

Difficult Conversations with Volunteers

TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES



**We all face
difficult
conversations
at times...**



**But we can
turn these
conversations
into
opportunities**

- We have the opportunity to:**
- **help our volunteer succeed**
 - **avoid bigger challenges**
 - **positively impact our missions**
 - **develop our leadership abilities**

It's necessary to have a conversation:



- When a client complains
- When staff complain
- When other volunteers complain
- When behavior is offensive
- When there is friction between the volunteer and staff or other volunteers
- When the volunteer does not follow the rules
- When work suffers
- When the volunteer is antagonistic

It's necessary to have a conversation:



- When behavior is disruptive
- When staff is seen as "putting up" with a volunteer
- When a volunteer's attitude is counter-productive
- When a volunteer's behavior changes
- When a volunteer is chronically late or absent
- When a volunteer disrespects your leadership
- When a volunteer has an agenda
- When a volunteer shows poor judgement

**Preparation
is the key to a
successful
outcome
when having
a difficult
conversation**

*Why am I
the best
person for
this job?*

Take a moment to think about:

- your vision for your program-it is based on meaningful volunteer contributions to your organization's mission.
- how meeting this challenge head-on will free you to focus on advancing your program.
- how your proactive steps will keep this challenge from ballooning into something bigger.
- how you are helping the volunteer succeed.
- how your leadership skills will grow.
- how your volunteer program will be viewed as a professional, well-run program.



The 8 Elements of a Successful Outcome

Preparations are critical before, during and after the conversation



- **Remind yourself that you are the best person for this challenge**
- **Prepare and practice your opening statement**
- **Do not apologize for the conversation**
- **Do not speak for the volunteer**
- **Do not diminish the person(s) who made the complaint**
- **Allow ample time for feedback and discussion**
- **Follow up with diligence**
- **Give yourself credit**

Before the Conversation

Prepare yourself to succeed



Remind yourself that you are the best person for this challenge

- you know this volunteer better than anyone else.
- you care about this volunteer and want to see them succeed.
- by being proactive, you can keep the situation from getting worse and therefore making it worse for everyone, including the volunteer.

Practice your opening statement

- be direct-don't drag it out; be kind but get to the point.
- be very specific-don't confuse the volunteer by hiding the message behind chit chat.
- assure the volunteer that the conversation is meant to help the volunteer succeed.
- don't overload the opening statement with praise meant to "soften the blow."
- make clear your intent to mediate a solution that works.

During the Conversation



A good mediator remains neutral and open

The goal is a solution:

Don't apologize

- apologizing for the conversation negates its importance.
- refer back to the mission.
- restate expectations.

Don't coach the volunteer

- remain neutral and hear them out.
- assure them that you are confident in finding a solution that satisfies everyone and furthers mission goals.
- be empathetic, but don't immerse yourself so deeply in the volunteer's feelings that you lose neutrality.

Don't diminish the source of the complaint

- remind the volunteer that everyone has a voice.
- acknowledge, but don't agree to condemn personalities.
- remember that listening does not imply agreement, so use phrases like "I understand what you are saying."

Allow time for discussion:

- don't judge frustrations, judge actions.
- ask for confirmation that the volunteer feels heard and understood.
- ask for confirmation that the volunteer has heard and understood your position.

After the conversation



Keeping it successful

"I walked away feeling like I had salvaged this relationship and everyone was satisfied."

Follow up

- check in with all stakeholders soon after the conversation.
- keep the dialogue open.
- prepare a strategy based on your policies such as verbal warning, written warning, termination.
- if the volunteer is terminated and other volunteers are upset, hold an open meeting for those volunteers and clear the air by encouraging the sharing of their perceptions while outlining the organization's position.

Give yourself credit

- take pride in your leadership.
- learn from the conversation.
- journal your thoughts.

What if the situation persists?



Having a difficult conversation does not always guarantee the problem will be resolved...

When the situation persists:

- look for other ways the volunteer can serve.
- if termination is necessary, part with a clear ending and wish the volunteer well.
- allow yourself time to feel disappointed.
- remind yourself that avoidance would have created bigger problems.
- remember that not everyone is a fit for your mission.

And prepare for the future by:

- creating policies and procedures that spell out expectations and disciplinary actions.
- creating probationary periods.
- review your recruitment ads and strategies to ensure you are not signaling that "any warm body will do."
- enlist new people as advocates and make volunteering an elevated position.
- reject potential volunteers from roles, not the organization.

Tips



Tips to successful outcomes when dealing with challenging situations

Dealing with egregious behavior? Enlist the help of a panel. A panel, consisting of yourself and key staff members accomplishes 3 things:

- It shows a united front.
- It eliminates the "he said, she said" element.
- It encourages staff involvement in the complexities of volunteer management.

Be clear about termination status:

- by simply just "not calling" the volunteer, you give implied permission to continue to represent your organization.
- engage with your volunteer team. Don't discuss specifics, but do let them know that your organization and the volunteer in question have "parted ways."
- refer back to the mission and your dedication to providing impactful volunteer involvement.

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management
discussions
and
information,
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