

Dealing with difficult volunteers

Whether you are dealing with a challenging individual, an unreliable volunteer, or a problem board member, it's never easy to confront someone who is donating his or her time to your organisation.

While every situation is unique, this guide provides some hints and tips on the subject.

The healthy way to handle a difficult or challenging volunteer

When a volunteer is causing problems, the worse course of action is to ignore the situation altogether. This only leads to more and potentially larger issues at a later date. Always handle conflict in a timely and direct fashion.

Define the issue

Before you deal with a situation, you need to understand it accurately. You must do this before you meet with the individual involved. If you need to, discuss with others who are also familiar with the situation to get another perspective. Never gossip, but take advantage of wisdom and wise judgement.

Take some time to consider what the problem might be. It could be:

Character

The volunteer lacks moral judgment, a strong work ethic or cannot be trusted?

Competency

The volunteer lacks the skills set required to do the job? In this case you may have to re-examine your recruitment and selection process.

Chemistry

The volunteer is a good and competent person, but the organisational fit just isn't right.

It's way too easy just to say 'he's the problem' or 'she's the problem' but you never really win. Defining the problem helps you solve the problem.

Also, own everything you can. It's almost never 100 per cent them. Find out what you've done wrong or what you could have done better and be honest about this. Once in a while you'll even realise it's not them. It's you or the organisational culture.

Separate the person from the problem

This is just so huge. Here's an example: Sometimes small children do something wrong, as a result many parents feel the need to punish, in some shape or form. Some parents might say that the child has been bad and then assign the punishment. Smarter parents might say that the child is generally good but has done a bad thing. The latter is an example of great parenting, and it's also an example of a great conflict management strategy. Now apply this to the volunteering situation you are faced with.

Affirm the person. Deal with the problem. Even if it's a character issue, when you affirm the person and deal with the problem you are in a much stronger position.

Go direct

Have the conversation face to face. And yes, a conversation. Not an email, or a hidden policy agenda.

Have the conversation over coffee, or in your office.

So how do you have the conversation?

Try an affirmation sandwich, which begins with praise, then deals with the issue (the meat), and ends with affirmation. Here's a short example with the volunteer named Jane.

Begin

Jane, I love how you've grown in confidence. I've seen you complete a number of tasks over the past 12 months and it's so encouraging.

Deal with the issue

I need to talk to you today about the way your attitude is affecting other people in the office. You might not even be aware of it, so I want to give you a chance to talk about it. But it needs to change and I hope we can get there together.

End

So let's work on this plan together and I'm sure we can see you continue to make progress. I really hope we can work this through. And I am confident there's a way if we work hard enough.

Follow up

Don't finish the relationship when you finish the conversation.

Remember, you separated the person from the problem. So you are now dealing with the problem and caring for the person.

Book a coffee or get together at regular intervals and check on their progress.

Evaluate

As you help them readjust or reform their attitude evaluate their progress. This is hard, but their long term health and the health of your organisation are impacted by honest evaluation.

Do not sacrifice them or your organisation because you're trying to be nice. Speak the truth. Your commitment to them as a person will pay off in the long term, even if they may never see it.

Support Cambridgeshire runs a number of free courses on any aspect of volunteer management, so please contact us for more details at info@supportcambridgeshire.org.uk.