

Strategies for Dealing with Unreliable Volunteers

by Shawn Kendrick | October 28, 2009

As much as we appreciate volunteers, there are always a few, however, that throw a wrench into our plans due to their unreliability. You know the ones.... The “over-scheduler” who calls at the last minute to let you know he has a conflict and won’t be able to make it. Or the “amnesia victim” whose scheduled time just slipped her mind. The intentions may be good, but these unreliable helpers can really impact the effectiveness of your event or program. The question is how to deal with them. Again, the answer lies in treating volunteers similarly to the way you treat paid employees. There’s very little research specific to handling troublesome volunteers, but there is a wealth of human resource data aimed at dealing with regular employees who may be problematic. This can serve as our guiding light in dealing with volunteers. When addressing problems such as unreliability, Dr. Joanne Sujansky, founder of the management consulting firm KeyGroup, suggests the following approach. (Note: where Dr. Sujansky refers to *employees* in her article, we modify it here to specify *volunteers*.)

Be specific

Don’t exaggerate or make generalized statements like “you’re never on time.” Stick to exact accounts, such as “you’ve had to cancel the last two times you’ve been scheduled.”

Focus on the requirements of the job

Be clear in explaining how the unreliability affects everyone. It’s quite possible that your volunteers don’t understand how integral their roles are. With some clarity, they may take matters more seriously.

Consider the needs of the volunteer

Always try to address the situation in the manner you think will get the best results from that volunteer. Keep in mind that some are straight shooters and would prefer you get to the point, while others may seem crushed to hear they aren’t doing well. With this in mind, strongly consider how you are going to deliver the message.

Give timely feedback

Don’t wait a long time to address a problem situation. Of course, if there is a highly emotional or stressful environment at the time of the poor performance, wait until it has subsided.

Make sure the volunteer understands

Don't ask a bunch of closed-ended questions. If you ask the volunteer if s/he understands, the answer is likely to be yes, whether your point came across or not. So, at the end of the discussion, it's a good idea to ask your volunteer to paraphrase what you just said. From there, you can see if s/he truly gets what you are saying.

Document

Always create a paper trail of your conversations, as well as the behaviors before and after them. The trick here is to be objective and document both good and bad. Many managers fall into the trap of only documenting problematic behavior.

As Dr. Sujansky points out, most people in positions of authority hesitate to confront individuals about poor performance. However, if you do, one of two things will probably happen:

- 1) The volunteer's track record will improve.
- 2) The individual will deselect himself/herself from your volunteer pool.

In the long run, either of these two outcomes is likely to result in a more dedicated, cohesive, and productive group of volunteers for your organization.

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