

Firing High Maintenance Volunteers

How to Fire Volunteers and Move On

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In every workshop on volunteer management I am asked the question, "How do you fire a volunteer?" Volunteers don't get paid. Why would I want to fire them? Couldn't we just let them continue doing what they want to do when they want to?

Unfortunately, it isn't that simple. Volunteer roles are very important to the mission of the organization, and if the job isn't getting done or if the volunteer is lowering the morale of the other volunteers, we have a responsibility to correct the situation. It could be that the reason we want to get rid of a high maintenance volunteer is because they are not fulfilling their responsibilities, or it could be that they are just impossible to work with. However, before we make that decision, we need to make sure that we have taken every performance-coaching step to correct the situation. Performance coaching, the one-on-one meetings that happen between the manager and the volunteer, may provide an opportunity to resolve our concerns. Some organizations, like the California State Railroad Museum, have formal performance reviews for all volunteers and regular performance management meetings.

If the volunteer manager has developed very specific job descriptions and expectations, the manager can talk to the volunteer when those expectations are not being met. All of these alternatives are both easier to implement and managerially smarter than making a decision to terminate a volunteer. They recognize that there are many reasons why a person may be behaving inappropriately, and that some of these reasons have answers other than separating that person from the program. We strongly urge that you to consider each of these alternatives before deciding to fire any volunteer. The goals of performance-coaching are to get the project back on target. If the volunteer does not do the job, it is time to find a replacement.

Before you have the firing meeting, be sure to check out the legal ramifications of such a decision.

Legal Issues

It is not outside the realm of possibility that a terminated volunteer could sue you and your organization. Even if no one sues, carefully following a clearly defined process will assure

everyone in the organization that people were treated fairly. Emotional and unexpected dismissals could cause upheaval in your organization. Legal issues are never simple, and every nonprofit agency is unique. Always check with your organization's lawyer before making any legal decisions. Many liability concerns can be avoided by carefully screening volunteers before they get involved.

In addition to job descriptions you would be well advised to develop a volunteer manual that clearly outlines the duties and responsibilities of your volunteers. This is especially important if you do face the need to terminate someone. The more documentation you have, with conditions and policies for termination, the safer you will be. To be doubly safe, be sure to distribute the policies to new volunteers. Some organizations even have the volunteers sign a letter of agreement outlining the expectations on the part of the organization and the volunteer. Board members are handled a different way since their service (and termination of such) is covered by the bylaws of the organization. Terminating a board member is a matter for the board as a whole to act according to the bylaws.

Legal Justification

There are two legal justifications for firing a volunteer. The first is simply that the goal of an organization is to deliver quality service to the members and/or clients. The organization must have policies and practices, which call for the volunteer to be accountable for the highest levels of performance. If the volunteer is a barrier to that delivery, then the agency has a legal obligation to take some sort of action. But these expectations of quality service and the service required by both paid and volunteer staff need to be spelled out in a policy manual.

A second legal justification has to do with giving significance (value) to volunteer service. By allowing just any quality of service for the volunteer, the organization conveys the impression that the volunteer work done is irrelevant and insignificant. An organization that does not care enough to enforce quality of volunteer work communicates to other volunteers that their volunteer work is insignificant.

Developing a System for Making Firing Decisions

If you do, however, encounter a situation in which none of the performance coaching alternatives work, it is helpful to have in place a system for dealing with problems. Some agencies have been sued by terminated volunteers, and many agencies have encountered political and community relations problems. The system that follows is designed to help the volunteer manager both in making and in justifying the decision to terminate a volunteer. Essentially, it has three parts:

Part I: Communication of Clear Expectations

The first stage of the system is development and clear communication of position expectations. The organization needs a set of official policies regarding volunteer personnel issues. It is especially important to have policies on probation, suspension, and

termination. The organization sets in place a planned orientation program with very specific examples of the requirements and unacceptable behavior. The specific position charter must outline the objective of the position (i.e. - attend 8 of the 10 board meetings).

Part II: Investigation

The assumption behind part II is that the volunteer manager has tried all of the suggestions in performance coaching (listening, coaching, training, etc.) and nothing seems to be working. Those volunteers whose performance is unsatisfactory are told of their deficiency, counseled on improving their work, and then re-evaluated. Failure to conform to the quality standard over time becomes grounds for termination. The investigation is the collection of the data to make sure that the volunteer is truly not fulfilling the job requirements. Part of the investigation is to make sure that the volunteer manager has done a fair job of enforcing the system to all volunteers. This is not only to be fair to the person being fired, but also to make sure that you are not putting yourself in the position for litigation. In cases where the wrongful performance is not incremental but is substantial in nature such as inappropriate relations with a client or breach of confidentiality then what is needed is some "proof" that the volunteer did in fact commit the wrong-doing. This might be testimony of other volunteers, staff, or the client.

