

Principles for Dealing With *Difficult Volunteers*

Dealing With Difficult Volunteers Marilyn MacKenzie

Try to handle problems promptly.

Problems won't disappear if you just ignore them. In fact, they are likely to get worse. Don't "store up" problems but deal with them as they occur.

Don't try to confront difficult situations when you're so upset that you're not rational.

You need to be at your best—calm, under control and ready to listen to the response of the volunteer. You want to be as open and honest as possible. If you're very upset, you'll be defensive and perhaps accusatory. It's better to rehearse what you want to say. I find writing down the key points helps me focus and clarify my concerns.

Serious reprimands should be carried out in a one-to-one setting.

The Japanese are right about "saving face." You may feel it important to have a second person there to imply that this action has the blessing of a higher authority (your principal, staff member, or PTO president) but the interview should be conducted by only one of you, with an observer. You may want to indicate that you have checked this action out with the appropriate authority, if they are not present. "I have talked to Mrs. Smith about this yesterday and she agrees that . . ."

Describe what you have observed.

Evaluate or interpret as little as possible. I find it helpful to have the example of the problem behavior that I have observed recorded, with the date as the basis of my concern. If I can't confirm a behavior that is reported to me by a third party, I usually will not act on it.

Use the job description to identify expected behaviors.

Sometimes it is important to separate the individual from the function or position in order to make a fair decision. Is the person able or willing to do the job as assigned?

Mrs. Gardiner was a lovely, older woman who answered the phone at the Voluntary Action Centre. Recently Mrs. Gardiner's hearing had deteriorated badly, but no one wanted to hurt her feelings. Phone messages were garbled, missed, or misdirected. Clients were frustrated and service was compromised. Despite a genuine desire to protect and value Mrs. Gardiner, something had to be done. Mrs. Gardiner was not able to carry out the tasks of "receptionist." Fortunately, she was able to file, photocopy, and make the best pot of tea in the office. Her future was secure.

Indicate a shared commitment to find a solution to problems.

The volunteer should not hear. *“This is your problem. What are you going to do about it?”* But rather should hear: *“How can we develop a plan for dealing with this issue?”*

Arrange for follow-up.

This is part of the coaching assessment and recognition activities that are so important in assuring the problem behavior doesn't recur and that solutions are being worked on. Set a specific date in the future not more than three weeks. Put it on your calendar right then. Do the follow-up. Have the volunteer meet you or talk on the phone. Review the plans and the progress. Remember to look for movement toward the goal, not perfection.

Dealing With Problematic Volunteers

Grapevine, March/April 1996

Sue Vineyard

MYTHS

Let's look at some myths in regard to those very troublesome volunteers. This list may help you clarify the depth of problems you face because of difficult volunteers. If you find yourself believing one of the following, you may have to readjust your thinking as you plan your strategy in dealing with identified problems.

Ignoring a problem will make it go away.

WRONG. It may go underground and be more difficult to confront, but it will not go away, unless, of course, you plan to simply wait for the person to die, the height of avoidance.

No one else notices. I'm the only one who is suffering.

You must be kidding. Others see the problem and can shift their anger or frustration on you, wondering why you don't take control and stop the negative behavior.

I can fix/change the problem person.

WRONG. You can't and shouldn't. That's not why you're there. "Fixing" volunteers will drain your energy, time, and effectiveness and ignore the 98 percent of volunteers who are doing a great job. Keep in mind, I am not talking about people who are causing minor problems and simply need to be set straight. I'm talking about real troublemakers who are dysfunctional.

There's good in everyone. I just need to give them time to show it!

WRONG. There are some nasty people. How they got that way is not your problem or challenge. Savior is not in your job description. Time won't fix everyone, and in the meantime you'll lose good people and possibly hurt some (volunteers) who don't deserve to put up with abuse.

If I confront them, it will make things worse.

Not if you do it carefully and calmly. NOT confronting problematic behavior will cause more trouble, however.

If I confront them, they will leave and the program will die.

If your program rides on the whim of one individual . . . That is simply too much control, power, and dependence in one person.

If I'm really the caring and all-accepting person I should be, I can handle them.

STOP IT! You are beginning to believe your own press clippings. You're a volunteer (coordinator), not a saint. Don't see other people's dysfunction as somehow a test of your worth. They are the problem, not you.

If I push them out they will be mad at me.

Maybe. Maybe not. If they become angry, so be it. You did what was best for the program (school, PTO) and the people it serves. Sticks and stones and all of that . . . Some may actually be relieved to be out of a situation that was uncomfortable for them.

All of the above are MYTHS. They are WRONG. Eight times wrong. Well, maybe only 7½ times wrong.