



# Where are Your Volunteer Leaders?

By Susan J. Ellis

How often have you heard,  
“I’ll help with that, but don’t ask me to lead it!”?  
Here’s how to hear “Yes!” next time you ask.

**I**f you’re having trouble recruiting volunteers for leadership positions on boards, councils, or committees, you’re not alone. It’s always easier to find people to perform hands-on work than those willing to lead.

“We need to redesign volunteer leadership roles to improve our chances of getting a yes to our invitation to serve.”

Chairing an event still offers status and applause, but there seem to be fewer and fewer people willing to take on such a task. Why? And what’s the future of our society if no one wants to lead?

## The Negatives Might Outweigh the Positives

Consider what we ask of leadership volunteers in most situations. We expect them to:

- **Give enormous amounts of time**, including lots of long meetings, and not always productive ones.
- **Mobilize a board or committee** made up of other volunteers who may have already rejected the heavy responsibility of leadership and have very different ideas of what it means to work on behalf of this group.
- **Be willing to stick their necks out** and take risks on behalf of the project at hand.
- **Make difficult choices and then face scrutiny** (and maybe criticism) from colleagues about these decisions.

“Do the benefits outweigh the negatives?”

- **Accept legal liability.**
- **Defer gratification**, since it may take months or years to see the results of their work.

If we’re honest about it, volunteers are right if they assume this is a major commitment. It may be more of a mystery why anyone agrees to serve in such roles at all!

## What Does a Volunteer Leader Gain?

Applying basic recruitment principles, the first step is to articulate the benefits of leadership roles. The second step is to identify the types of people who would find those rewards satisfying. Examples of such benefits include:

- **the intellectual challenge of developing and implementing strategies** to help the community or organization
- **opportunities to interact with many colleagues or community leaders**, possibly regionally, nationally, or even internationally
- **being at the forefront of positive change** and action
- **accomplishing something** that has long-term and lasting implications.

These are all important payoffs. But do they outweigh the negatives already listed? For many, the answer will be no. Time

is simply too precious to sink hours into a volunteer role designed decades ago.

## Strategies Worth a Try

Filling leadership roles with volunteers requires a shift in thinking. Here are two tactics that may reap rewards for you:

### 1. ASK THE LESS OBVIOUS CANDIDATES.

There are at least three categories of people to consider for leadership positions:

- those predisposed to fulfill the roles you need
- those open to being convinced to fill the roles
- people who are more comfortable as followers but have leadership potential.

It's not always obvious who might be willing to accept your position offer. Why? Because it's common to list candidates based on who's already very active. This approach, while certainly appropriate, is limiting. It also tends to "reward" current volunteers with ever more demands.

Instead, a nominating committee needs to learn more about less active volunteers. Some of these people might welcome an invitation to come and create a group more to their tastes.

To identify these candidates, ask questions like these: What do they do outside your organization? Are they officers in other groups? Are they managers in their place of work? If you don't know the answers, you need to collect such information.

### 2. UPDATE ROLES.

We need to redesign volunteer leadership roles to improve our chances of getting a yes to our invitation to serve as an officer or chairperson. A few ideas:

**Avoid "co-chairs."** It's common to negotiate two reluctant people by making them co-chairs. The theory is that it will lighten the load for them both. Wrong! First, the co-chairs now need to take time to communicate and coordinate. Second, no one is really in charge and both chairs feel reluctant to overstep the other.

An alternative is a leadership team of two to four volunteers who rotate the top position every few months. This makes it clear at any time where the buck stops, while giving everyone less to do in the other months.

**Provide support for volunteer leaders.** Create designated "executive assistant" volunteer roles to support the top officers. Some people would never want to be the leader in the limelight, but are happy to work behind the scenes. Some functions might be:

- handling routine telephone and e-mail exchanges that always fall to the top leader
- setting up meetings and handling the logistics of invitations, RSVP's, and refreshments
- keeping track of deadlines.


This approach brings new people "inside" management. At the same time, it genuinely lessens the work load of the leadership volunteer.

“If you don't know the answers, you need to collect such information.”

## “Why are there so few volunteers willing to lead?”

Some organizations ought to consider paying someone for five to ten hours a week to do these routine tasks. This is not a negation of volunteers! Rather, it gives volunteers the respect they need. It provides continuity as volunteers rotate through positions. It helps develop consistent systems that ultimately save time. It frees volunteers to do the work they're most needed to do: lead with vision.

## Getting to Yes

Trying over and over to recruit people into serious, time-consuming roles without examining how we structure leadership positions is a dead end. People are smart enough to recognize a sacrifice when it's offered to them! If we pay attention to streamlining the work of leaders, we may discover more volunteers willing to say yes. 

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## HELPING YOUR VOLUNTEERS LEAD

Use these *Nonprofit World* articles (NonprofitWorld.org/members) to develop successful volunteer leaders for your organization:

**Eight Ways to Improve Leadership Team Meetings** (Vol. 23, No. 3) will keep volunteer leaders from spending wasted time in meetings.

**New Trends in Volunteering – & How to Tap into Them** (Vol. 30, No. 2) outlines ways to redesign volunteer roles and recruitment strategies.

**Using Surveys & Focus Groups to Gather Market Data** (Vol. 13, No. 3) will help you collect the information you need to identify potential volunteer leaders.

**Volunteer Protection Act: What Does It Mean for You?** (Vol. 16, No. 2) describes how to protect your volunteers from the risk of legal liability.

**Also see Learning Institute programs on-line:** Volunteer Management (NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute).