

Service Agreements Among Friends and Colleagues

By [Danny van Leeuwen](#) | March 23, 2017 | [Edit](#)



I'm an old hippie [left]. I've lived in many houses and on a farm (commune?) with other people. Regularly we heard, "I agreed to *what?* No I didn't." "Since when is that a rule?"

I, and then my wife and I, developed skill in clarifying expectations and accountabilities: much effort invested to reach consensus, always worth it.

Later, in my work life as a healthcare leader, I tried to use service agreements between departments to clarify expectations and accountabilities. It was often resented and seldom reciprocated.

Now, as a person with growing and seemingly unmanageable *pro bono* participation in volunteer and not-for-profit organizations, I try to do the same.

Service agreements set boundaries, which can be especially important for someone who's managing a chronic condition. The details may vary, but they generally contain:

- Hours committed
- Exact nature of the commitment – what's in and what's out. What tasks and/or responsibilities is each of us committing to?
- Turnaround times
- Deliverable with due date
- Best, and alternate communication, channel
- Assumption to make when there's no response – either way (Does silence imply consent, or "I'll get back to you later," or...?)



One of the volunteer communities I participate with

Here's an example that I recently used with the S4PM newsletter team. What do you think? Have you ever experienced the challenges I described? Have you used agreements like this, formal or

informal, in volunteering or in families or in the workplace?

I agree to serve as an Associate Editor for the Society of Participatory Medicine monthly newsletter for a trial period ending April 30, 2017, at which time I may agree to continue.

I commit to:

1. Devoting at least two *pro bono* hours per month reviewing submission drafts for basic editing (relevance to the S4PM mission and monthly newsletter subject, clarity and plain language for all reader groups, originality). Will use Freedcamp project management software as instructed.
2. Answering email requests from senior, lead, or other associate editors within two business days unless I previously notify them that I'm unavailable (travel, health, another gig).
3. Confirming receipt of a request and that turnaround time is doable or project a turnaround time for a request without a time stated.
4. Checking my spam folder at least weekly for misrouted emails.
5. Giving at least 30 days' notice if electing to stop serving as associate editor (unless reason is emergent health related)
6. Attending editing management calls as requested by senior or lead associate editor as able within current schedule.

I do NOT commit to managing the process or production of the newsletter.

The lead associate editor commits to:

1. Giving me at least two weeks' notice for routine editing requests and clearly stating turnaround time for urgent or emergent requests.
2. Communicate with me using my primary xxxxx@xxxx.com email address with yyyyy@gmail.com as the backup if no response received within the promised two business days.

What do you think? Have you ever run into these problems, or tried an agreement like this?

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Danny van Leeuwen on March 29, 2017 at 7:16 am ([Edit](#))

I've received several comments via email. Thanks. You know, I don't follow my own advice often enough. I do service agreements mostly for myself. To control myself. I'm easily overextended, I want things to be perfect, and I'm easily diverted. I've often told my teams that we do often do more than we've committed to. When we feel overwhelmed we can cut back. We're the only people that will know. Others are expecting less. Anyway, I'm glad this touches a nerve.

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Mark Taylor on March 29, 2017 at 10:32 am ([Edit](#))

I had a similar experience some years ago where it wasn't clear whether I was being asked on an advisory group because I had MS or had a skill set useful to the panel that included a patient perspective.

The first is vaguely patronising, the second requiring more than just a bus fare. During the conversation it was clear they wanted a time commitment but not to compensate for that time against any reasonable scale.

I quite like what Danny has done, more power to him. Two way and realistic.

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