

Why we need to tackle volunteer problem behaviour



Last August, BBC Radio here in the UK broadcast an episode of their 'In Business' programme called "[Managing Volunteers: Free and Easy?](#)" It did an excellent job of highlighting the importance of effective volunteer engagement and outlining why experience of managing volunteers can lead to people to be better managers of paid staff. However, during the show one person remarked that volunteers can't / shouldn't be disciplined or dismissed. I disagree and here are three reasons why.

First, the vast majority of organisations that involve volunteers do not exist for that purpose. They exist to cure cancer, end child cruelty, end animal cruelty, fight discrimination and a myriad other reasons. Putting it bluntly, volunteers (and paid staff) are a means by which that mission is fulfilled. If a volunteer is not helping an organisation achieve its aims then it is only right that we should take action to correct that. Ideally this would re-engage them in work that moves the organisation forward but, if that isn't possible, the mission is more important than the individual.

Second, what volunteers achieve matters. People want to make a difference and not have their time wasted. If someone's problem behaviour gets in the way of others making that difference then it must be addressed. Not doing so implies that we don't really care about the contribution of volunteers. This can be demotivating for other volunteers

and can undermine your efforts to show people (in the organisation, in the community etc.) that volunteers are important contributors to the mission of the organisation.

Third, any volunteer involving organisation will have standards for how it does what it does. You wouldn't expect paid staff to behave in an inappropriate way towards clients, colleagues and the public: such behaviour would be addressed promptly and firmly. The same should be true of volunteers. Just because they are unpaid does not mean they are exempt from standards of behaviour that your organisation expects. Ignoring inappropriate behaviour by anyone, paid or volunteer, is as good as condoning it.

In most instances (except for gross misconduct), whenever we encounter problem behaviour we should try to correct things and keep the volunteer engaged. We may not use the formal language of discipline or performance management, as we might with employees, but the goal would be the same - to get the volunteer contributing positively to the fulfilment of the organisation's mission in a way that is consistent with appropriate standards of behaviour. Dismissal of a volunteer is, therefore, a last resort to be pursued when all else has failed. But it must remain an option if no other solution can be found.

I hope I have convinced you that we can and should discipline and (occasionally) dismiss a volunteer. The question is, how do we do that? Unfortunately I don't have the space to answer that question here so please check back later in the year for part two, "How we can tackle volunteer problem behaviour".

When the role doesn't suit the volunteer

Sometimes this situation arises. What can we do? Much depends on when you realise that the role doesn't suit and the sooner this happens the better it is for everyone.

How can we ensure we find out as soon as possible?

- Have clear role descriptions and recruitment criteria
- Take time and care with the process of volunteer selection
- Have a trial period before the volunteer makes a final commitment
- Regular supervision and review of the position
- Lots of communication and support – involve volunteers in decision-making
- Listen carefully to feedback from the volunteer and from colleagues and clients

What can we do about it?

- If a problem arises tell the volunteer as soon as possible
- Be gentle, supportive, mindful of their feelings/needs, as well as specific and honest
- Go through a performance review process
- Discuss it together – ask them what you could do to help them enjoy the position more and do a better job
- Offer appropriate training.
- Offer the volunteer an alternative role
- If necessary give verbal and written warnings as you would for a paid worker
- If there's nowhere for them in your organisation, suggest they contact Volunteering Waikato for other voluntary work
- **Keep your focus on the Mission of your organisation**

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SOURCE: Volunteering Canterbury – www.volcan.org.nz



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