



Dealing with Difficult Volunteers

1. The Always Running Late Never On Time Volunteer

- **Profile:** Reliable volunteer, great worker, but never ever on time.
- **How to tackle:**
 - Remind all volunteers the expectations of their role and that being timely is one of those expectations.
 - Positive reinforcement when timeliness is demonstrated
 - Short and to the point conversation with Mr. Tardy-
 - Is there something preventing him from being on time?
 - Explain how this affects the work and morale of the rest of the team.
 - Is there a better volunteer position fit?

2. The Unreliable Well Intentioned Volunteer

- **Profile:** Committed to the cause but unable to follow thru on commitment
- **How to tackle:**
 - Address the situation the first time it happens before it escalates.
 - Gently remind the volunteer of the problem that their cancelation may cause
 - If the behavior does not improve, it is time for a more in depth conversation.
 - What is causing the problems with reliability?
 - Is there a volunteer position that may offer more flexibility in the scheduling?

3. The Experienced Expert Volunteer

- **Profile:** Experienced in a certain area, questions your every decision, has sideline conversations with other volunteers/staff; Undermines your leadership
- **How to tackle:**
 - Gently remind the volunteer of how the entire staff/volunteer team work together to fulfill the agency's mission.
 - If behavior continues, have a meeting with the volunteer and your supervisor
 - Ask the volunteer to bring any concerns they have directly to you and not to other staff/volunteers. Explain how divisive and demoralizing this behavior is to the team.
 - Be prepared to explain your decisions.
 - Make it clear to the volunteer that direct communication and respect for your leadership are critical to the success of the organization.
 - Explain acceptable versus unacceptable ways to bring complaints up. Establish clear boundaries.
 - This type of behavior is very difficult to change. May lead to volunteer termination.



4. "The Negative Volunteer"

- **Profile:** Displays irritation and constantly complains about everything- employees, other volunteer, the clients, you name it!
- **How to tackle:**
 - Model positive behavior. Keep your own negative comments in the backroom. Do not make the mistake of sharing where volunteers can hear you.
 - Talk with the volunteer and find out exactly what they think may make things better. Accept suggestions when possible or explain why things cannot be done a certain way.
 - If the negativity continues, consider reassigning the volunteer to a back office role where she is not interacting with the public or other volunteers.

5. The Aging Volunteer

- **Profile:** Long term dedicated volunteer whose skills have declined
- **How to tackle:**
 - **Challenges:** Commitment to the cause. May be a long time volunteer or even a donor to the organization, loved by all.
 - Have a conversation. Be honest and let them know you have noticed errors in their work and that you are concerned for them. Explain why it is critical for errors to be minimized.
 - Discuss options: Does the volunteer position allow for them to be partnered with another volunteer?
 - Is there a simpler volunteer opportunity where they can still help at?
 - Would a temporary leave of absence help?
 - Offer to plan nice retirement party, recognition or lunch. Assure them that they will continued to be invited to agency special events.

Good General Practices to Avoid or Address Problems

- **Expectations**-Have volunteer job descriptions that clearly spell out job expectations, training requirements, qualifications and schedules. A well written volunteer job description and volunteer grievance policy could be your life saver when problems arise.
- **Spend time in interviewing and placement**- Consider a 4-6 week trial period with a time for a follow up evaluation.
- **Provide proper training and shadowing opportunities or transition to a new position**- Shadowing and training offers potential volunteers the opportunity to practice a volunteer position while having one on one direct supervision. Have trusted long term proven volunteers available for new volunteers to shadow. The feedback you will gain from your long term volunteers will help you in guiding any additional training or placement changes for new volunteers.
- **Be open to feedback**- Volunteers may be in a position to observe potential areas of operation that can be improved. Be willing to listen but be honest when things cannot be changed.
- **Do not ignore the problem brewing**- Communication is key. Have a conversation with those involved. Be ready to address issues up front and directly when they first come up. Don't brush under the rug because they will not simply go away. Timely communication will help avoid bigger problems.

- **Define the issue that is causing the problem-** Is it a negative attitude? Is it a lack of knowledge that can possibly be resolved with additional training? Is it a matter of the position not being a good fit for the volunteer skills? Is it the environment, other staff or long term volunteers that are causing the situation? Learn your facts and then address the situation.
- **You can't fix everyone-** Spending too much time trying to fit the situation with one volunteer will take time away from recognizing the great work done by the other volunteers. It will drain your energy and will decrease your effectiveness. Some volunteers are not a good fit for the organization or the position. Perhaps another agency may be a better fit for them.