

# DEALING WITH DIFFICULT VOLUNTEERS

BY  
MARILYN  
MACKENZIE

*Part of the Volunteer Management Series of VMSystems*

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# Introduction

## DEALING WITH DIFFICULT VOLUNTEERS

**V**olunteer managers of the world UNITE! You have nothing to lose but your guilt! This monograph is dedicated to your liberation. Give yourself permission to admit that occasionally (oh, yes, very occasionally) you feel discouragement, frustration, perhaps even anger with the volunteers you manage.

As a profession, we hold dear the belief that volunteering is supposed to be fun. It's supposed to be a pleasurable, positive experience. As a colleague of mine asserts, voluntary agencies suffer from "terminal niceness." We smile...a lot. We welcome and support struggling efforts to contribute. No gift too small, no challenge too large. We bend over backwards to avoid unpleasantness. When it becomes evident that we can't go under, over or around it, we as managers of volunteers feel we have failed. It's clear that the profession attracts caring folk - like us - who when pushed to the limit, seem able to give even more. It's because we care that we take responsibility for the failure of others. Let's be honest. Some volunteers are darned difficult. Solomon, Confucius, and Erma Bombeck working as a team couldn't handle them any better than we do!

Very often the manager of volunteers is working in isolation, the only person in the agency or institution charged with the responsibility for the nature of volunteers. It's lonely. With no one to talk to, no one to learn from, there is a tendency to internalize responsibility-to build an elaborate network of "if only I did" or "perhaps I should have" when we've really done your best.

You're not alone. Whether you manage a team of six seniors on alternate Tuesdays, or supervise an army of young people full time for a handsome salary, you'll find some volunteer behaviors difficult to deal with. The purpose of this monograph is to give you a tool kit from which to draw strategies that work for you. If a piece of advice doesn't feel right or makes you feel phony or just seems dumb to you, don't use it. Adapt it, adopt it or discard it. There are some general principles that you can apply to handle any situation when you feel your blood pressure rising, your sweet temperament evaporating and your patience strained.

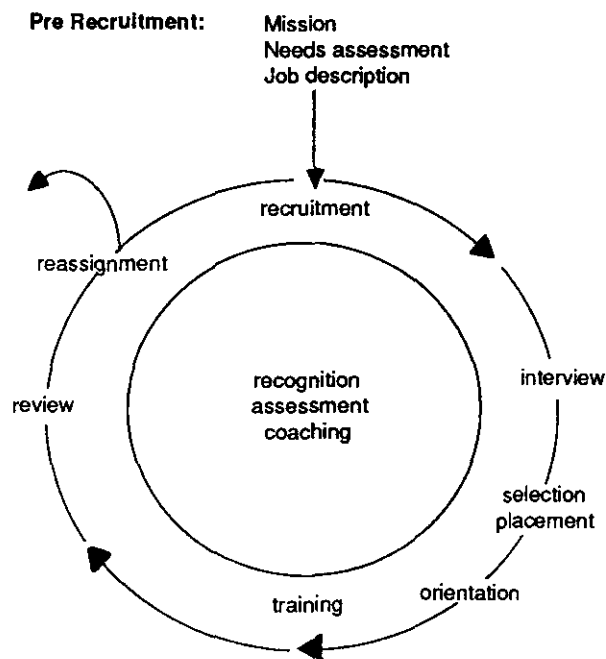
# Chapter 1

## THE VOLUNTEER RETENTION CYCLE

It would not be honest to suggest that all problems with volunteers are of their own making. Many of the problems we face as managers of volunteers can be reduced or eliminated by attention to the Volunteer Retention Cycle - the application of sound people principles. Volunteers have the right to expect that we have put the systems in place to assure that volunteering will be crafted with the best care, concern and attention we can offer.

The title of this model has been carefully chosen. I have emphasized *retention* of volunteers because I believe there are volunteers out there today interested and available to programs that are well run and that offer meaningful tasks for the volunteer to do. Our task as managers is to create a climate where volunteers want to stay. This is the essence of successful volunteer management.

