

Volunteer Management

Leading Change at Your Shelter

Stage by stage, you can help your volunteers change the world

BY HILARY ANNE HAGER AND MEGAN WEBB

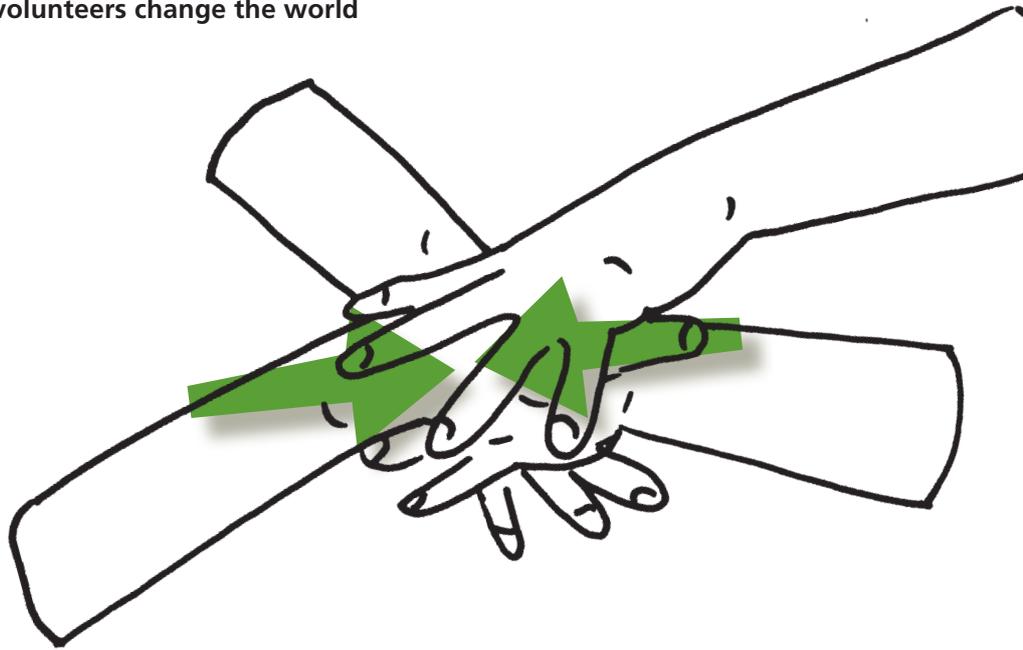
Making change is hard. If you read our last article, and understand the building blocks for creating an effective volunteer program, you may be ready to make some of the changes that we recommended. You may find you're facing internal resistance from management, staff, and even volunteers. In this article, we're going to discuss some ways to approach making these improvements, so that you can get buy-in from everyone and move forward.

In his book *Leading Change*, John P. Kotter, a renowned expert in leadership and change management, identified an eight-stage process of creating major change in organizations. This process can provide a useful lens for looking at how to implement change in volunteer programs and put into place the building blocks we've previously outlined. Kotter's stages are:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency
2. Putting together a group with enough power to lead the change
3. Developing a vision and strategy
4. Communicating the change vision
5. Getting rid of obstacles
6. Generating short-term wins
7. Consolidating gains and producing more change; and
8. Anchoring new approaches in the culture.

Establishing a Sense of Urgency

At animal welfare organizations, establishing a sense of urgency is seldom a problem! The work all needs to get done, there will never be enough funding to pay staff to do it, and bringing in volunteers is a natural solution.



Not doing it correctly, however, causes far more trouble than not having volunteers at all, so the challenge is to craft an argument for the need to be strategic, measured, and thoughtful in implementing a broader plan for change within the volunteer program.

Very rarely do volunteer managers, paid or unpaid, get hired simply to maintain the status quo. Instead, they're often issued mandates to improve the programs they manage, but without a clear idea of why or how. The first step, typically, is identifying the things that aren't working; usually, there are aspects of the volunteer program or organization as a whole where systems are breaking down and functionality can be improved. The strategy will emerge later, but an understanding and explanation of what's not working will help guide everyone in the right direction.

The sooner that issues in the volunteer program are addressed, the sooner everyone benefits. But rather than having the volunteer coordinator launch into a series of programmatic tweaks and course corrections without a firm plan in place, we

advocate first getting a baseline of where the program currently stands.

Susan J. Ellis's *Volunteer Management Audit*, available at the online bookstore of Energize Inc., (energizeinc.com) is an excellent means of measuring how a volunteer program rates against best practices in volunteer management. This tool invites participation from volunteers, staff, and other community stakeholders to take an in-depth look at the existing program and score it against a set of standards that exemplify well-run programs. The audit results can help identify areas where improvements can be made and remove any issues around personal agendas or opinions that may pop up—or at least bring them to light and provide an opportunity to address them.

