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Nice!

Leaders of Volunteers: Stop Being So Bloody Nice!

By [Rob Jackson](#)

October

2018

Last month Susan J Ellis, president of Energize Inc., wrote [a Hot Topic updating us on her fight with cancer and explaining future plans for the company](#). Over the next three months, the consultants working closely with Susan and the Energize team will introduce ourselves in the monthly Hot Topic, sharing a little of who we are and discussing an issue in volunteer leadership and management that we feel passionate about. I have been asked to go first and, as a Brit, I feel we can't continue until we've been properly introduced.

Hello. I am Rob Jackson, director of Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd. It's nice to meet you.

OK, with that done:

Who am I and why am I part of the Energize team?

Earlier this year I marked twenty-four years working in the volunteering movement and thirty years as a volunteer. I've worked for a few organisations in my career, most notably spending six years in a senior management post at Volunteering England. Amongst many responsibilities: I led our project funded work in sport, health and social care, and infrastructure development; held the strategic lead for our relationship with over 300 local volunteer centres; and oversaw the 2007 merger with Student Volunteering England.

I left Volunteering England in 2011 and founded Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd, working as a consultant, trainer, event speaker, and author. Whilst most of my work is in the UK, I have considerable experience overseas as well. I was co-chair of the working group on quality volunteering for the European Year of Volunteering 2011; have spoken at events in Romania, the Republic of Ireland, Turkey, Malta, Portugal, and Poland; and have made numerous visits to deliver training in the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

I have known Susan since 1996 and consider myself fortunate to not only have her as a colleague and mentor but as a friend too. I have worked as part of the [editorial team](#) at [e-Volunteerism.com](#) for many years, and since January 2013, I have co-authored the Journal's *Points of View* articles. In 2015, Susan and I launched the UK version of the ever-popular Energize, Inc. book, [From The Top Down: The Executive Role in Successful Volunteer Involvement](#).

Which leads me nicely onto my burning issue in volunteer management.

What is my burning issue in volunteer management?

I actually find it hard to pick just one, but for this article, I'm going to focus on our need as a profession to influence more effectively. As I put it one of my keynote presentations, leaders and managers of volunteers have to **stop being so bloody nice!**

Most of us who work with volunteers are inherently nice people. We must be to effectively engage and lead others to work for no financial reward, often in challenging circumstances. But that niceness can also be our downfall.

We can fail to take action against the toxic volunteer who drives others away and holds our organisation back from meeting its mission. If we fail to address poor performance and behaviour by volunteers then we communicate a message that says we don't care what they do or how they do it, devaluing the contribution volunteers make and damaging our professional credibility.

We can fail to challenge the prejudices of paid staff about the competence of volunteers. I too often hear stories of employees who consider volunteers to be incompetent, unreliable and ineffective simply because they are unpaid. Yet, countless volunteers around the world make life and death decisions every day as firefighters, lifesavers, and paramedics (to name just three roles).

We can fail to effectively influence senior leaders. Our niceness means we too often accept what we are given, expressing gratitude when inadequate resources are allocated, or budget cuts made, for engaging volunteers.

We can fail to lobby funders, government, and others in positions of power and influence. Few professional associations for leaders and managers of volunteers take on an advocacy role, speaking up for their members. Instead, they emphasise developing good practice and supporting networking, both valid activities, but of limited value if the wider context for our work remains ignorant and ill-informed about volunteering.

Don't get me wrong. I don't think we should stop being nice all the time. Nor should we become petulant toddlers, throwing our toys out of the pram when we don't get what we want. Rather, it's imperative that we balance our inherent niceness with an assertive streak.

What do you think?

Do you agree that we can sometimes be too nice?

Do we accept our lot to readily, not speaking up and challenging the status quo?

What have you done to effect change?

What happened?

What did you learn?

So there you have it. That's me, why I'm involved in Energize and a little about one of the issues I am passionate about.

What's Next?

Between now and the end of the year I will be continuing to write about the issues that matter to me on [my blog](#), in my monthly column for the UK's [Third Sector Magazine](#) (subscription required), for the *Points of View* column in [e-Volunteerism](#), and quarterly, Energize will feature a [Hot Topic](#) from me.

I'll be playing a role, alongside Australian colleague and friend [Andy Fryar](#), to steer [International Volunteer Managers Day](#) through 2018 and planning for 2019.

I'll be training in the UK, including sessions in Wales and Cumbria where I'll be tackling the topic of "Understanding and effecting real change for success in volunteer involvement".

And if that wasn't enough, I'll be working on plans to return to Australia, New Zealand, and North America in 2019 and 2020.

Oh, and I'll be hanging out with my wife, four children and a two-and-a-half year old cockapoo called Ruby and pursuing my passion for motorsport (especially Formula 1); music (I have eclectic tastes but especially blues and rock); food and wine; reading and movies; and history, politics, and travel.



