer programs and the roles which volunteer's play, determines the level of knowledge that the person has of the existing volunteer programs.

If the mention of volunteer programs is met with disinterest then there may be a preconceived idea of the role of volunteers which the person may be identifying with. A response of pleasant surprise may indicate that the person may not have been aware of the full extent of the existing volunteer programs or how volunteers may be engaged. By having these conversations it may be possible to identify target markets where further promotion of existing volunteer programs may be needed.

<http://wendy-moore.blogspot.com/2011/10/shamelessly-self-promote-volunteer.html>

**Submitted on 14 October 2011 by Reed Dewey, Principal, Volunteer Frontier, Chevy Chase, USA**

Susan: Thanks for these great suggestions. I've found in these challenging times that many nonprofit executives are so focused on cash flow matters that other priorities (like volunteer engagement) aren't fully addressed. I suggest appealing to senior management with how they'll save or make money with expanded volunteer use. Why not start by coming up with a plan for senior management framed in this way? I suggest showing bosses the money, then later appealing to the more reasoned rational for volunteer engagement for which we all deep believe.

**Submitted on 11 October 2011 by H. Roberts, President, PLNJ-Blankie Depot, Keyport/NJ, USA**

Two tips that have helped me over the years place the focus on volunteers and volunteer programs while reaching an often uneducated but interested audience:

- attend Board meetings with key volunteers and ask for 10-15 mins to share what your dept is up to. Our presentations are often the ah-ha moment at meetings.
- photograph everything! Nothing speaks louder or has more impact than the visual experience of volunteers in the field, with your clients, with members of your local community. Put a prideful face to everything you do.

**Submitted on 03 October 2011 by Hanan Bilal, Director of Volunteers, Ronald McDonald House Charities of North Central Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA**

I agree with what you've shared in this article. Volunteer leaders must lead by example.

I use about 5 volunteers to assist my efforts as the Director of Volunteers. When other managers see the benefits these volunteers offer our agency's mission and vision (output of work), it definitely increased their desire to request (interns-pro bono volunteers).

I like the proactive thinking and doing rather than merely complaining and being reactive. Engaging volunteers starts with us. Volunteers help us to be more effective and efficient.

Thanks for sharing this information.

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