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Promises

The Moral Obligation of Volunteer Recruitment Promises

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Recruiting volunteers to contribute their time and effort to your organization puts *you* in the middle of an implied promise. By issuing the invitation to participate, you are representing that volunteers 1) will be working towards a meaningful mission and 2) will be valued partners in that work. When new people agree to volunteer, they initially commit because they believe in the genuineness of that invitation. Which means they believe you and respond to your sincerity.

So recruitment sets up a moral obligation for each of us.

What happens, therefore, when a little voice in the pit of our stomach nags at us with thoughts such as: “Oh, dear, what if this volunteer ends up in X department where the staff is so negative?” or “Will the risk manager argue against allowing volunteers to do it the way they want?” or “What will they think when they realize volunteers are taken for granted here?”

It’s probably safe to assume that each of us believes in the mission of our organization – that its ultimate goal is truly worthwhile and its services of benefit to recipients. (If not, it’s time to change jobs. Really.)

But it’s not enough to engage volunteers solely because of the importance of the long-term goal. For many organizations that goal is decades away, if attainable at all. None of us will wipe out all diseases or hunger in our lifetimes. And not all missions are to end something. A museum or a park expects to continue forever, give or take a century. But *how* an organization treats its participants (employees, volunteers, and clients) matters every single day, right now.

This means that it’s imperative to create the most welcoming and productive environment for everyone – for the long haul. That’s why a leader of volunteers is ethically bound to tackle any issue that violates the promises made in recruitment.

In my opinion, we have an ethical dilemma whenever we find ourselves:

- Working around resistance from paid staff (or veteran volunteers) rather than confronting and changing it.
- Seeing that there are no consequences when employees are unsupportive of volunteers and, maybe worse, that there are no rewards for doing a great job with volunteers.
- Accepting restrictions on what volunteers can and can't do that are created under negative, outdated, or otherwise wrong stereotypes about who volunteers are and whether they can be trusted.
- Allowing volunteers to be invisible or of lowest attention on organizational charts, in agency brochures, in annual reports, on Web sites, etc.
- Watching donors of money receive adoration while donations of time and talent are undervalued – except for members of the board of directors, who are rarely acknowledged as volunteer.

These sorts of concerns – which are rampant – ought to trouble us not just because they are frustrating and irritating to us in our jobs, but because they are symptoms of a disconnect between the organization's stated desire for volunteers and its basic attitude towards them.

If you've worked at improving these sorts of fundamental indicators of whether an organization values volunteers and you're making progress, fine. But if these issues continue or multiply, can you in good conscience continue to recruit new volunteers into the organization? If your values about community engagement are clearly in conflict with those of the organization (or its leaders), are you not being dishonest in the promises implied in recruitment? Is it time to change jobs?

Most of us need our jobs. I am not being cavalier in suggesting that resigning is an easy thing to do. And I'm not recommending that anyone threaten to resign as a strategy to get attention to frustrating problems. I am, however, urging honest advocacy. We can make it clear to our executives that we will not mislead potential volunteers nor place them into unreceptive units. We can point out the consequences when lip service about wanting volunteers is not backed by tangible support. We can even be up front when we recruit, telling prospective volunteers about the challenges they may face and offering them the chance to partner with us in changing the organization for the better.

A volunteer can find many organizations with which to affiliate and do good in the world. What right do we have to ask people to choose our organization if they will be unfairly limited or have to navigate an obstacle course? We are cheating them by wasting the full potential of their time. And, ultimately, we are cheating our whole society by squandering talent resources. I truly believe that this is not a grandiose overstatement. What do you believe?

- Have you had to confront a personal ethical dilemma in your work with volunteers? How did you handle it?
- What else might place your values in conflict with those of the organization?
- What are some other suggestions for handling such situations?

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Posted on 5 October 2007 by H Roberts, PLNJ Inc., Pres., Keyport, NJ USA

The moral obligation we have to clients, donors, Board members and the community in which our non profits campaign is no different or any more important than the obligation we make to volunteers reporting in. Mission is everything. If you find yourself at an ethical impasse, talk mission. If upper management or staff aren't inclusive to your VRM position or those you recruit-review the mission. Because if the mission fails, you've lost sight of your moral obligation.