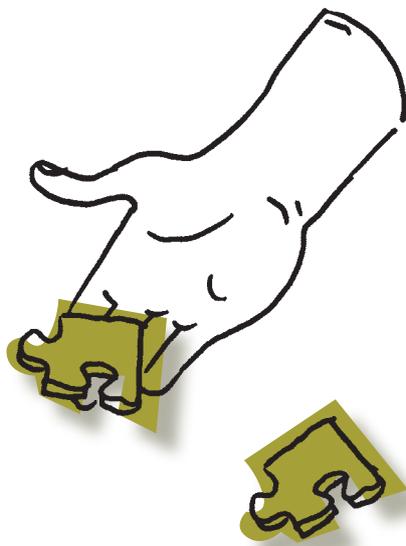
Putting Together a Group with Enough Power to Lead the Change

Volunteer managers are in a unique situation because they have such a variety of constituents to serve. The program they manage and the changes they implement

must have a positive impact not only on the volunteers and animals, but on the organization and staff, as well. That's a lot of different groups to keep happy! It's important to build buy-in from all these constituents so they don't attempt to sabotage your efforts.

Volunteer coordinators should work with their supervisors to define their role in the organization. In too many organizations, even though volunteers are a part of daily operations and impact nearly every aspect of the work, the person in charge of coordinating that vital program isn't involved in major decision-making processes. Often, people who coordinate the volunteer program don't directly supervise the staff who will be working side-by-side with volunteers, and they don't have a seat at the table when decisions about operations are made. We suggest that volunteer coordinators should be elevated to management level within organizations, so their voice and perspective—and their commitment to their various constituencies—can be shared.

Specific personnel issues—such as the volunteer coordinator's authority to select and terminate volunteers; to give feedback to staff who need to improve their interactions with volunteers; and consensus about who should be involved in decisions about the volunteer program—need to be hammered out, as well. Too often, the lack of clarity around these is-



issues leads to conflict and confusion. Even if the final authority doesn't rest with the volunteer coordinator, everyone should be clear about who *does* have it.

Management must also be clear on the goals of the volunteer program. Our position is that the focus should be on quality and appropriate fit for volunteers, rather than the pursuit of higher volunteer numbers, which can lead to a surplus of ill-prepared—but well-intentioned—folks who won't help get the program where it needs to be. Group anxiety about change can cause members to be suspicious of motives or agendas driving the call for change, and agreement about goals is critical to alleviate concerns and to show a united front between management and the volunteer coordinator.

A program can't be managed by one solitary volunteer manager. Not only is it impossible given the fixed number of hours in a day, it's ill-advised, because a group of people who are engaged and

willing to help do the work will add a layer of richness and innovation that's impossible for one person to imitate. Once the scope of the volunteer manager's role is determined, the rest of the leadership team should be pulled from lead volunteers, staff, and other key managers.

In most organizations, the volunteer program's purpose is to augment the staff's ability to accomplish the organization's mission. Staff must have input into identifying the ways in which the volunteer program will best support their efforts.

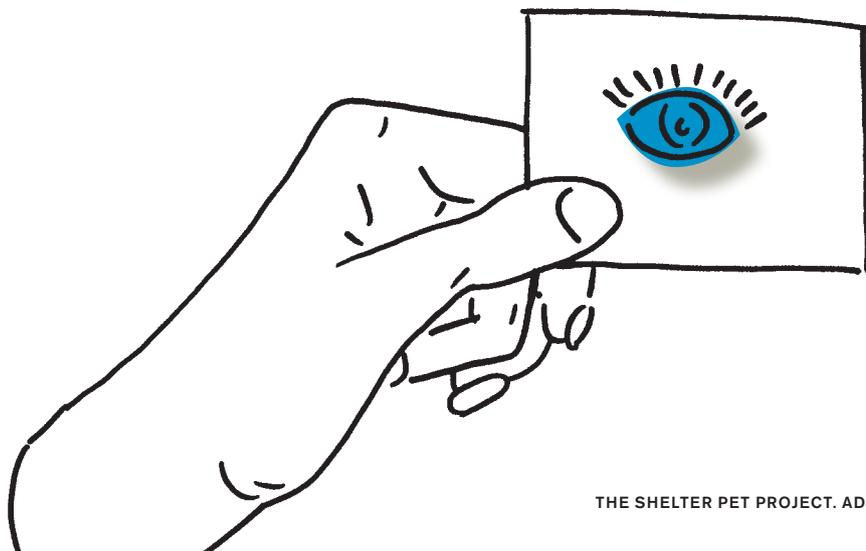
Volunteer managers should identify one or two staffers for the leadership team to represent staff interests as they relate to the volunteer program, and should also work with the entire staff to get a sense of how they perceive the program. The volunteer manager must have a way to communicate with the staff on a regular basis (at least weekly) about what is and isn't working with the volunteer program, so the manager can intervene in situations before they become serious.

