

Why Can't I Get Any Recognition When I Volunteer For Everything?

By Larry N. Peeno
Fine Arts Consultant
Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Jefferson City, MO

From time to time we need reminding that our national and state associations are volunteer organizations. They can do what they do because members donate their time, energies, and expertise and pay dues for the privilege. Volunteering is something that a person chooses to do freely with no promise of compensation or rewards and often without being asked or obligated. It is the power of choice. It is done with full realization of the significance of what one intends to do and of its effects. It's done on purpose and for a definite reason. It's understanding, caring about, and acting out of respect for each organization accompanying by a willingness to seek responsibility in promoting their growth. In some cases it infers obstinate and perverse determination to follow one's own will despite influences, arguments, and advice in opposition! Volunteers are comfortable with the notion that the leadership is subject to the same human frailties as themselves (i.e., they can make mistakes). Therefore, at times, volunteers must demonstrate a contradictory toughness to continually support the organization thus enabling it to translate its mission into reality.

Good volunteers are leaders who persist toward a common goal, are not easily discouraged, keep their hopes high, and exhibit stamina and assurance. They are willing learners, enthusiastic, genuinely optimistic, personally involved, and pursue their goals passionately. They are satisfied with the contribution they can make to a cause, place a high priority on meeting the needs of others, can ignore a difference in status, and set aside self-interest if necessary. In other words, they can demonstrate the values of volunteering while side-stepping the pitfalls of self-promotion.

To volunteer demands a vision beyond those which some individuals might hold. We know there is a pervasive realization that we need a pluralistic approach to solve problems. All members, even those whose personal aspirations are markedly different, must realize that national and state associations alone cannot solve all our problems and that maximum involvement of people who volunteer create better organizations and often provide fresh ways to advance their collective visions.

This system exists because these are the people that get things done. These are volunteers that each organization knows are dependable. They will work with little or no supervision and are committed to deadlines. They will not undertake a task just because they were asked to do it. They will not volunteer just to volunteer. These are people who are doing it, when others are just talking about it. They will respond positively and take responsibility for their own actions. Not only do they meet their obligations, but will often go beyond what is expected. For these individuals to do less would be to compromise their pride.

Much of the success of national and state organizations has always been, and must continue, to transmit from one person to another the habits of mind and heart necessary to contribute freely of their time and energy. Anything that jeopardizes this diminishes the organizations' capacity to function in the role most teachers depend upon (i.e., to be actively involved in the association).

On the other hand, we do not want to stifle volunteers with processes and procedures. Art educators are very oriented to process management. This means emphasizing attention on how things are done rather than on what gets done. The more attention turned in this direction, the more we tend to structure what and especially how they do it, resulting in volunteers being reduced to just a pair of hands and to following directions. We need to know when to back off. Let's not go too far and over-define volunteering and regulate its development and growth.

A shared understanding of what it means to volunteer is a good beginning point for helping maintain unity in our national and state associations, and a strong commitment to volunteering is critical if we are to sustain and expand our organizations. Our future depends on the volunteer.