How to get in touch?

Drop me a line via the Energize [Contact Us](#) form or contact me at rob@energizeinc.com. I'd love to hear from you.

Related Topics: [Ethics](#) | [Leadership](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#)

Comments from Readers

Submitted on October 3rd, 2018

DJ Cronin, Brisbane, Australia

I think you speak the truth and thanks for writing.

Sometimes we can be too nice but in a world where toxic leadership abounds it gives us the opportunity to show off the soft skills that are needed for effective volunteer leadership. Some roles in society are not leadership roles but volunteer management certainly is.

Perhaps our sector readily accepts our lot. But define "our lot"? Throwing caution to the wind I think "our lot" consists of

- A resistance to the fact that we are leaders and therefore accountable as leaders.
- Regurgitating the same issues every year which may be helping people stay in a comfort zone and may be allowing new people to our sector becoming passionate about the issue until they join the comfort zone!
- The "woe is me" and "I'm just a" complex.
- The martyr syndrome which drives us "on the smell of an oily rag"
- The "I am so busy I have no time to think of sector stuff and why should I?" position (which in fairness is understandable if we are not reaching out and explaining why it does matter!)

Like it or not we need strong leaders to advocate for our sector and that strong leadership is missing. There are people like yourself Rob and certainly others but not enough to form a strong leadership movement. And here's the thing - Why are we not engaging with volunteers themselves about these matters? Why does this never come up as a possible solution? There are millions of them in our respective nations. Why don't we consult and work with the people we lead - many of whom are leaders in their own fields? Let's emerge from our silos and try a new form of engagement - with volunteers! Let's get volunteers to do an audit of the Volunteer Management Sector in our global village. Let them tell us why we keep going around the merry roundabout and let's collaborate to find solutions for our sector.

Because at the end of the day it is about the people we serve in our communities. And I will always believe that strong and effective volunteer leadership will lead to better outcomes for

our society. We are all in this together. Its time – for some new thinking and to misquote Einstein – No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that created it – We need to see the volunteering world anew!

Submitted on October 8th, 2018

Rob Jackson, Director, Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd, Grantham, United Kingdom

Hi DJ and thank you for the response to my post. We agree about the need for leaders of volunteers to step beyond our comfort zones and advocate. It isn't always easy but it can and must be done if we want to move our work forward. That progress isn't for our own benefit but for those we exist to serve, such as volunteers, our organisations' missions and beneficiaries.

I love your thoughts about engaging volunteers in this work. Why are we so consistently slow to make the most of the potential in our volunteer networks yet spend so much time encouraging others to do this? I do wonder, however, how we might pitch this to volunteers so as not to come across as self-serving?

Thanks again for your thoughts and for your own ongoing leadership in our field.

Submitted on October 9th, 2018

Wendy Moore, Brisbane, Australia

Thank you for posting the hot topic, Rob. I am not so sure if we should stop being 'nice' it sort of goes with the territory of leading volunteers and the alternate 'being mean', wouldn't go down well in our profession. You make a valid observation about being nice, perhaps, placating volunteers when they are not happy or 'choosing one's battles' and keeping the status quo is a bit of a cop out, I admit it.

The mere mention of managing volunteer programs evokes the comments of "how NICE" followed by "do you get paid for that?" from people who do not have a clue what is involved in the role. Nice just seems to go hand in hand with volunteers, nice to have, but perhaps not really necessary, according to some. While the roles that volunteers do, may be very much appreciated and provide a value added component to service delivery; with organisations focused on cost savings and increased income, where do volunteers fit in and how do we measure that:

- No. of hours volunteered?
- No. of years of volunteer service?

These milestones may be quite significant to volunteers; however they do not provide any practical, measurable data pertinent to organisational goals. Perhaps it is time to reveal an

assertive streak and implement Change.

Change may evoke fear and resistance. To help alleviate the fear of change, I would, as DJ suggested in his response, engage with volunteers. Talk with volunteers about ways to make a positive difference in clients/patients experience. If volunteers' opinions are listened to and valued, they also have ownership in the change process and would be more invested in seeing positive results and growth in the programs.

Let's talk about 'Touchpoints', a term used in marketing and customer service.

"Touchpoint Guru" Hank Brigman defines a touchpoint as an influential action initiated by a communication, a human contact or a physical or sensory interaction. Each touchpoint is a message that literally "touches" a customer in some way. Collectively, touchpoints create the customer's experience. Source: smallbusiness.chron.com/touchpoint-marketing-34078.html

What if we utilize the volunteer 'nice' factor (of course they're [volunteers] nice, they are freely giving their time to help others) and make sure that we can measure the value added service which they provide. By including volunteers in touchpoints, value adding to the service provided by staff, volunteers can have a practical and positive effect on the client/patient experience. This positive client/patient experience may lead to future repeat visits and recommendations of the organisation to others. Many volunteers are already providing brilliant customer service.

