Volunteering and Boundaries

Boundaries are guidelines, rules or limits that are created to identify what are reasonable, safe and permissible ways to interact with others. They set the parameters of what is, and is not, acceptable behaviour. Boundaries can be both professional and personal.

Boundaries are important for adhering to certain legal principles (e.g. privacy and confidentiality), for maintaining workplace culture, and for your own self-care. Your boundaries are set by you, but they must also fit within an organisation's overall policies, procedures and culture. Clear communication and staying calm are the best ways to ensure people are respecting your boundaries.

In a volunteering program, boundaries exist between:

- Volunteers and clients/service users
- Volunteers and other volunteers
- Volunteers and employees

Personal versus Professional Boundaries

Where personal and professional boundaries conflict with one another, in most cases the boundaries set by the organisation will need to prevail. This is because organisational boundaries are usually set in accordance with compliance requirements, such as legislation and grant agreement guidelines, and based on policies and procedures. For example, an organisation may set a boundary that a volunteer cannot drive a client home in the volunteer's personal vehicle. This may be due to several reasons, including insurance, privacy and confidentiality, and safety.

Volunteers are encouraged to discuss how their personal boundaries intersect with the professional boundaries of an organisation with their Volunteer Manager if any issues arise.

Communicating Boundaries

Once set, boundaries must also be communicated and maintained. Communication of boundaries might be formal (e.g. through a Code of Conduct) or via conversation (e.g. "I'm not going to talk about my personal life"). Once set, boundaries must be maintained. Be assertive in an open and honest way, and learn to say "no". Be respectful of other peoples' boundaries, even where you might not necessarily agree with them. People tend to set personal boundaries based on values, which are subjective and differ from person to person. Many external factors may influence boundaries including culture, religion, and life experience. Everyone has the right to set their own boundaries based on their own values.

Volunteers and Clients or Service Users

Setting and maintaining boundaries can be difficult in volunteering roles that involve ongoing, direct client contact. Many volunteers see the same people week after week and will almost certainly form some sort of relationship with these people. Boundaries in these relationships are vital.

You may set emotional boundaries around how much of your personal life you are willing to share or boundaries around your personal space. It is important that you value empathy and the importance of

a caring and helpful attitude, but you need to balance this with providing a respectful and proficient service.

Your organisation may have boundaries in place around receipt of gifts from clients or what work or actions you, as a volunteer, can or shouldn't do. At all times you should work within your position description, on duties you have agreed with the organisation. This is important not only for maintaining boundaries, but also from a legal and safety perspective.

If a client asks you to do something beyond your position description or out of scope of the service you offer, you are encouraged to check with a supervisor or your Volunteer Manager and should always feel comfortable to say no.

Volunteers and Other Volunteers

One of the benefits of volunteering can be the social interaction with other volunteers. Many people are motivated to volunteer to meet new people and make friends. This is one of the great things that volunteering can offer, as it provides an opportunity to connect with like-minded people. It is also a great way to make new friends in a new city following a move. However, it is still important to maintain professional working relationships while volunteering. All staff have the right to feel safe and welcome in the workplace and be free from harassment and bullying.

At all times, interactions with other volunteers must maintain boundaries, including the privacy and confidentiality of clients and of other volunteers. This is particularly important if the social relationships between volunteers extends outside of the workplace. It is also important to be mindful that not all volunteers are seeking social relationships through volunteering, and to be respectful of this decision and not breach their privacy or make them feel uncomfortable by asking them to participate in social events if they have indicated they do not wish to do so.

Volunteers and Employees

In the course of volunteering it is likely that volunteers will form work-based relationships with their Volunteer Manager and other paid staff in the organisation. This is a natural part of volunteering and aids the effectiveness of service and program delivery by creating a cohesive team. Such relationships also assist Managers of Volunteers to cater to the motivational needs of their volunteers and provide meaningful recognition. However, there should always be a professional relationship between volunteers and the employees with whom they interact. This relationship should respect boundaries, but also align with legislative compliance requirements. For example, in many cases it may not be appropriate to discuss client details with volunteers for privacy reasons.

In most cases, employees in an organisation assume a supervisory and support role over volunteers in the organisation and have a duty of care to their volunteers to protect both their physical and mental health and wellbeing. Following boundaries, as well as policies and procedures, is integral to protecting volunteers and ensuring they are safe and happy in the workplace. Volunteers should know that if they are asked to act beyond the duties in their position description by a client or another volunteer, or are uncomfortable with their boundaries being crossed, they can refer any issue to their Volunteer Manager or another supervisor.

Friendly, Not Friends

A simple way to frame the most appropriate approach to boundaries for many volunteer involving organisations is 'friendly, not friends'. This can be applied between volunteers and service uses and volunteers and employees. It is perfectly okay, and indeed conducive to a harmonious workplace, for everyone to be friendly and on good terms. But what a volunteer would do for a client, and what an employee would do for a volunteer, should err on the side of friendly, not friends.

Boundaries are important in any workplace but can take on particular significance in organisations where volunteers are providing services and programs to clients. The importance of boundaries is even more heightened when services are provided to vulnerable people, including children, the elderly and people experiencing disadvantage. Following all workplace policies and procedures and maintaining professional boundaries in all interactions ensure the safety of volunteers, employees and service users alike.