### VOLUNTEER RETENTION CYCLE



Look first, at the overall design of the model - it is a pair of continuous circles, one within the other. The outer circle starts at the top with pre-recruitment activities. It revolves through the phases of recruitment, interviewing, placement and selection, followed closely by orientation, an extended phase called training that may be made up of several discrete parts, with a final review phase that may lead to re-assignment or a mutually agreed upon departure. The inner circle forms a core or the bedrock foundation for all other activities. It suggests an ongoing commitment to the volunteer recognition, coaching, and personal and program assessment. To paraphrase a favorite old spiritual, "the big wheel moves by planning and the little wheel moves through the personal commitment of the volunteer manager to make it happen."

Let's look at the components of the model in depth. Where can activities by the volunteer manager head off or at least lessen people problems?

### PRE-RECRUITMENT

It's tempting to suggest that volunteer management starts with recruitment. "All we need are bodies. Just give me bodies and I can conquer the world." It ain't so. A preoccupation with only recruitment is the 'quick fix' solution for a volunteer program in trouble and it ends up creating more trouble.

Before volunteers are introduced into any agency, a lot of ground work must be done. The time spent here will reap benefits and lessen problems later despite administrative urgings 'to get on with it.'

Managers of volunteers are like gardeners. Recruiting without preparation is like planting a delicate rose in hard and unfriendly soil. The pre-recruitment phase of the Volunteer Retention Cycle is a period of preparing the soil - determining what the earth needs to allow growth to flourish, removing rocks or boulders that clutter or block the plant, pulling the weeds that drain the plant's strength and finally spreading a lot of fertilizer. This takes time. In my first job, my employer suggested that he wanted the volunteer ranks to swell from one lonely soul to one thousand in my first year. Bright-eyed and innocent, I agreed. No amount of explanation could convince him that twenty committed folk at year end were a suitable substitute for the army he had envisioned.

The development of any volunteer program is predicated on a needs assessment confirming that:

- the service is needed by clients
- it fits the organization's mission and mandate
- it can ethically and safely be delivered by volunteers
- an effective service is not currently available from another agency

In the pre-recruitment phase, the manager is building commitment to the volunteer program. She/he is both missionary and warrior, spreading the good news about the benefits of involving volunteers and eliminating barriers to their effective service. She/he must convince the Board, the staff, clients, and even the volunteers themselves that they have an essential role to play. Trying to introduce volunteers to a program without the whole-hearted support of Board and staff is simply not worth it.<sup>1</sup> Another common mistake made by neophyte volunteer managers is to start recruitment campaigns before they really understand the tasks to be done. "If you can draw breath, there's a place for you at our agency. Come on down!" And the amazing thing is that people do come but they don't stay. Sue Vineyard, a well-known authority on volunteer management, has coined the Eleventh Commandment, "Thou shalt get thy silly act together."<sup>2</sup>

A volunteer can't help but fail if:

- She/he doesn't know what you want him/her to do
- Neither do you

This blinding flash of the obvious is violated more often than you would imagine.

When starting a service from scratch, job descriptions must be flexible and fluid. Be sure to stamp draft on them and encourage those working with you to comment, criticize, enhance, eliminate, and reorganize 'draft' job descriptions. When the program is ongoing and job descriptions are being developed (at last!) consult widely with those doing the tasks before committing responsibilities to paper. Who knows better than the person doing the job what needs to be done? Difficulties arise when the volunteer manager and the senior volunteers decide in the privacy of their basement office that this will be done "just so." Involving volunteers now in the decisions that will affect them will build commitment to the changes proposed and will reduce resistance to final decisions.

## RECRUITMENT

There is a magic formula that will assure you volunteers who are effective, are satisfied with their role, and who will stay with you. It is:

☞ *"the right volunteer for the right job at the right time"*

Gone are the days when any body will do. Today the talk is of 'focused recruitment,' going after those people with the skills, attitudes and knowledge you want to do the job right.