How do we measure this? There are already comprehensive third party surveys which evaluate client/patient experience based on various touchpoints of service, we need only to include volunteer service, perhaps as a free form field, as part of the evaluation, to provide some statistics of volunteer influence on a clients/patients experience. Volunteers may then be viewed as a significant and measurable force in attracting clients/patients to the organisation, just by being Nice!!!

Submitted on October 25th, 2018

Rob Jackson, Director, Rob Jackson Consulting Ltd, Grantham, UK

Hi Wendy and thank you for contributing to the debate.

You're right that I am not suggesting we all get mean instead of nice. I think we (volunteer managers) sometimes need to drop the niceness and get tough - tough with volunteers, tough with colleagues and tough with senior managers. Tough love perhaps? Always sitting back, smiling, complying and rolling over won't move us forward as a profession.

The touch points concept you mention is very similar to Jan Carlzon's Moment of Truth concept from the 1980s. I love the idea of quantifying and measuring the niceness of

volunteers within that kind of approach, enabling us to truly value the niceness volunteers bring to our work.

Submitted on January 11th, 2019

Nick Levinson, New York, NY, U.S.A.

Selecting just one point:

As an ad hoc volunteer coordinator, I've been un-nice by being less thankful to those volunteers who essentially do nothing despite my efforts. About one in ten are unproductive and about one in a hundred are actively harmful. The harmful I tossed out the door. In one case, I read the riot act in two sentences, and that worked wonders. The unproductive I asked, about once an hour, nicely but in front of other volunteers who were already working, what would you like to do? He'll let me know. About an hour later, again publicly, would you like to do x or y (both simple)? He'll think about it. At the end, I made a point of being profusely thankful to most of the volunteers but only slightly cordial to the one who hadn't done a stitch but could have. My sense is that the helpful folks actually liked that I distinguished between the two. The comparison probably increases the total output even when the one obstinately refuses to help.

In another case, a volunteer wasn't doing anything. He had a broken arm that was essentially useless. We needed paper cut with a paper cutter, potentially dangerous. I taught him how to use his bad arm to lean on the paper so the stack wouldn't move while he used his good hand to bring the blade down. He succeeded. I asked him if he was comfortable doing it. Yes, he was. But he was willing to do the work only if I stopped working so we'd chat. I refused. I'm virtually asocial, but I don't mind chatting if it coincides with more work being done. But I do mind not working. Bad deal, so I refused.

I tossed a harmful volunteer out despite his having an IQ of 50. If he was 30 years old, an IQ of 50 translates into an age equivalence of 15 and 15-year-olds work every day, maybe mowing lawns but at something. I was volunteering. This person was going around tying everyone up with his advice, none of which anyone accepted, except one suggestion which was accepted early and didn't need repeating. He made the rounds again. I thought of having him sit with me that night but I had a crucial report to do by morning. I twice asked him what he wanted to do and twice he walked away from me. I took the initiative and spent half an hour tossing him out. A staffer helped by bringing his coat. I thanked him for "thinking of us."

In one place, I did nothing about an annoying and unproductive volunteer (e.g., he accused a woman of being 20, not of being the wrong age for a duty but simply of being 20). I thought the leadership liked him and I was having a hard enough time getting anyone to to use us. It was a political campaign. The only two people present were just sitting. I asked for work but got nothing. Then the candidate's spouse, a schoolteacher, showed up and I explained the

problem. He promised to fix that. Then he sat down. He did nothing. I suspect the candidate thought of volunteers as incompetent and likely set that as a general tone. I tried to change that but got nowhere.

Can't more volunteer leaders be upwardly forceful? Mostly, no. They don't have the clout. If they want to keep their positions, they're required to work within the paradigm promoted by almost all paid folks below the CEO that volunteers "can't do anything" but "think they can do everything" (a staffer's words when he asked me, a volunteer, for task suggestions, then I gave him eight and he was unhappy). Volunteers are seen as threats to jobs. Coordinators are usually paid, reinforcing that volunteers can't do management or advanced work, so the coordinators look for work that "volunteers can do", meaning almost nothing. As a volunteer, I complained to a political organization's head office by phone and was told that "we're all volunteers"; when it folded, they fired 30 staff, so they probably lied to evade criticism.

If 10 people apply for a paid job, you might choose the best one and send 9 home. If 10 apply to volunteer, you can choose 9 or 10. I advocate for volunteerism despite most paid people's opposition. I'm inclusive, including of people with disabilities, for whom I think of accommodations. But, to borrow from a book title, don't pour water on my head and tell me it's raining.

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