

Find Your Threshold of Volunteerism – Avoid Burnout in Five Steps

By Del Albright

It is hard to say no to helping a cause you believe in, but eventually, we say yes too much, our plates become full, frustration hovers, stress builds, and burnout looms in the forefront. As we continue volunteering, we are lucky if we do not blow a gasket, toss a stroke, get mad or just quit! Once you burn out, you no longer help the cause – you might even hurt it. So my advice is to learn where your threshold lies and not cross it.

Threshold is an ancient word, dating to c.1000 and probably earlier. The term “thresh” was initially meant to stamp on or trample and survives today in the verb to thresh (wheat) and thrash. The “hold” portion is of unknown origin. The threshold is literally the first place in a building you step and has evolved to mean any gateway.

Threshold also means the magnitude or intensity that must be exceeded for a particular reaction, phenomenon, result, or condition to be manifested – like burnout.

In our world of clubs, events, rides, landuse politics, and organizational boards of directors and leadership, we can't afford to lose any volunteers to burnout, so I've come up with a cure to help keep folks productive in the game.

Like Hunting for Quail

One simple key to avoiding burnout and staying effective is to narrow your focus; concentrate your efforts. I like to think of our land use battles (and club politics) as a quail hunt. A typical hunt consists of hours of walking, wearing yourself out, then suddenly blazing away at a flurry of birds, usually missing most of them. But, of course, the only one who enjoys this is the dog – who can't stop dog-laughing at your newfound state of frustration.

The fight for trail access has reached such a flurry that many of us don't know where to start. So, we take the shotgun approach. We try to get in all the games. Of course, we want to help out all our partners in other states, other regions, and other clubs. So, we assist with letters, phone calls, emails, etc. Soon, we will have an extensive filing system that may cover many subjects, letters, and meetings. Then suddenly, we realize we're up to and over our ears!

A similar thing happens when we volunteer with Boards, Committees, sub-groups, social network groups, clubs, etc. Work (jobs) expand to fill the space available, which I borrowed from Parkinson's Law – the old adage that work expands to fill the time allotted for its completion.

And hey, what about that lawn that needs mowing? And that car (4wheeler?) that needs detailing; the significant other that is tired of you being at the computer half the night; and the trails that need riding? Next thing you know, burnout sets in. There are just too many battles to fight (and too many meetings to attend) that your effectiveness drops off soon.

There are no LED lights on your threshold of volunteerism. There is no yellow highlight. As a result, you may not even know it is looming in front of you. So just what can you do right now to avoid crossing that threshold?

Five Steps to Avoid that Threshold

STOP! Suppose you're a land use activist or organizational (club, school, church, board) volunteer who's been doing MORE than your share. In that case, it's time to identify your threshold, concentrate your efforts, increase your effectiveness, and avoid crossing that threshold and burning out. Stop wiping out your energy. Stop the onset of burnout. Here are some ways to do that.

First Step: Choose and allow. Re-affirm your commitment to the causes/efforts you believe in. We all need to keep fighting the good fight. You can't let burnout take you out of the battle. Every letter we write; meeting we attend; run we run; new member we recruit; we make a difference. People we keep in the fight, no matter their role, make a difference in the outcome. So STAY IN THE FIGHT.

Choose the jobs you want to tackle. Then, allow only those things that fit your "schedule" to be part of your life.

Tell yourself you're going to do your part, just maybe a different part from here on. That's ok.

Second Step: Identify your best jobs. Decide what you're really good at doing. Are you a letter-writer; a meeting person; an advisor to others; a volunteer leader who organizes others; a writer in general; or just someone who wants to give money and stay in the background? Find your niche – what you are really good at. This may take some soul searching but has a lot to do with identifying your threshold.

Third Step: Let go. Drop those things you're not good at doing. Bite the bullet; admit it, and let others who might be affected know you need to drop something. If you're not good at it, you'll fight it more than fix it. So please don't feed the monster and keep it ugly; get rid of it.

Fourth Step: Facilitate. Help others pick up what you need to drop. The sensible thing to do is help someone else take over those jobs for you. Find another activist to jump in where you left off (or never really got started). Don't just leave your partners hanging. If folks depend on you, find a way to transition out of something you're not good at by helping someone else pick up where you left off. It may take some "cards on the table" talks, but that's better than letting something fall off the table.

Fifth Step: Grab your niche! Focus your efforts on your niche. Now that you know what jobs you want to keep and have gotten rid of the rest, you begin to focus. Concentrate on getting really good at those things you're now doing. Make every effort count. Take classes if appropriate to improve your chosen niche. Get the paybacks. Stay clear of your threshold. Make a difference.

We all need to be doing our part in those volunteer efforts we believe in, like fighting the land use/public land access battles or helping Associations and groups grow, but we all don't need to fight all the battles. And we certainly can not keep volunteering until we have no time left for the rest of life.

We must identify our threshold and avoid burnout in ourselves and our fellow volunteers. If you follow the steps: 1) choose and allow; 2) identify your best jobs; 3) let go; 4) facilitate, and 5) grab your niche, you can stay in the fight, fight for what you believe in, and make all our efforts more effective while avoiding burnout.