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Understand

I'll Never Understand Why Executives Still Don't Understand

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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I was searching for something in the [archives of my Hot Topics](#) and found myself amazed that I have written 172 of these since 1997! I've commented on many different events, initiatives, successes, failures, and puzzlements in our volunteer field. But one theme keeps recurring: lack of enthusiasm about and true support for volunteer contributions from those in charge of organizations.

I will never understand the inability of executive-level decision makers to “get” how important volunteers are to the health and success of their organizations – or how important volunteers *could* be if approached in a strategic and creative way.

It is inexplicable to me that the subject of volunteering is simply omitted from the board room, long-range planning, funding applications, financial accounting, and anything else perceived as critical organization management. Even worse, volunteer involvement is often handled at a level far below the top – as a sub-unit of the department willing to house it (not necessarily the most logical one).

In many ways, this is the vital windmill at which I have been tilting throughout my career. Yet the call for attention needs to be repeated again and again. Why does nothing seem to change?

Powerful Sound Bites

Those readers familiar with my writing, especially [From the Top Down](#), will not find anything new here as I've said it all before. But I want to highlight the key points in an effort to give each of you some “sound bites” or “elevator speeches” to use in your own advocacy for our work. Unless we are united in how we articulate our vision, we cannot expect executives to come up with these points themselves.

So, in the hope that these bullet points will be useful, here is the most succinct set of arguments I can make for not ignoring volunteer involvement. And then I want *you* to add some more of your own.

- **Volunteers are an essential part of an organization's network of *supporters*.**

Every organization needs *friends* in the community – people who feel a sustained relationship with the cause and the mission, which they express in different ways over many years – even over a lifetime. These supporters move in and out of different roles at different points in their lives (sometimes doing several at once): they give money, time, and talent; they provide access to information, valuable contacts, and in-kind goods and services; they spread your message and educate the public.

- **Volunteers are time donors with limitless potential for contributing energy and a world of skills. But that potential will not materialize without a strategic plan to attract and engage the *right* volunteers for each organization.**

When hiring new employees, organizations spend time and energy combing the community, expecting to find the most qualified applicants. That same community is also a treasure trove of prospective skilled *volunteers*. Expect to find them by also putting some effort into that search.

- **Volunteers expand the *brain* of an organization (as well as its heart).** This thought was expressed by a colleague in Perth, Australia last month after attending one of my workshops there. He realized that he had understood the “hearts and hands” gifts volunteers offer, but had not before recognized the addition of greater skills and perspectives volunteers bring to the thinking of an organization (if we welcome them to do so).

- **Even though the staff is highly educated and well trained, it cannot be assumed that they have ever been taught anything about working with volunteers.**

What's my vision of utopia? That someday curriculum explaining the role of volunteering in society, the scope of citizen participation, and the basic principles of effective volunteer management is taught widely – at all levels of education and especially within the professional training of any occupation that will, upon graduation, definitely be expected to interface with volunteers on the job (examples: nurses, teachers, social workers, clergy).

- **Poor volunteer management costs more money (and effort) than doing it right in the first place.**

Signing on anyone who steps forward to “help” in vague ways, without clear objectives and coordination, simply wastes time – for the paid staff and for the volunteers. Who can afford to waste time? Worse, it can hamper achieving what really needs to be done for your clients or the public, making the engagement of volunteers a drain on resources rather than value-added.

- **It is not self-evident that “having” volunteers means an organization is supported by the community – and adding “more” volunteers is not necessarily a meaningful objective.**

Some volunteers are loyal to the clients or the cause, not necessarily to the organization. Executives ought to find out what volunteers are really thinking and saying in public. And, in some cases, focusing on *fewer* volunteers who are truly committed (and qualified) might be better for everyone.

- **When we value something, we plan for, fund, oversee, and evaluate it. So if we do not do these things for volunteer involvement, what's the message?**

When we value something, we designate someone to be responsible for it (someone with the skills and interest to do it well). Organizations should have someone in charge of volunteer involvement, not assign it as a sideline activity for someone who really isn't interested or qualified.