Gone are the days of the all-purpose poster, tacked in the already crowded notice board of the laundromat: Urgently Needed, Volunteers! No Experience Necessary! Today what works are more selective strategies. For example, the cleverly crafted human interest stories in the trade papers are more likely to encourage retired teachers to

become literacy tutors or carpenters to build non-profit day care playgrounds.

The steps to effective recruitment:

1. Know the job to be done.
2. Determine the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to get the job done right.
3. Go where you'll find the people who possess those attributes.
4. Ask them to help you.

Not everyone will say "yes", but the one that does will be right for the job you have in mind. It's like buying a box of chocolates. If you only enjoy the hard centers, why buy the assorted variety? Specialize, go for what you want!

When volunteers say "no", your first reaction is to cajole, to plead, (yes, even to beg). Don't! Don't take a 'no' as a defeat for your persuasive powers. It may be an honest reflection of the person's time, availability and interest. A volunteer saddled with an obligation that he doesn't want but feels obligated to take is a recipe for disaster. Unsettling as it may be, it's better to have no one at all in the position than to have someone who holds the title and does nothing. (More on this later.) Perhaps workload or family demands means at this time that the volunteer won't help you. Leave the door open for a follow-up call if interest is expressed.

#### INTERVIEW

There's real reluctance in the volunteer community to interview prospective volunteers:

- "I don't have time to interview."
- "It's too much like work."
- "I feel uncomfortable about interviewing."

Some of the anxiety about interviewing can be reduced if you think of it as Marlene Wilson suggests: "an interview is a chat with a purpose."<sup>3</sup> This opportunity to get to know the volunteers, their dreams, their hopes, their loves and their

hates, is invaluable in establishing a relationship that is less troubled.

Many so-called difficult volunteers never clearly understand what it is they are to do, how they are to do it or why they are there. Similarly, many opportunities to work with volunteers creatively, to allow them to stretch and grow, to respond to challenge, are lost because the volunteer manager isn't aware of the volunteer's dreams or interests. Because you value the volunteer and their contribution, take the time to talk to them. Be assured that their volunteer experience will be the best it can be.

#### PLACEMENT AND SELECTION

You can say "No" and sometimes you must. Even if the answers seem right, if you have doubts about placing a volunteer, don't do it. Check the references, ask for a second interview, have a colleague join you in a second interview. You have a responsibility to protect the clients you serve, and to uphold the reputation of the agency you represent. Don't lose sight of these responsibilities in an effort to place a volunteer who is 'needful.' Likely you are programming that poor soul for failure. You may be reinforcing their worst fears by putting them into a position that is not appropriate.

One of my students shared this story. She had completed an interview with a man interested in volunteering in probation services. Something didn't seem right. She couldn't put her finger on it but there was an unexplained tension in the room. Instead of confirming his placement, she asked the man to return the following day. At the door he turned and said casually, "You don't mind, do you? When I work with *these people*, I like to carry my gun." He revealed a small hand gun.

A final story to illustrate the importance of appropriate placement. A brand new volunteer manager in a psychiatric setting was approached by a recently discharged patient from the same institution. She wanted 'desperately' to volunteer in the



coffee shop. Although the former patient was slow to act, poor at making change and quick to tears, the coordinator felt obligated to take her on. The staff, patients and visitors complained. The volunteer spent most of her assignment weeping in the coordinator's office and the coffee shop service suffered.

If an appropriate placement cannot be found in your agency (and I hasten to suggest this is a rare occurrence) there are other opportunities for service. Potential volunteers might be directed to the local Voluntary Action Centre. A wide variety of volunteer placements are available there. It helps to make the phone call to alert the Centre while the volunteer is seated in your office.

#### ORIENTATION

Here is another opportunity to clarify your expectations of the volunteers so that miscommunication can be eliminated and problems can be short circuited. The K.I.S.S. - keep it sweet and simple - principle should be liberally applied. One of the most effective orientation strategies is using a 'buddy' or 'mentor', a volunteer who likes what she/he's doing and who does it well.

There's a triple bonus here. The new recruit has an on-the-job role model to emulate. The more established volunteer is rewarded for doing well (a special kind of recognition.) And the volunteer manager is freed up from doing long formal orientation sessions.

