

The Volunteer Leader as a Facilitator of Change

Ask yourself these questions to see if you're promoting or impeding innovative breakthroughs.

By Susan J. Ellis

As volunteer resources managers, we're always trying to educate others in our organizations about the benefits of volunteers. Executives have low expectations of us, mainly hoping we keep volunteers in line and happy. It's not that they prevent us from doing more, but that they can't imagine what more we can do.

Asking the Important Questions

The great thing is that we can take initiative. What do we *want* our purpose as volunteer engagement managers to be? Is it our role to manage a core of unpaid helpers – or is it to identify unmet client and staff needs and find non-cash resources in the community to meet those needs? Are we

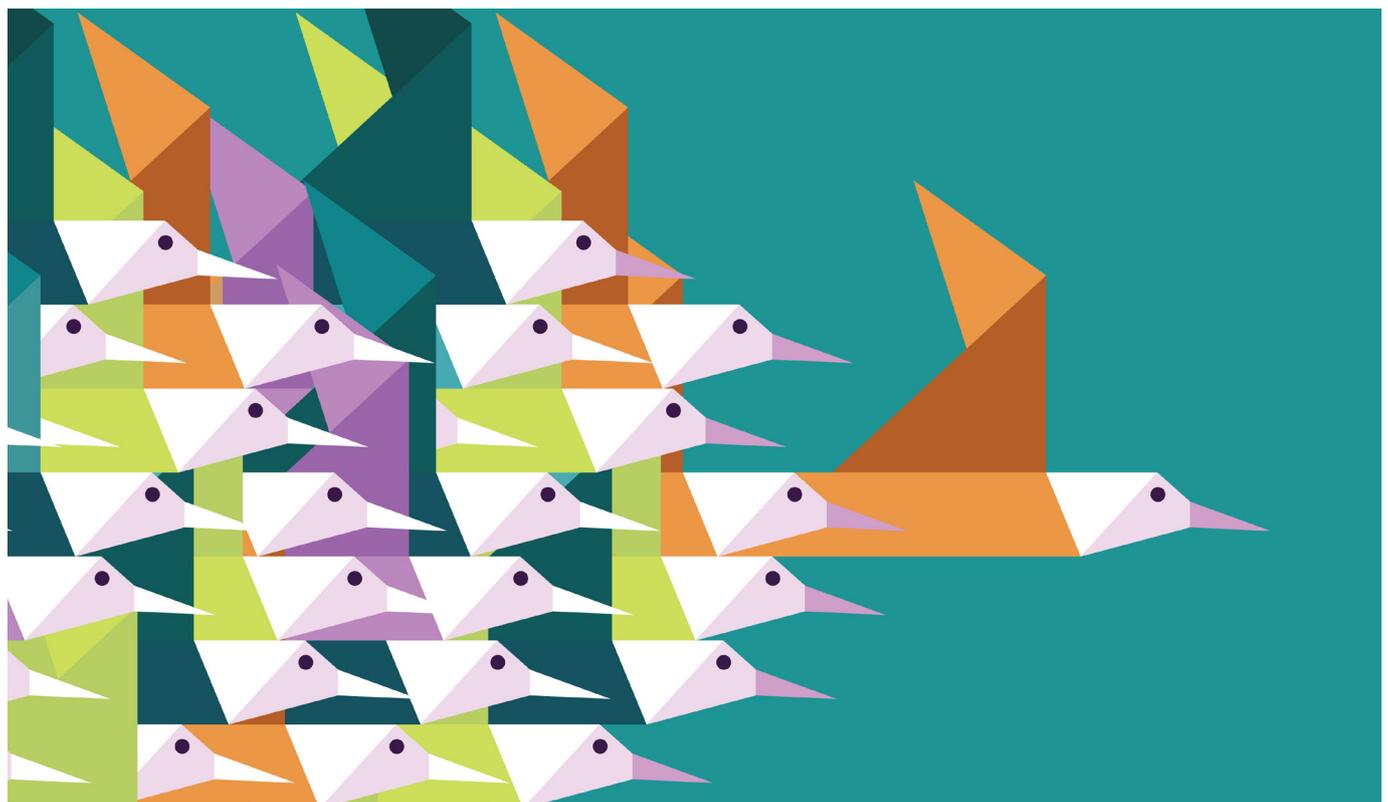
about *volunteers* or *solutions*? As volunteer managers, we create most of the roles volunteers fill. Are volunteers always assistants, or do we open opportunities for them to lead, be creative, experiment, dream?

Satisfied volunteers aren't our work's purpose. *Mission* is. By making sure volunteers do what has the most meaning for service recipients, the lovely win-win is volunteer satisfaction, too!

This approach to our work requires a certain tolerance of risk. Are we willing to rock the boat? Are we willing to accept controversy, even conflict? Do fears about safety and liability limit our innovation? Are we worried about our own job security? Examine your reactions to these questions, and consider whether your discomfort might make you an unwitting obstacle to change.

Our role is to facilitate volunteer accomplishment. That raises more important questions:

“Are we about *volunteers* or *solutions*?”



“Do we open opportunities for volunteers to lead, be creative, experiment, dream?”

How do you react to new ideas posed by volunteers?

Do you recruit volunteers for their different backgrounds, skills, and opinions? Do you recruit to fill vacancies on a roster – or do you invite people with creativity and drive?

Do you challenge and re-educate volunteers (and paid staff) who resist new ways of doing things?

How often do you review volunteer position descriptions and ask: “Is this still the most important and effective thing volunteers could be doing?” What do you do when the answer is no?

Looking into the Crystal Ball

History teaches that where there is change, there will be volunteers. Volunteering has always been at the vanguard of change because volunteers act out of determination to make things happen. If there’s a human need or social problem not yet addressed, volunteers will respond first. If the organizations that emerge from those volunteer efforts are unwilling to change, the volunteers will leave to start different initiatives.

Not every volunteer wants to lead or risk challenging the status quo. Some people are joiners or dabblers, satisfied to support the work others lead. Not every volunteer is competent or inspired. But collectively, over time, the effect of donated efforts toward a cause can change the course of history. And regardless of how much we’re paid, what we choose to call ourselves, or how we’re viewed by the public, we who lead volunteer engagement will be in the middle of it all. 

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, Inc., an international training, consulting, and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. Based in Philadelphia since 1977, the firm has helped a wide diversity of clients across North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, Israel, and Australasia to start or expand volunteer efforts. Ellis has written 14 books on volunteerism and dozens of articles. She provides one of the introductory chapters in VolunteerMatch’s Volunteer Engagement 2.0, from which this article is adapted. She is co-publisher of the international online journal, e-Volunteerism (e-volunteerism.com), and dean of faculty for the online volunteer management training program, Everyone Ready®. Browse the 1200+ pages of free volunteer management information on the Energize website: energizeinc.com.



Risk, Change, & Volunteers

To gain more new perspectives, see these resources at NonprofitWorld.org:

Where Are Your Volunteer Leaders? (Vol. 30, No. 6)

Creating Breakthroughs (Vol. 26, No. 4)

Beyond Diversity (Vol. 18, No. 2)

Do Your Volunteer Surveys Miss the Point? (Vol. 35, No. 1)

Seven Risk Questions for Your Board (Vol. 33, No. 4)

Are You Walking Your Walk? Rate Yourself with This Easy-to-Use Grid (Vol. 29, No. 5)

How to Measure Your Volunteers’ Success (Vol. 35, No. 3)

Outside the Comfort Zone (Vol. 25, No. 3)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Volunteer Management (snpo.org/li).

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