Posted on 5 October 2007 by Margaret Robertson, Manager Volunteer Services, Queensland Australia

I wholeheartedly agree with Susan on this and I have recently been more upfront on confronting resistance rather than working around it. In the past I was inclined to just stop recruiting volunteers for areas that didn't support them well (and tell the manager concerned why I wasn't recruiting). These days I am much more likely to be direct. Recently I addressed some inappropriate behaviour by paid staff by asking them "Do you want the volunteer to leave? Because she should...", and then describing the issue. This was much better than a generic "you need to do more to support your volunteers..." as it provided concrete examples of what was wrong. Standard performance management, really - and if the behaviour does happen again, I'll take it further. As Susan has said elsewhere, resistance or conflict is sometimes the result of ignorance rather than perceived threat or even philosophical disagreement.

Posted on 4 October 2007 by Teri, Dayton OH USA

Sometimes announcing a "Fresh Start" for your program can work wonders. Try bringing your seasoned volunteers onto an advisory team (make sure they understand that you have no obligation to actually use their advice) with other problem and supportive staff members. If people feel that a reorganization or redefinition of jobs was their idea, or involved their input, it is easier to get buy in. In this situation your staff can have a chance to more fully see where changes need to be made--even if the change is theirs to make.

Posted on 3 October 2007 by Debra Savitt, Supervisor, Volunteer Resources, Jewish Family and Children's Service, Minneapolis, MN USA

I feel blessed to work for an agency that truly values the contribution of our volunteers and, understands the worth and return on investment of our volunteers. We could not do what we do without our volunteers. The dilemma we face is presenting the challenges that arise in the lives of many of our client groups without scaring the volunteers away. So many volunteers have only the

best of intentions, but when the going gets tough, many volunteers bail. Bottom line is the administration and staff are supportive of what we in Volunteer Resources do every day.

Posted on 3 October 2007 by Shirley Kirkpatrick, OASIS Education Center, Manager - Volunteer Programs, Eugene, OR USA

I did indeed leave a job because of how undervalued and unacknowledged the volunteers were by the paid staff. The worst was the top management. Hard as I tried, I was met with resistance at every turn. I chose to leave the organization because in my gut I knew I could not in good conscience recruit volunteers only to have them be treated as less-than-desirables. I tried working with staff, educating them on the benefits of having incredibly talented and knowledgeable volunteers. They were too scared and intimidated by top level management to see what a valuable asset we had. I gave it a year and then left. Most of the volunteers have left as well.

Posted on 3 October 2007 by Virginia Norris, Silverado Hospice, Volunteer Coordinator, Simi Valley, CA USA

We had a problem with volunteers being treated by some employees as second class citizens in our office. With the approval of my supervisor, I put together an in-service on how to treat volunteers. I invited the boss in the corporate office, and he came. Since then there has been a 180 degree change in the office. I liked the idea from the article about noticing and reinforcing the positive change.

Posted on 3 October 2007 by Lea Taddonio, National Tropical Botanical Garden, Volunteer Coordinator, Kalaheo Hawaii

I have an issue where established volunteers create an unwelcoming atmosphere for new participants in a certain department. Many of these volunteers have been here for twenty years which makes the change process slow. I have begun using honesty as the best policy with newbies placed in this department. Some fit in with the group mentality and some do not and request transfer. The problem is that the newbies who don't fit in often have the best and most creative ideas. However, they don't want to bang their head against the wall during their free time. My challenge is how do I keep creative, fresh volunteers to change to group dynamic when they can clearly use their talents in other areas of the organization with limited drama.

Posted on 3 October 2007 by Pat Bubb, Retired HR Manager, Basking Ridge, NJ USA

I think any organization that truly values volunteers will require paid management support through their job descriptions and performance evaluations. Otherwise, the commitment does not have sufficient "teeth" to be successful and satisfying for everyone.

Posted on 3 October 2007 by Lise, GSHFH, Volunteer Coordinator, Springfield USA

It is so important to bring these issues out as soon as they appear. We are all faced with some level of this problem. I know I have veteran volunteer who do not always believe that others can gain the skills needed to do the job. Talking about it with our executive director was helpful and a start to trying to fix the problem. COMMUNICATION IS KEY!

Posted on 3 October 2007 by Dan, UWEX, Agent, Medford USA

I agree we have this moral obligation. I am concerned also about how volunteers treat each other. Our executive board is all volunteer but sometimes individual members or coalitions of members speak or act in ways that are reason for other volunteers to take offense. As the only paid professional of this organization, I find myself seeking to help them see how to respect each other even when there are conflicting opinions. This is the most significant volunteer challenge I face.

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