Please note that orientation should begin as soon as possible. Some authors suggest it begins with the first contact between the volunteer and agency. Orientation can't be done just once annually. Better to simplify it and offer it whenever a new volunteer is recruited.

#### TRAINING

The purpose for training is better job performance and increased personal satisfaction. Both of these

goals reduce the likelihood of problems in the managing of volunteers. Training does not take place only in the classroom with chairs in neat rows.

One of the most useful concepts of training is that of the 'two minute trainer.'<sup>4</sup> When you sense a 'teachable moment', present your information in three to five clear, concise and easy to remember steps. Ask the volunteer to review the steps as he applies them. Support the new behavior with encouragement and praise.

#### REVIEW/REASSIGNMENT

Yes, Virginia, there is a life after recruitment! Few volunteers are prepared to make a life-long commitment to the task they have agreed to do. Volunteers are looking for short term projects with a clearly defined beginning and end. Some may welcome a chance to tackle a new task. Others may be ready to move on. Accepting the volunteer's decision to leave is sometimes difficult.

"What have I done wrong?" "Don't leave now, I've just got you trained!" "Who will replace you?" These are questions that will leap to your lips. Remember, a volunteer who had a good experience with your agency will be an effective 'friend raiser'<sup>5</sup> for your organization in the community.

When volunteers decide to leave:

1. *Smile* bravely
2. Thank them for contributing whatever it was they did best
3. Encourage them to continue to be the best they can be wherever they go

You're in the business of empowerment - not just within the walls of your agency but for the larger community. The volunteer you've trained and nurtured will go on to strengthen other agencies. In time, you may benefit from the work of a colleague who, like you, has invested time, effort and caring, with a volunteer who now wants to come to your agency.

## COACHING, ASSESSMENT, AND RECOGNITION

These elements of the core are so interwoven, it's difficult to determine where one ends and the other begins. They are not discreet events that take place on a line but are dynamic and continuing responses to the events that make up the volunteer's life, both within the agency and without.

I am increasingly committed to the notion of the volunteer manager as coach rather than supervisor. A coach is someone who can help you do something that you cannot do by yourself. The coaching relationship is one of equals. The coach sets standards, assists in the development of strategies, adjusts those strategies to accomplish the goals, but the doing is the responsibility of the volunteer. The volunteer may surpass the coach in actual skill performance or achievement, but it is the coach that has provided the guidance to allow this to happen.

Contrast this with the concept of a supervisor. Even in the most enlightened relationship, it is the supervisor who is in charge, who is responsible and ultimately accountable for the activity. When volunteers are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions, they do act more responsibly. When volunteers believe that any failure to act on their part will be compensated for by the manager, they are less likely to act responsibly.

*Assessment* as part of the central core suggests an on-going process of checking and re-checking. The role of the manager is to pose questions:

- How are we doing?
- How does it feel?
- What suggestions do you have at this point?
- How can I be helpful?
- What are our next steps?

This approach is more fruitful and less threatening than the traditional terminal evaluation that asks the questions "how come it didn't work?" or "why did *you* do it wrong?" The ongoing assessment

allows the volunteer to determine what changes need to be put in place to achieve the desired result. It programs volunteers for success, not failure. Its importance in reducing or eliminating problems cannot be overstressed. Volunteers urgently need the 'guideposts' that ongoing assessment provides.

Shake up your old beliefs about recognition. It isn't just the annual dinner where the pins, plaques (or, as a boss of mine frequently misspelled them - the plagues) and certificates are given out. Recognition is part of the central core, an ongoing process as fundamental to managing as oxygen is to breathing. When babies are learning to walk, we don't wait until they enter the Boston Marathon before we encourage them. They pull themselves up, we squeal in delight. They fall, we pick them up, hug them, and urge them on. We call grandma. We hold them by the hand.

It should be the same for the volunteer. Any step toward the goal is worthy of praise. (Hugs are all right, too!) Keep it focused on specific behavior that is appropriate.