Developing a Vision and Strategy

The group, which can be populated with invested volunteers, staff, and even members of the community, should then work to craft a vision of where they want the volunteer program to go, and outline a strategy for getting there. This is where all of the different voices, perspectives, and experience can be most valuable. It's imperative to understand where you are before you try getting anywhere else—staff and current volunteers can articulate the program's strengths and weaknesses, and where they'd like to see the organization move.

Communicating the Change Vision

Once the vision's established, it must be communicated effectively and consistently to everyone within the organization. People need and want to know what's being developed before it's implemented; hearing about the coming changes can





To the extent that it's possible for volunteer managers to influence messaging coming out of their organizations as a whole, they should work to ensure the importance of volunteers and their contributions to the organization are reflected in every communication that goes out. From the mission statement to the website, from literature about the organization to newsletters, volunteer participation should be noted, praised, encouraged, and treated as integral.

Volunteer managers should work with management to ensure that supervision of volunteers is included in the job descriptions for all staff in the organization—this will help reinforce the value of volunteers and stress the importance of working well with them. Supervision of volunteers should also be included in the performance evaluation of staff, so that staff members have incentives for making an effort to succeed, and to get active feedback on how they're doing.

If, however, despite all efforts to keep staff and volunteers connected and aligned, conflicts are still occurring, and staff are not behaving appropriately, the volunteer manager or the staff person's immediate supervisor must address the issue immediately. Leadership must set the tone, and then require staff to follow its lead, holding people accountable when they're not acting in alignment with the organization's ethic around volunteers. Allowing staff to behave badly and drive volunteers away isn't OK.

Generating Short-Term Wins

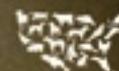
The most important thing to remember is that change requires thoughtful and deliberate planning and action. A common mistake is to rush into making multiple changes without laying the groundwork necessary to ensure success. This approach can lead to changes without buy-in from those who need to implement them, which can even cause these people to sabotage your efforts. The urge is to move quickly to make improvements, since there's so much to be done and so many animals in need, but this can upset volunteers and staff, and can cause anxiety and resistance from the players involved.



we can help you help them

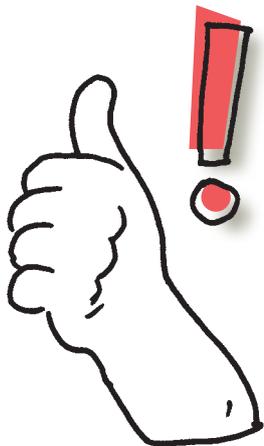
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Acknowledging the people who made the wins possible is an incentive to participants and encourages engagement from everyone. Once things start working well, the strategy gains more credibility, more people come on board, more projects are identified, and the changes become a part of the organization's culture.

But while you can't fix everything overnight, it's critical to create little victories that help demonstrate that you're on the right track and give everyone a boost. Acknowledging the people who made the wins possible is an incentive to participants and encourages engagement from everyone. Once things start working well, the strategy gains more credibility, more people come on board, more projects are identified, and the changes become a part of the organization's culture.

This type of change can take a bit longer to put into play, but the delay can be worth it. It doesn't necessarily need to be glacial in pace—if the urgency's there, and the will to make comprehensive changes is motivating enough, this process can happen pretty quickly, but the steps still need to be followed, and the small wins need to be gained.

Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change

As the volunteer manager, you'll need to keep your eye on the volunteer program's vision while at the same time coordinating the many small victories that move the program toward this vision. Your role will be to keep reporting on the positive outcomes of these victories, and piece them together for the staff, volunteers, and public to see the vision come to life.

This will help get everyone excited, less frightened of change, and ready to get on board to make more improvements!

Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture

In many organizations, gathering input from staff and volunteers and obtaining buy-in may be a completely new way for the organization to function. Your organization may have been very hierarchical in the past, a place where the leadership simply sent commands down the chain and demanded follow-through by staff and volunteers, even if they didn't agree or feel the changes were necessary.

Your work to influence the volunteer program may create an entirely new way for the organization to function. It's important to remember this when your work becomes particularly difficult and frustrating—you may not only be attempting to influence the volunteer program but the organization as a whole! But this is why we believe volunteer programs are so important and the work of volunteer managers is so essential. These programs can be the catalyst for wonderful changes in an organization—and for the animals and people it serves. AS



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