- **"Volunteer" does not mean low-level (no matter what word you use).**
Board members are volunteers, as are most advisory councils, student interns, pro bono consultants, and loaned executives! They may describe themselves with different terminology, but the common denominator is that a wide range of people contribute their expertise and time without going on the organization's payroll. Surgeons volunteer vacation time to perform operations in poor countries. Never assume a "volunteer" is unskilled.
- **It takes a village to raise a child, and it takes an entire organization to support volunteers.**
Even with a highly-competent director of volunteer involvement, every single staff member shares responsibility for daily interaction with volunteers, partnering to accomplish goals. And the expectation for this is set *by top management*. How senior administrators demonstrate their commitment to involving volunteers determines how most staff will perceive it.
- **The key to unlocking the opportunities presented by volunteers is to pay attention.**
As with any other management function, the success of volunteer involvement is directly proportional to the amount of time spent thinking about, reaching the right decisions on, monitoring, and improving it. Volunteers should be on the executive agenda for the same reason that client services, money, and employees are.

All of the points here are, to me, self-evident and inarguable. So why are they so little understood?

You Can Help

Over the next few months we at Energize are going to focus on speaking to organization executives in some new ways, including a more mission-centered [Everyone Ready®](#) Web site and a series of articles related to "Why Volunteers Matter" and "It Takes an Entire Organization" to engage volunteers effectively. We hope that these will be a resource to anyone who is trying to make the case for proper staffing, funding, and training for volunteer involvement.

You can help us in two ways with your responses here (thank you in advance!):

- Tell us which publications, associations, conferences, and social media sites your top administrators read, attend, or keep tabs on to support their careers. We will attempt to get the word out in the right places.

- Share your own “sound bites” about the importance of volunteer involvement. In other words, answer this question: *What would you like Energize, Inc. to say to your decision-makers for you?*

Related Topics: [Executive Director, Role of](#) | [Policy Development](#) | [Program Assessment](#) | [Recognition](#) | [Volunteer Management, Overview of](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Philosophy](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Submitted on 18 August 2011 by Michael Schaefer, Director of Volunteers, Meals on Wheels of Trenton/Ewing, Ewing, NJ, USA

One reason the evidence isn't out there as much as it should be is because most nonprofits do not take a systematic/scientific approach to fundraising. Advocacy groups did this 20 years ago but community organizations have been very slow to catch up.

Nonprofits still rely far too much on grant/public funding. They don't roll up their sleeves to develop networks with the help of their volunteers. They don't develop direct mail strategies because most nonprofit execs last less than the time needed to do so.

Also, very few nonprofits incorporate volunteers in their core work - at least in large numbers. It's hard to spread passion about your organization when so few are involved in the details of your mission. Too many organizations view volunteers as a "necessary evil." This results in low turnover in boards and a continuance of the status quo.

Submitted on 18 August 2011 by Kelly Callahan, Director of Volunteer SC, United Way Association of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA

A point that seems to get the attention of high-level executives about volunteers is from the money/donor standpoint. With the economy the way it is, people will only part with their charitable giving dollars to organizations they are passionate about. The most passionate people in an organization are the volunteers. It is worth the time and money to support volunteers in a meaningful way, as they will be your future, if not present donors. They will also be more apt to leave dollars to an organization they are passionate about in their estate. When put this way, I often see a light come on in the eyes of CEO's. Further, while HR is a large part of volunteering, I believe the Volunteer Department should fall under the Development arm of an organization. When these two departments work together and respect each others contributions, an organization can be assured it is secure and strong.

Submitted on 09 August 2011 by H. Roberts, President, PLNJ Inc./Blankie Depot, Keyport, NJ, USA

I suppose it depends what non profit executives we're focused on.

Volunteer Match tells a different story; a different success story. The rich resource that IS Volunteer Match is providing key tools and progressive access for Executives of npo's every day.

If we identify one resource worth sharing with an Executive still leading from a lackluster desk, it's Volunteer Match and the remarkable forward thinking work achieved by their incredible team.