Examples of specific recognition are:

- "A very thorough report"
- "You've developed a splendid team"
- "A creative plan for fundraising"

Look for opportunities to find your volunteers "doing something right."<sup>6</sup>

As a volunteer manager you can help volunteers grow and develop in your program if you pay attention to all the elements of the Volunteer Retention Cycle. You can eliminate or reduce problems before they start. Volunteers deserve no less than your best efforts to insure that they have:

- A task that is important to the cause.
- A feeling that their special skills and talents are needed.
- A sense that they are valued as unique and worthwhile individuals.

## Chapter 2

# WHAT NOW? HELP FOR DIFFICULT VOLUNTEERS

The following are case studies of difficult volunteers shared with me by students, workshop participants, and harried colleagues. Perhaps you'll recognize someone you've puzzled over.

### THE INEXPERIENCED

*Wanda Gleek* has just retired from her job as a computer specialist. She was a very successful analyst and executive with her company. She has just become a volunteer with your agency, the Turkey Junction Children's Aid Society. Wanda has a thousand suggestions for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Turkey Junction C.A.S. She's sending pink memos to everyone from the janitor to the President about 'tightening up operations.' Your office has been flooded with calls and complaints. "Who is this woman?", they ask.

You are the volunteer coordinator at Turkey Junction C.A.S. How did you handle Wanda? Stop for a moment to consider your response.

Wanda's enthusiasm for change must be tempered with knowledge of the organization, its procedures and processes. Help Wanda to set realistic goals for change, working with the people and systems in place rather than alienating everyone with suggestions they can't or won't support.

Link Wanda with a supportive understanding 'buddy' who is not defensive about programs and policies. You want someone who will listen to

Wanda's ideas and will help her achieve the goals that are realistic. So often when we are 'turned off' by someone's presentation style, we fail to listen and value suggestions that are truly brilliant. When Wanda has a brilliant idea, her buddy along with you can help her implement it by explaining the most appropriate route to get it accepted.

Wanda may well enjoy working with your policies and procedures manual. Encourage her to read it and to participate in its revision, working through the proper channels. Be clear about job expectations and limitations - "You'll have some input but of course, majority rules."

Stress the value of teamwork - staff and volunteer, peer to peer. Help Wanda recognize that in the voluntary sector most decisions are made by consensus. Support Wanda in working within the system. Find her doing something right.

You may want to review Wanda's suggestions before they are sent forward. Set up dates for getting back to you, checkpoints on her achievements. In the early stages of her volunteer work you may need to make the final decisions while she offers the recommendations. As she matures in the organization, give her increasing responsibility for taking new ideas forward.

### THE DISCOURAGER

*Ethel Throttlebrush* has an opinion on everything. Why, she practically founded the Blushing Meadows Chapter of the Cancer Society. Armed with brownies, Ethel attends every meeting of the chapter

executive even though she hasn't held an official position with the chapter for seven years. Whenever a new idea is brought forward, Ethel claims, "We tried it already and it didn't work." New volunteers are very intimidated by Ethel, and recruitment efforts are getting harder and harder.

You are the President of the Blushing Meadows Chapter of the Cancer Society. How would you handle Ethel?

Every volunteer organization has its Ethel and her impact can be devastating. Ethel is truly committed to what's best for the agency, but she believes only she knows what 'best' is. Try to encourage her to use her knowledge of past events to prevent problems from recurring. "Tell us what it was that didn't work last time." Then involve the group in coming up with positive suggestions.

Praise Ethel for positive helpful suggestions. A clear statement that lets Ethel know how you feel when she's negative may be helpful - "Ethel, I feel so discouraged when you say that..." Remember to support new members for they will also be reacting to Ethel's negative behaviors. Actively seek out their opinions. Let the group members know that their points of view are welcomed.

If Ethel continues to depress and discourage the group, a peer who really cares about her should take her aside and outline the impact of her behavior. It may be necessary to suggest a project outside the group of a period of 'respite.' Be sure to couple any move out with recognition of the past achievements Ethel has had. This is a grand time for an article in the paper, an award, a banquet with Ethel as guest of honor.

