Redirect or Disengage

Redirecting Volunteers Who Perform Poorly

If you are faced with a volunteer who is performing poorly, try to first understand the reasons behind the poor performance, and then take the appropriate action to resolve the problem. By doing so, you may find that the problem is not serious and can be resolved with minimal action. Determine which of the following categories the individual can be placed in and follow the suggestions for that particular group.

The Motivated and Able Volunteer
Problems may be caused by unclear performance expectations or by difficult personal relationships. Clarify with volunteer the expectations of their job, counsel in conflict negotiation, or move volunteer to a setting without conflict as needed.

The Motivated but Unskilled Volunteer
Solve the problem through training, counseling or coaching.

The Able but Unmotivated Volunteer
Place the volunteer in a more motivating setting - make sure the volunteer is in a job they want to do, that they understand the connection between their job and the mission of the organization, that they have received appropriate recognition, and that they have decision making authority.

The Unable and Unmotivated Volunteer
Try to find a position that will meet the volunteer's motivational needs and is more suited to their skill level. If you find such a position is not available in your organization, you may want to refer the volunteer to another agency that would be more appropriate.

Dealing with Changes in Volunteers Over Time

Understand that an individual's life experiences affect their involvement in outside activities. Life-changing situations, such as getting married, being pregnant, losing a loved one, losing employment, entering retirement, getting a divorce, children leaving home, etc. can change the motivational needs of the volunteer. It is important to be flexible in regards to the volunteer's experience in order to meet their changing motivational needs. If you fail to accept changes in a volunteer and do not work to accommodate those changes, the volunteer may
choose to leave the organization and be involved elsewhere; somewhere that can fulfill their motivational needs.

Positive Corrective Action

If the volunteer does not respond to approaches to modify their setting, you can opt to take corrective action. Disengaging the volunteer should be the last resort. Corrective action is the better choice if you think there is a possibility that the volunteer could begin to perform better. To avoid damaging the volunteer's self-confidence and self-image, focus on what the volunteer can do differently rather than criticizing their unacceptable performance.

1. Get the Volunteer to Describe the Unacceptable Behavior
   • "How would you describe your performance in this situation?"
   • "How would you evaluate the accuracy of the work you do?"

2. Divorce the Behavior from the Individual's Self-worth
   • "That's not like you."
   • "That's not up to your usual standards."
   • "I'm confused about this."

3. Say Something Positive About the Person
   • Purpose is to diffuse defensiveness
   • Validate who they are:
     o "You care about our customers."
     o "You're a responsible worker."
     o "You're a smart person."

4. Ask the Volunteer for a Plan for Improvement
   • "What should you be doing?"
   • "What will you do next time?"
   • "What can you do to fix it?"

Their plan should be clear, specific, and detailed so they can picture themselves doing something different. Ask them how they will meet the expectation in the future.

5. Give Praise for any Improvement in Performance
   Giving praise for improvement supports Steps 1-4. If their behavior is still unacceptable, repeat step 4, asking how they will do even better the next time. As performance improves, make praise more difficult to earn. Praise the
improved behavior. Praise validates the improvements and will enhance the self-esteem of the volunteer.

**Disengaging the Volunteer**

If the behavior continues to be unacceptable, go through the first 4 steps again and let volunteers know they must improve their performance or they will be replaced. Terminating a volunteer should be a last resort. Having to terminate a volunteer means that something failed along the way - the screening/interviewing process, the job description was faulty, the training and supervision was lacking or weak.

Alternatives to Firing

Before terminating a volunteer, try some of these approaches:

Re-Supervise - make sure volunteer understands the rules and that rules are enforced.

Re-Assign - transfer volunteer to a new position or new setting.

Re-Train - provide additional training, a different training approach

Re-Vitalize - if a long-time volunteer appears burned out, let them take a break or transfer them temporarily to a position that is less demanding.

Refer - maybe they need a whole new change - set up an exchange program, or a volunteer swap for a few months.

Retire - some volunteers may no longer be able to do the work - assist them in making the transition with dignity.

Make sure there are no other available positions that may be suitable for the volunteer before you make the decision to fire them. After all, they came to the organization to help; you owe it to them to try to find an appropriate position for them. Consider each of the alternatives before terminating a volunteer in order to be fair to them.

Never make the decision to fire a volunteer immediately. The situation should be analyzed and studied, and then acted upon. When the decision to terminate a volunteer is reached, you must be able to admit that it is also a failure on your part; a failure in the sense that your screening process selected this volunteer, your training program taught the volunteer and you engaged them.
Developing a System for Making Firing Decisions

Once you have determined that firing a volunteer is the only appropriate action, you must have a system in place to deal with the situation.

- Develop a set of official policies regarding the employment of volunteers to include policies on probation, suspension, and termination
- Develop a system for informing volunteers, in advance, about these policies. You should discuss the policies with the volunteers and provide examples of requirements and unacceptable behavior.
- Develop a mechanism for relating these policies to each volunteer job. Job descriptions should explain the requirements of the job and have measurable objectives for determining whether the work is being accomplished satisfactorily.

Investigation/determination
Develop a process for determining whether the volunteer has broken the rules. Never fire a volunteer on the spot. Utilize a suspension policy while the situation is being investigated.

Document
All conversations and decisions should be documented to provide a record in case the situation needs to be reviewed again.

Application
Apply the rules fairly and equally, give appropriate penalties, and have a review process so that the decision does not look like a personal one.

Conducting the Firing Meeting
- Conduct the meeting in a private setting to preserve the dignity of the volunteer and of yourself.
- Be quick and direct.
- Announce, don’t argue. This is not a meeting to re-discuss and re-argue the decision. Expect the volunteer to vent, but remain quiet yourself.
- Don’t attempt to counsel - the time for that is past.
- Be prepared to end the discussion - the volunteer can have time to vent up to a point.
• Follow-up the meeting with a letter to the volunteer reiterating the decision and inform them of any departing details. Follow-up with others who may be involved as well.

Disengaging or firing a volunteer is never pleasant and should serve as your last alternative. Make sure that your agency has the appropriate policies in place for disengaging volunteers before you need them.