Volunteer Match not only GETS volunteerism it connects time givers, thought leaders and corporate partners and we should be sharing this outstanding resources far more often.

From a tiny online database to a 24-7 volunteer resource powerhouse, www.volunteermatch.org opens doors.

Submitted on 05 August 2011 by Thomas Kegel, , Akademie für Ehrenamtlichkeit Deutschland (fjs e.V.), Berlin, Germany

Hi Susan, it is the same in Germany. So, I would like to translate your hot topic into the German language and publish it on our blogsite: freiwilligenmanagement.de

I am CEO of the German Academy for Volunteering and we offered as the first German institution volunteer management qualification courses starting 1998, nowadays we have 1600 persons with our qualification.

Is it possible to translate your text with your name and link to the Energize website?
That would be great!

Response from Susan:

Yes..and thank you! We give permission for you to translate this Hot Topic and post it to your site. As you've indicated, your translated version should also include a link to the original Hot Topic on the Energize site.

To our German readers: I will be in Germany for two events in October listed in our [Conference calendar](#). I hope to see you there!

To other international readers: The offer to allow translations is extended to any organization that would like to translate any Hot Topic and post it to their site. Just please always include a link back to our site and please post a response to this hot topic letting people know you are offering a translated version. Note as well that anything on the Energize site can be translated through Google Translate – click on the button at the top right of any page.

Submitted on 05 August 2011 by Kristi Ondo, Director, Volunteer Services, Holy Spirit Health System, Camp Hill, PA, USA

"What would you like Energize, Inc. to say to your decision-makers for you?"

My answer to that question is short as thanks to [From the Top Down](#), I've successfully done that! BUT, what you can say to them and to my colleagues' decision-makers is to

1. Continue to listen
2. Make us a bigger part of that decision making process. Our volunteer department has grown stronger over the past year and one half, mainly due to the vocal support of our COO and our Senior VP of HR (my direct boss). Because I found my voice and the correct language, (thank you again Susan Ellis) I got them to pay attention.

My elevator speech is as follows:

These days, hospitals are asked to do more with less. This does not mean we utilize volunteers as free labor. Instead, we focus in on where these amazing individuals can help the most. Right now, that main spotlight is on our customer satisfaction scores. Who better to add the special touches and take the time with our patients and their families than the volunteers who have the "luxury of focus" (again, thank you Susan)

Aside from the speech, I have a power point that includes charts with correlation between volunteer hours on inpatient units matching up with higher satisfaction scores in those areas. Executives like pretty charts and pithy phrases. Energize, Inc. publications help me keep their attention!!

Submitted on 04 August 2011 by Sean Rogers, Rutgers University, , USA

I agree, but am not at all surprised. What objective and empirical evidence do leaders have that makes the "business case" for volunteers? Where are the studies that show that an X amount of investment in and attention to our volunteer workforce leads to an X+ improvement in organizational outcomes? Most of what I read on volunteers is not evidence-based, yet that's what execs want (and arguably need to take the issue more seriously). Researchers are still trying to make the case that it pays to pay attention to paid employees, lol. I'm working on filling the volunteer research gap...look for some interesting findings in 2012!

Submitted on 04 August 2011 by Paul H. Austin, President & Project Manager, Northern Berkshire Habitat for Humanity, Inc., North Adams, MA, USA

Your points are valuable information which I shall take to heart as president of a small Habitat affiliate. I have always believed that our volunteers are the life blood of our organization, especially those who arrive every work day, week after week. I really wish I could find more ways to thank them for their contributions. We are especially blessed with two nearby colleges with student volunteers. Some of these students have aquired considerable construction skills after being with us on several projects. My only other lament is not having enough volunteers to complete our projects in a more timely manner.

Submitted on 03 August 2011 by William Hoelzel, Volunteer, Foodshare, Hartford, CT, USA

[Here is a study](#) that I learned about through one of the two Volunteer Coordinators at Foodshare, the regional foodbank in the Hartford, CT, area. Volunteers donated almost 39,000 hours of volunteer time to Foodshare in 2010.

Obviously, I think this [13-page report](#) is a worthwhile read, but you can skip right to pages 2-3 to see why people don't volunteer and why they stop volunteering.

Submitted on 04 August 2011 by Glenn Whitcomb, volunteer and Board member, Baytown HFH, Baytown, TX, USA

Not a problem at our local HFH chapter in Baytown, TX. We have two employees, and every member of our Board is a volunteer. The Chair and 75% of the members work on house construction.

Maybe chapters in large metropolitan areas should break into smaller localized chapters?

Submitted on 03 August 2011 by Mae Sonmez, Farmington, CT, USA

Thank you very much Susan, such a nice topic you have pointed out in your article. This is actually exactly what I was thinking and your article supported my thoughts and arguments. I think every executive should read your article and pay attention. I have been a volunteer for 8 years and still am in a very serious level and required education and professionalism. I have a MBA degree and corporate background and love to work at non profits. I changed my career and reinvented myself and still cannot find a job in non profits.

Submitted on 03 August 2011 by Carol Stone, , Stone Nonprofit Consulting Group, Villa Park, CA, USA

You are right on!!! It's amazing to me how much energy the Board spends on fund development. Now that I'm retired, I sit on five boards, all different places in their life cycles. Only one gets it. The rest are far from seeing the value of spending equal energy on planning for volunteers. I will send a copy of this article to each of them. I Keep bugging them.....as you know I would. Thanks for the ammunition. Looking forward to the Everyone Ready website.

Submitted on 03 August 2011 by Katy Campo, Volunteer Coordinator, Three Square, Las Vegas NV, USA

Thank you for posting this. I recently attended a conference with other Volunteer Coordinators and I have returned to my position amped to present to my entire staff about this topic.

Submitted on 03 August 2011 by Caroline Crowell, Director Volunteer Services, Inland Hospital, Waterville, ME, United States

I truly echo everything you have said in this article. I am sharing it with my superior. Recently I mailed a Volunteer Engagement Survey to all of our volunteers, clergy included, and have the results. The volunteers feel often that they are taken for granted. I have been searching my brain trying to come up with a creative idea for staff to send them thank you's for their exceptional performance. We already have this in place for our employees - but can't get staff to thank our

volunteers. Many of our volunteers have higher education and are able to make sensible decisions/tasks to help where necessary thereby allowing staff to do the position that they are trained and paid for.

Volunteers are our echo to the community for support and funding. We love them, but I think they are taken advantage of in so many positions through the United States. Why?

Submitted on 02 August 2011 by Sam Elliston, CVA, Sacred Service Coordinator, New Thought Unity center, Cincinnati, OH, USA

Every class, every speech, every in- service or whatever I am leading begins with the question, "Why do you involve volunteers?" and then, Susan, I ask your famous question, "If you had enough money to pay everybody to do the tasks, would you still involve volunteers?" (why? why not?)

It is an exercise that I encourage people to take back to their staff meetings and many do.

I can report that the people I talk to are now less apt to say that they involve volunteers due to lack of money for paid staff than they did 10 years ago so some of what you have been teaching has rubbed off. But there are still one or two who continue to think that volunteers are unpaid temps.

I wish I could ask groups of non profit executives this question but I am not usually invited to train them.

I wish I knew what to tell you to say to the CEOs- remember the Erma Bombeck essay of walking through a town where all the volunteers had left? Maybe something like that - show all the holes in services and activities in the community that would exist without volunteers and then ask: do you really want the lowest employee on the totem pole to be in charge of making sure those holes are filled?

Or something like that - ? - I look forward to other people's ideas

Submitted on 01 August 2011 by Trina Isakson, Principal, 27 Shift, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Your points echo the results of my masters research on a leadership model of volunteer engagement. Some of the six themes I found included a systems approach to volunteer engagement and working with volunteers as peers, not subordinates. <http://www.27shift.com/papers>

PRIVACY STATEMENT