During the coaching and investigation period, it is very important to document, document, document. The manager should keep a personnel file on the volunteer and keep write up a brief summary page on each meeting. A summary page would be:

Performance Coaching Meeting:

Manager: Jon Jackson

Volunteer: Lucky Smith

Discussion: I talked with Lucky about not showing up for his volunteer shift at the information desk on June 5, July 6, and August 14th. He said he had a family emergency in June, was on vacation in July, and just forgot in August. He was sorry and would try to do better. We talked about him getting a replacement when he could not make it. He said he would.

Sounds great, except in September Lucky didn't show up again. You called him the next day to set up a meeting with Lucky to terminate his position.

The documentation also demonstrates that the volunteer manager do a fair job of enforcing the system. It requires equal and fair application of the rules (no playing favorites), appropriate penalties (graduated to the severity of the offense) and, if possible, a review process, so that the decision does not look like a personal one.

You will note that the above processes mirror the common personnel practices for paid staff. They are, in fact the same, and they should be, since evaluating either paid or unpaid staff should follow the same rules.

The advantages of this system are two-fold. First, they assist the volunteer manager in making the right decision, and in feeling comfortable about making that decision. The system is fair to both the volunteer and the agency if properly followed and tends to produce 'correct' answers. It also allows the volunteer manager to divert to a less drastic solution as appropriate.

Second, the system helps develop a case for firing that can be utilized to explain the decision to others, whether internally or externally. In practice, in fact, an odd side effect of this systematic approach is that many problem volunteers decide to voluntarily resign rather than face the inevitable and seemingly inexorable conclusion of the process.

Part III: The Firing Meeting

Regardless of the system utilized to reach the decision to terminate, someone has to actually convey that decision to the volunteer. This will never be a pleasant experience, but here are some tips that may help:

Conduct the meeting in a private setting. This will preserve the dignity of the volunteer and perhaps of yourself.

Be specific. Some managers are so vague that the volunteer walks out of the meeting wondering if he or she was fired or offered a job. The volunteer manager may tell Steve that his work with kids was fantastic. The inner city young people loved him and they would love to put him on full-time staff. Then the manager says that the staff were concerned because Steve tended to be late, and he often didn't show up.

Words like "tended" and "often" are vague, especially when couched between phrases such as "fantastic" and "love to have him on full-time staff." What the manager needed to say was, "Steve, in spite of your rapport with our inner-city young people, we just cannot depend on you. On September 10th, 17th and 24th, you did not show up and we were counting on you. I talked to you about this and you said you agreed that if you could not make the commitment to be there each week, we would need to replace you. We have found someone to replace you and are taking you off of our volunteer team."

Don't negotiate—just state your decision. The purpose of the meeting is simply, and only, to communicate to the volunteer that they have not met the specifics of the performance expectations and they are no longer going to be needed. You are going to find a replacement. If they have a uniform or keys, you need to collect them immediately. If the volunteer wants to vent, let them vent, but just listen—don't become defensive and try to defend. Since many non-profit organizations have a social mission, and we truly care about people, we are tempted to counsel this person. That is not the purpose of this meeting. Any attempt to counsel can send a mixed message.

Follow-up. Send a follow-up letter (sample below) to the volunteer stating your appreciation and anything positive that you can say; however, state the decision to terminate the volunteer letter of agreement. Inform the staff and other volunteers on the

team of the decision. Be sure to keep the details confidential. The volunteer will usually tell the details.

Sample Letter:

Dear Lucky Smith,

Thank you for your interest and involvement in CCC and the time you spent volunteering as a receptionist at our information booth. This is such an important position as we make many public contacts. Your outgoing personality and winsome way with people was a real asset to us.

We are so disappointed that your schedule did not allow you to keep the requirements of the position charter, as outlined in our volunteer personnel manual. As mentioned in our meeting on September 26, 2002, we need to seek a replacement for your position and terminate our letter of agreement.

I trust that when your schedule changes, and you feel that you can meet the requirements of this position, we can once again have you be a part of our volunteer team.

Sincerely,

*Jon Jackson
Volunteer Manager*

Firing a volunteer is difficult. Let me emphasize again that firing is only the last result, and I only consider it when the continued involvement of the volunteer is having a negative impact with the members of the organization, our clients, or our public.

Have I ever had to fire a volunteer? Yes, but not a highly involved volunteer. I did all I could to salvage the dignity and resources of the highly involved volunteer, who was a high maintenance volunteer. Sometimes I went home and complained a lot to my wife about this person, but we made it work. However, I have fired high maintenance volunteers who did nothing and did not fulfill their commitments, and I really didn't lose any sleep over it. Don't waste your time with Lucky Smiths who don't show up. Move on.