

When Helping Hands Hurt your Cause

by Krista Balbach | January 29, 2008

As you may have read, in addition to writing for [VolunteerHub](#), I also work part-time at a small library. An incident occurred there this week that gave me inspiration for this month's blog article. One of our volunteers is a bit challenging to deal with at times. And, as the course of human nature runs, there may be at least one such volunteer at your organization as well. This can manifest in many different ways, such as misrepresenting skills and abilities, ignoring directions, straying off-task, chatting too much with staff or other volunteers, or wanting to revamp everything about your agency.

Staff reactions to this type of individual can be varied. Gee, but these volunteers are donating their time to help us out, some might say. Of course [volunteer or ientation](#) and training time is an investment, but agencies naturally expect a return on that investment. Once up to speed, volunteers are supposed to be there to relieve the time crunch. Re-doing assignments given to volunteers or constantly defending your policies and procedures can be a drain on staff time, resources, and emotional energy. Therefore, the actions of difficult volunteers can compromise the quality of service you provide to your agency's clients.

Take Action

So, what can be done? First, make sure to review your new volunteer procedures. Do you check volunteer references? Are you distributing detailed job descriptions during or ientation, so each volunteer will know his or her responsibilities? Does your agency provide mentors and offer frequent feedback and evaluations during training? Most importantly, do you have a standard contract drawn up for both the volunteer and the coordinator to sign? If not, draft one as soon as possible. Make sure that the contract is open-ended for both parties involved when it comes to termination. Unless your group requires a minimum term to serve, make it clear that volunteers are free to leave your program whenever they wish. However, although not necessary, you may also want to include a clause stating that you would prefer two weeks notice, just as most employers require. To protect your organization, include a provision stating that your organization can terminate a volunteer's position, effective immediately, at any time and for any reason.

Know Your Options

In most cases, severing ties with a volunteer should not be the first step in rectifying the matter. However, do not ignore problem behavior. Instead, be alert, recognize problems, and do not delay in taking steps to remedy the situation. Remember, you are in charge, and you do have options:

Option 1: Reassign Even with careful screening and background checks, sometimes a volunteer's skills are not up to par with the task you originally assigned to him or her. Or perhaps there is a personality conflict with a staff member or other volunteer with whom s/he must interact. Reassignment to a new task may be the answer here.

Option 2: Retrain As an alternative to reassignment, you may consider retraining. If a volunteer is having difficulties with an assigned task, s/he may need additional coaching on techniques or procedures. In addition, take learning styles into account. For example, instead of a classroom setting, perhaps s/he learns better in a more hands on manner.

Option 3: Recharge Long-time volunteer's may just need a break. This is especially true if they are assigned to either a repetitive or very intense job. Some organizations enforce mandatory time off after a specified period of service, while others rotate the volunteers job to give him or her a chance to re-energize.

Option 4: Refer to another organization Although it is often difficult to admit for both parties involved, sometimes an agency and a volunteer are just not a good fit. In this case, get the volunteer in touch with a volunteer center or consider an exchange program with another organization.

Option 5: Retire Due to health concerns or other changes in his or her life situation, a great volunteer's attendance and/or performance might start to disintegrate. However, s/he may still be reluctant to sever ties with your agency. If you recognize this trend, you may want to approach your volunteer about retiring so that both s/he and your organization can part with mutual respect.

Unfortunately, in a few rare cases, terminating a volunteer is the only option. Done improperly, this can result in legal and/or public relations nightmares. If you do not have a set of procedural guidelines in place for terminating a volunteer, you owe it to your agency to take the time to do so.

Prevent Issues Before They Occur

One of the easiest ways to prevent these difficulties is to [recruit and retain quality volunteers](#). Eliminate potential problems by prescreening applicants and then providing thorough training. Also, make sure that communication lines are wide open. Volunteers do best when both you and they know exactly what is expected of them. Remember to praise them when they are doing well and offer them incentives and perks. Small things like a volunteer of the month parking spot or the opportunity to advance to a more complex job can make a big difference. And, although it seems like a no-brainer, many organizations don't formally recognize their volunteers, so don't forget to acknowledge their efforts with an annual volunteer appreciation night.

So, what are you waiting for? If you do have that one challenging volunteer in your organization, enact a change. Make sure all your volunteers are truly lending a helping hand.

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