

Stalking the Elusive Executive

**A Dozen Tips for Getting Your
Top Decision-Makers
to Read (and Learn from)
Volunteer Management
Literature**



12
Great-Ideas

from Susan J. Ellis

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By
Susan J. Ellis

The [Energize Online Bookstore](#) offers a wide range of titles to assist volunteer program managers to learn the best practices of the field and remain on the cutting-edge with fresh ideas. But no volunteer program manager can do the job alone. Volunteers must be seen as a vital component of an agency's human resources and that means the highest decision-makers in an organization also have to become educated on this subject.

Unfortunately, there are not many places that executives can learn about maximizing volunteer involvement and, in some ways, they don't even "know what they don't know." So volunteer program managers have a key role to play as in-house educators, teaching "up" to their immediate managers and onward to the top, including the board of directors (who are themselves volunteers but rarely examine the subject of community engagement on the board agenda).

A number of the books in our store can be used to educate decision-makers as well as frontline volunteer program managers. For example, I wrote my book [From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success](#) specifically to help those executives who really want to support volunteers and are looking for new and better ways to do so. I wanted to speak for all the volunteer program managers who are frustrated by a lack of administrative support—in the hope that one day I will no longer hear so many participants in my training workshops say: "if only my boss would understand." There are other books that can broaden the horizons of management.

To any executive who happens to read this "by mistake"...

As you can quickly see, these tips were written mainly for volunteer program managers who need help in gaining administrative support, even to get their bosses to read a book on the topic of volunteers. Clearly, this does not refer to you! Congratulations on being a cutting-edge administrator who knows that effective volunteer management is good agency management.

Now, how about helping other executives? Recommend the books you like to a colleague who might not be as aware as you are of the importance of this subject.

For some of you, the really monumental question is: ***How do I get my boss to read a book about volunteer involvement?*** Because I have heard this query so often, here are a dozen specific, practical suggestions you can use to “educate up.”

By the way, asking your boss to read a volunteerism book does not necessarily imply that there are problems to correct. The best organizations—and the best administrators—always seek to get even better, so any volunteer program can benefit from ideas for doing things more successfully.

But let me caution you: I and the other authors of the books we sell hold us to the highest of standards—expressing a vision of volunteer administration that is not yet universally practiced. So, if you want your executives to read such a book, be prepared to be a high-quality director of volunteer services!

If you are still hesitant about approaching your executive with the request to read a volunteerism book, always remember this underlying principle: Providing support to you, as director of volunteers, is to do what's best for *volunteers*, not simply to help you in your job.

So here are my dozen tips.

① *The Direct Approach:* Buy a book for your exec and ask him or her to read it.

You never know until you try and there may be no justification for anticipating resistance. In fact, you may be pleasantly surprised! To make the task of reading the book less daunting, you might note which chapters you feel are particularly of value to your organization.

② *The Direct Approach Plus:* Buy it for him or her, then highlight paragraphs in the text and insert some margin notes to refer to specific examples in your organization.

③ *The Direct Approach with the Author's Personal Touch:* Buy it for him or her and ask our authors to inscribe/autograph it first. If you've already bought the book, we'll send you a self-adhesive label with the inscription that you can place inside the front cover. We'll say anything you want, such as: "To an executive who will certainly be interested in these pages." (!!!) (E-mail us at info@energizeinc.com to request a bookplate. Please be sure to specify which book/title you want inscribed, spell the name of your boss correctly, and give us your postal mailing address.)

④ The Direct Approach, Public Version: Give your executive the book at the annual volunteer recognition function as his/her thank you gift! Noting publicly, of course, that the book will only be reaffirming the support shown all year. (Can be combined with author's inscription!)

⑤ The Spoon Feeding Approach: Over the course of several months, give him or her a chapter at a time, or even a few paragraphs at a time. This can be particularly effective if the section relates to something in your monthly report for that period.

As another twist, try ending the excerpt in the middle of a sentence and add a margin note that says: "I have the whole book, if you'd like to read more"!

Slip selected pages in with other papers needing executive attention.

⑥ The It's-Harder-to-Say-No-to-a-Volunteer Approach: Buy a copy, but ask a key volunteer to give it to the executive with the request that he/she read it. If you have a volunteer program advisory committee, they can do this as a group.

⑦ The Seize-the Moment Approach: Be alert when a situation occurs that provides the opportunity to give your executive the book at a "teachable moment." Highlight sections that address the relevant issues. Examples:

- when an evaluation report is produced
- when an incident occurs between an employee and a volunteer
- during a budget cut or union contract talks
- right after a successful recognition event, in the spirit of "we could make this even better"

⑧ The Peer Pressure Approach, Private Version: See if a colleague's boss who has read the book is willing to write a "testimonial" letter of endorsement to your boss.

⑨ The Peer Pressure Approach, Public Version: Use your local directors of volunteers in agencies (DOVIA) association in one of several ways:

- a. As in the suggestion above, have the DOVIA solicit reviews and testimonials from several executives who have read the same book, asking permission to use the endorsements in a newsletter (which can then be shown to your boss) or in individualized letters accompanying the book.
- b. Ask the association to send your boss the book (which you purchased on your own), with a letter explaining that key executives in town have been selected for special recognition.
- c. Arrange for the DOVIA to buy that title in bulk for all members and send every boss a copy with a note explaining the DOVIA's commitment to best volunteer management practices.
- d. Initiate a DOVIA-sponsored "Boss Recognition Event" (possibly during National Volunteer Week) and give an inscribed copy of the book as an award. The Volunteer Administrations of Southwestern Pennsylvania (VASP) has been doing exactly this with *From the Top Down* for more than ten years (so thanks to them for this great idea). Here is what the Danielle Bauer, 1996 VASP president, has to say:

When the organization initiated the "VASP Valentine Award" to honor the Executive Director or CEO most understanding of and sympathetic to volunteerism there was only one appropriate prize: a copy of From the Top Down. It affirms what all volunteer administrators know; it really does have to come from the top down!

10 The "Executives Seminar" Approach: Lead your DOVIA in sponsoring a half-day educational program about support of volunteers to which all local agency executives are invited. Co-sponsor the seminar with the Volunteer Center or with another professional group such as ASAE or AFP. Give a volunteerism book as part of the registration package and refer to it in the seminar.

11 The Next-Best-Thing Approach: See if you can get a deputy administrator, vice president, or other department head to read the book first, and then suggest it to the top person. (To get this person to read it, try suggestions 1 to 10 above!)

⑫ **The Going-over-His/Her-Head Approach** (careful, this is a last resort and risky): Try to get a board member to read it and raise questions about your organization's volunteer involvement in a board meeting.



Once your executive has the book, the next challenge is to make sure the book is read. Try these techniques:

- Ask questions about it.
- Comment on certain sections and try to strike up a conversation about it.
- If the book was given as an award, invite your boss to speak to the group that gave it, with his/her further perspectives on the executive role.

I hope that you can find ways to use our Online Bookstore offerings both to win you increased respect as the leader of your organization's volunteer program and to build appropriate support for volunteers.

All best wishes to you in your work,

Susan J. Ellis
President
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