Two bylaws might be put in place to prevent this situation from happening again. The first is a term of office provision. Many groups have instituted the 'two years on the Board, one year off' concept to allow new ideas and new leadership to surface. The second that might be helpful is a policy that only Board members holding office can attend Board meetings.

## THE FOUNDER

The Founder is a subset of the Discourager. As an organization matures and changes, often it is a founder who resists the loss of power and control. A founder, well respected by all, is out of step with the new reality of the organization. This problem reaches its peak when staff are first hired. It is a difficult time for all. The staff person must convince the founder that staff commitment to the organization is genuine and complete. They must be seen to operate only with the best interests of the organization at heart. Recognize that the founder has been functioning in the nurturing role and must now abandon that role as the organization grows up.

## THE ABDICRAT

*Rob Gassy* is the Fund Raising Chair for the Bellowing Rivers Cooperative Nursery School and Daycare. Rob was eager to be appointed. People were anticipating a very vigorous and innovative campaign because Rob was full of good ideas and seemed eager to take on added responsibility. It seems now that something has gone wrong. The major fund raising event is only four months away and no one's heard from him about his plans. Worse still, Rob isn't coming to meetings. When asked, Rob says, "Everything's under control. I've got it all under control."

You are on the executive of the Bellowing Rivers Co-op. How would you handle Rob?

Rob needs help. He must make a decision to leave the position or to produce results. He should be given an opportunity to gracefully withdraw - "Rob, are you still interested in being our Fund Raising Chair? Has your situation changed?" If he claims continued interest, use the job description to outline your expectations. He may not know how to pull a committee together or what information should be reported when.

Help Rob set realistic goals and target dates with specific responsibilities assigned to other individuals. If possible, use past written plans to give him direction. The past Fund Raising Chair may be prepared to meet with Rob as an advisor to firm up these plans. A strong vice-chair is helpful. A member of the executive may need to assume this role if no one else is available. Be sure to follow up on target dates with a phone call.

Rob should be giving monthly reports to the executive even if he can't attend in person. It's a good policy to have for all committee chairs. Rob may be uncomfortable or unable to delegate. Help him by modeling good behavior yourselves. Prompt him with questions that suggest sharing the workload. "How can this task be broken down to make it more manageable?" "Who on your committee is best suited to handle this part of the task?"

To prevent this happening again, ask Rob to provide sample plans of past fund raising or similar projects. Check references with special concern for his ability to get a task done and to delegate. Build into the job description target dates and indicators for success. Meet with him prior to his assignment. Let him know what's expected about reports and meeting attendance.

#### THE PROCRASTINATOR

The Procrastinator is a milder version of the Abdicrat. The trick with Procrastinators is to get them started. Then they are fine. Be clear about expectations and checkpoints. Do any follow up promised so that they know you know when work is being put off.

#### THE FANTASYLAND VOLUNTEER

*Billy Wonder* wants to be Publicity Chair for the Riot River Conservation Committee. The Committee has been working hard to establish its reputation as a credible citizens' action group, by presenting papers to government and lobbying both media and politicians about the wisdom of

protecting parkland from the pressures of high density housing. Billy has no background in advocacy or public relations although he has worked hard for the group distributing pamphlets. You know from your personal correspondence that Billy can't write well. He knows the Publicity Chair is vacant and he really wants it.

You are the Chair of the Nominating Committee for the Riot River Conservation Committee. How might you best resolve this issue?

Not enough value is placed on the role of the Nominating Committee. It has the power to shape the future. As the Chair of the Nominating Committee, you have an obligation to get the right volunteer for the right job at the right time. You are looking for specific skills, knowledge and attitudes related to publicity in your Publicity Chair. Billy doesn't have a clear picture of his own skills or those of the task he is offering to do. He needs to see a clear job description that would outline expectations: fluency in written and oral communication, knowledge of local media and media personalities, experience with advocacy issues. Spend time with him outlining his skills and comparing them to the job description. Help him feel good about his past accomplishments and identified skills. Talk about where they might be used in the organization.

