

TERMINATE OR TOLERATE? Dealing With a Problem Volunteer

One of the most disturbing aspects of managing volunteer programs is the unfortunate incidence of volunteers who become problems. Often the circumstances surrounding these situations are founded in the volunteer. On the other hand, many of the situations are preventable with good volunteer management practices. The good news is that firing a volunteer is possible. While firing is not appropriate for dealing with the often annoying volunteer or even the seriously disruptive volunteer, it is appropriate for dysfunctional volunteers.

This paper will discuss when termination is needed, what supervisory details need to be addressed and issues to consider related to impact of termination. The advisory leader role will be used in examples because they are perhaps the most distinguished and influential volunteers in the Extension system. The principles and practices however, apply to any volunteer role or volunteer at any level in the organization.

In Extension we are prone to be grateful to any volunteer who walks into the office wanting to help. We are so problem oriented, we tend to think we can fix any problem. Not always true. McCurley and Vineyard, 1998, offer the following myths:

Myths about Problem Volunteers

1. *If I ignore the problem it will go away.*
The problem volunteer may recede from the limelight, but will still be lurking and possibly be harder to identify at a later time.
2. *No one else notices*
Particularly, the complaining volunteer will be noticed. No need to be a martyr when it does not help the situation.
3. *I can fix a dysfunctional person.*
This is not in the volunteer manager's job description and other volunteers will eventually resent the time and energy drain taken from their legitimate issues.
4. *There's good in everyone...we just need to give them time to show it.*
Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged that there are evil, nasty people who enjoy causing others to be hurt. Allowing them to continue is harmful to the program.
5. *A confrontation will make things worse. They might get mad.*
The best interest of the program is the first consideration. The volunteer manager has to maintain control.
6. *A confrontation might result in the volunteer leaving and if they do, the program will fall apart.*
If this is true, deeper problems than the one problem volunteer exist.
7. *If I'm a truly caring person, I can handle all the people who are problems.*
Volunteer managers do not have to be "saints". All the feel-good people cannot solve problems caused by mean-spirited people.
8. *Everyone wants to be fixed.*

Not true. Some people enjoy the attention they get or watching the chaos they create.

The myths address “problem volunteers” who need to be dealt with but not necessarily “fired”. There are books written about various strategies to handle the confrontational volunteer, the whining volunteer, the “bully” volunteer and others. This paper will not address this large group of problems. What it will address are the valid reasons to “fire” a volunteer. There are three reasons that are supported in the literature:

Competency Issues

Unfortunately, there are instances when orientation and competency-based training over time still fail to help a volunteer perform the role acceptably. Another possibility McCurley, 1996, refers to is motivation. Is the volunteer able, but just not motivated? Or is he motivated, but unskilled. In some cases, volunteers outgrow the job they are in, and do not want someone else doing the job. An example is an advisory leader who did not come to meetings for two years, but when a new member joined the council, he staked out his geographic territory in no uncertain terms. In such cases, volunteers fill a space that needs to be occupied by an active volunteer.

With competency issues, the volunteer manager must do orientation training and other needed training. It is not enough to just offer training either. Documentation of the volunteer’s attendance at orientation and competency training is critical evidence the volunteer manager may need to produce. Volunteers may have either rejected training opportunities or something in their personal situation may have impacted performance on the job.

Fulfillment of Role Issues

When the volunteer goes beyond the role they have been given, there may be justification for firing. Examples include volunteers who do things they are not authorized to do. In these cases, while they may mean no harm, if they are not properly trained, they can absolutely do harm. Examples include the advisory leader who meddles in faculty personnel issues, or the leader who represents Extension inappropriately with community groups.

With these issues, the job description and more specifically, the position description is a key management tool. The job description should be discussed in orientation training with the new volunteer. A good way to confirm their understanding of the role is to modify the job description to create a position description for each volunteer which they sign at the conclusion of the session. The job description should outline the goals, objectives, and performance measures of the job.

Behavior Issues

Even the best application and screening processes can fail to detect someone who for whatever reason, makes poor judgement decisions relative to personal actions. The volunteer who suddenly becomes abusive, disrespectful of authority, or hostile may be having personal issues to deal with that have nothing to do with the volunteer job. These volunteers can be harmful to the program and to individuals in the program. In some of

these type situations the volunteer may be acting different from their normal pattern. Sometimes these type behaviors become normal over time and they may be intentional. The best management practice in these situations is documentation and dealing with incidents as they occur. For some of these situations, termination is the best alternative for the good of the program.

Supervisory Responsibilities

Terminating volunteers is possible, but should probably be employed only if the situation is very detrimental to the organization and after all other alternatives have been explored. Consider the following options:

- Re-assigning to another volunteer role. For example, they may perform well in a different program area or on a program committee rather than the overall council level.
- Referring to another agency or organization.
- Recognize and retire them from the volunteer role.
- Insist on re-charge time when they are rotated out of their position for a specified period of time.

In county Extension programs, the County Director is ultimately responsible for making sure faculty utilize best volunteer management practices. Appendix A is a Scenario of a Volunteer Dismissal. McCurley and Lynch, 1996, suggest that volunteer managers develop a system for making firing decisions. Elements of a good system include:

1. Forewarning / notice
 - Personnel policies regarding employment of volunteers including probation, suspension, and termination.
 - A volunteer application and screening process and operating procedures to guide informing new volunteers about policies.
 - A job description and mechanism for explaining the job requirements and unacceptable behavior. Orientation and competency based training with documentation of attendance is important.
2. Investigation / determination
 - Having a clearly defined process for conducting a fair investigation.
 - Being consistent with policies of the Personnel Department of the organization.
3. Application
 - Follow-through on enforcing the system.
 - Treat all volunteers equitably.
 - Providing a peer-review mechanism so decisions are not personal.

Impacts of Firing Decisions

Dealing with problem volunteers is time consuming, emotionally draining, and potentially detrimental to the program. McCurley and Lynch, 1996 note two benefits of having a firing system in place:

1. The right decision is more likely to be made.

2. A case for the termination is developed. This can help diffuse negative impact in the community or even externally. Often, the volunteer will decide voluntarily to resign rather than face the inevitable.

In terms of replacing advisory leaders on an advisory council, there is a Checklist of Questions attached in Appendix B. This checklist addresses additional volunteer management practices that are fundamental. Appendix C offers Strategies to Re-Staff an Advisory Council. It is not uncommon for a new County Director to inherit an Advisory Council that is predominately Extension “family, older volunteers with a traditional view of Extension programs, and a few influential members who do not come to meetings. Starting completely over is desirable, but not always possible considering the political nature of most counties.

Summary of Best Management Practices

While firing a volunteer is not easy or pleasant, it can be done. Better yet, is to use the best volunteer management practices referenced in this paper. They are:

- Develop a system for handling problem volunteers.
- Use clearly written job descriptions.
- Use orientation training to detail the job description and the processes for removal.
- Conduct competency based training.
- Have group operating procedures that specify member expectations.
- Provide volunteers with evaluation and regular feedback on performance.

References:

Lee, Frances Jarene with Julia M. Catagnus. 1999. What we learned (the hard way) about supervising volunteers: an action guide for making your job easier. Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.

McCurley, Steve and Rick Lynch. 1996. Volunteer management: mobilizing all the resources of the community. Heritage Arts Publishing, Downers Grove, IL., pp. 105-110.

McCurley, Steve and Sue Vineyard. 1998. Handling problem volunteers. Heritage Arts Publishing, Downers Grove, IL pp. 41-52.