

A Few Pointers On the Unpleasant Topic of Firing Volunteers

By Sarah Jane Rehnborg, Ph.D.

Associate Director for Planning and Development of the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service

LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin.

One of the greatest fears of those not experienced in working with volunteers is the misconception that volunteers cannot be fired. Although firing or removing a volunteer is clearly not a desirable task, it can be done, and indeed at times must be done. Furthermore, the staff and the other volunteers serving your organization deserve to be part of a work environment that honors good performance and addresses problematic situations. All of us are devalued when the behavior or performance of another person, even a well-meaning volunteer, is allowed to continue unchecked and unaddressed. For the good of the program and the morale of all the workers, problems must be addressed. However, just as human resource managers should have systems in place to address this possible eventuality, so should the manager of volunteers.

What leads to volunteer dismissal?

Before a brief review of the systems necessary to guide the process, let's look at the reasons for letting a volunteer go. Generally dismissal is a response to one of three areas of concern: performance problems, conduct problems, or economic problems. Performance problems generally relate to the quality of work, the quantity of work, the timeliness of the work performed, or the rate of improvement on a given work-related task. Conduct problems relate to behaviors such as the volunteers' attendance, dependability, and generally acceptable work behaviors such as honesty, and sobriety. Economic problems can also apply to the area of volunteerism. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, an organization that has experienced significant fiscal cuts resulting in staff lay-offs may not have a sufficient number of supervisors to facilitate the work of volunteers, or entire programs may be eliminated. In situations such as these volunteers too may fall prey to the same fiscal shortfalls that reduced the salaried workforce.

All of these issues should be addressed in the guidelines that govern the volunteer program. Conduct and performance problems should be considered and addressed via the volunteer's job description, and in the orientation and training provided to volunteers. Effective supervision should spot and address shortfalls before they grow into problems. Internal communications should be alerting all those in the organization to pending economic difficulties. In short, a well-managed program generally addresses most performance issues and should catch the vast majority of concerns before they develop into disciplinary nightmares.

What procedures should be in place?

Every agency should have in writing the behaviors that will simply not be tolerated under any circumstance. These are the behaviors that would result in immediate dismissal. Such behaviors may include entering the workplace with a firearm, loaded or not, regardless of any firearms license procured by the worker; coming to work under the influence of drugs; physical violence or threats; theft; or any other equally grievous behavior. These guidelines should be the same for both the salaried and the nonsalaried workforce. Again, this information should appear in the volunteer handbook and are generally reviewed in orientation sessions. Some agencies may include them in a contract that all volunteers sign.

In addition, your agency should outline a disciplinary process. Most processes involve a graduated process moving from verbal warning, to written warnings, suspension and finally dismissal. Each stage of such a process should involve a supervisory meeting where the behavior or the performance problem is addressed and an improvement plan is outlined. Critical to the success of the improvement plan is the thoughtful follow-up at designated intervals to review progress. In most cases the verbal warning and initial supervisory session is sufficient to correct the problem. In more intractable situations, the director will find that additional steps must be taken.

If your agency or organization has a human resources office, you would be well advised to meet with your personnel manager and pattern the system you develop for volunteers to parallel the employee grievance system.

But what if you actually have to fire a volunteer?

James Autry, in his wonderful essay "The Caring Confrontation" concludes that "there's just one way to fire someone: with love and support and deep, deep regret. You must try as much as possible to make the act itself a caring confrontation." (p. 113, *Love and Profit: The Art of Caring Leadership*). With this in mind, one ought never fire someone when you are angry, or emotionally upset; without (if at all possible) having worked through your grievance process with great care and attention; and finally without a third party available to witness the exchange. While firing an employee is far more likely to be litigious than firing a volunteer, firing a volunteer is tantamount to telling the person that the "gift" of him or herself made to your organization is not sufficient.

So if you find that you must ask a volunteer to leave, here are a few guidelines, based in part of the work of Steve McCurley and Sue Vineyard (see bibliography) that should assist you with this caring confrontation:

1. Schedule a meeting with the person, in a private setting.
2. Be prepared. The time for counsel is long past. The person is likely not going to be happy with anything you say. This is not a time for winning friends. There is nothing left to debate. Rather, plan what you are going to say, possibly script your comments, and stay on task. Preparation also includes informing your supervisor of the situation, and the rationale for the action.
3. Have a third person in the room with you, preferably someone of the same sex as the person

being terminated. This person does not need to say anything and serves as a witness to the situation.

4. State the reasons for the termination and present them in writing. Allow the person to sign the document indicating they understand what is being said.
5. Focus any comments on the performance and avoid personal issues or value comments.
6. Discuss any recommendations for future volunteer work with the person. This may include whether and under what conditions the person may return and volunteer at your agency.
7. Secure the return of any keys, parking passes, name tags, or other work-related items from the person before you conclude the meeting.
8. Current personnel practices generally include escorting the person from the premises following the meeting.
9. Do everything you can to stay calm. In addition to staying calm say only what needs to be said and nothing more. It is easy to start talking excessively when nervous and this could lead to confusion, mixed messages or incorrect interpretations of your actions.
10. Document the meeting. If possible, have your witness sign your report.
11. Be sure to exercise damage control. If the volunteer has friends among other volunteers you may want to let his or her friends know that the volunteer will not be returning. Although you must protect the confidentiality of the person let go, you also want to stem the tide of gossip and mis-information.
12. Do not provide a positive letter of reference for the fired volunteer.

"This material was found on Serviceleader.org, a web site of the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin." If you have questions, please contact Bailey Cool at baileyc Cool@austin.utexas.edu.