You might have him fill out an application form that asked for past experience in this field. It is reasonable to expect some. You might request references that would attest to his skill in Public Relations. You would be doing him a favor if you redirect him to another position within the Chapter. If he insists on the Publicity Committee, assign him as a Vice-Chair to work with a more skilled volunteer. Be honest that he currently doesn't have the skills necessary for chairing. If he aspires to the Chair, suggest courses at a local college, work with outside experts, or books that may sharpen his skills.

In balancing organizational needs and volunteer needs, you must not compromise the quality of service you deliver.

## THE TIMID MOUSE

*Melissa Meek* is very nervous about her role as Gift Shop Coordinator at Beaver Creek Memorial Hospital. Why, it's the first time she ever has been a coordinator despite six years at the Gift Shop as a competent, well-liked volunteer. Now Melissa can't make a decision without calling you. She even telephones you at home to plot out her next gift shop order. She's in your office first thing every morning with a list of unresolved questions, even when the answers seem obvious. Your patience is wearing thin.

You are the Volunteer Manager at Beaver Creek Memorial. How can you help Melissa become a more effective Coordinator?

Melissa needs clear directions, guidelines to help her complete her work. A thorough job description is critical at this time. Be sure to sit down with Melissa when you are undisturbed to talk through the job description. Try to elicit her concerns, her potential areas of difficulty, so that you can help her plan strategies for avoiding the problems she fears. It may be helpful to outline daily responsibilities at first. Write a 'to do list' together. You may want to develop some flow charts that break large tasks into smaller ones with due dates for performance review. Try to give her some tasks that she can take full responsibility for without checking back. For others you may encourage her to bring forward a series of recommendations that you and she can decide upon together. If the plans are incomplete try to have her identify the needed changes. Ask questions like "What will happen if we do this?", or "What other alternatives might one consider?" Praise all efforts at independent action.

Encourage her to make lists of the pros and cons of actions that she will present, in writing first and later, verbally. You are training her to be an effective decision maker: gathering relevant data, drawing up a list of alternatives, identifying factors that influence choice, selecting one, and finally making the decision. Pose questions that are

non-threatening - "Would you handle it that way again? What changes would you make? What are you pleased with?" Reflect on the progress she has made and your growing sense of confidence that she can make independent judgements. Share with her some of your decisions and how you reached them. When appropriate, ask her advice. This is truly evidence of your confidence in her.

## THE DICTATOR

*Maudie Schweppes* is the Education Chair for the Redneck Chapter of Planned Parenthood. Maudie is always eager to have new volunteers to help her implement the program, but then she criticizes and complains about their efforts. "If you want to get something done right, you have to do it yourself," is Maudie's motto.

Poor Maudie is so, so busy. She's got big ideas but not much gets done because the job is too big. Now The Redneck Journal, is criticizing the failure of Planned Parenthood to deliver expected service to the community.

You are the Executive Director of the Redneck Chapter of Planned Parenthood. How would you handle Maudie?

Maudie feels a strong sense of ownership of 'her' program. She may broaden her outlook if she recognizes that part of her responsibility is to develop the volunteers with whom she works. Many volunteers believe that delegation is a sign of failure, not strength. Maudie needs lots of encouragement when she does try to delegate. If she clearly accepts that the purpose<sup>7</sup> of her role is the development of a team, she may allow this to happen. The job description is the tool needed to outline her responsibility. Stress the benefit of teamwork - a broader delivery of service, more manageable task assignments, a sense of self satisfaction when a job can be done well, and finally an easier time of it when recruiting a replacement for Maudie.

Maudie has great ideas. Let her know you think she's great and has lots to share. You may win her support if you can help her implement her great ideas to a successful conclusion. You must be a good role model yourself. To assist Maudie as she begins to delegate, pose nonthreatening questions such as "Who might have the skills needed to get this job done?"

She may not realize that the task can be broken down into smaller parts. Again, stress volunteer development. "How can we help others learn the ropes?" Help Maudie identify component parts of tasks. Maudie's team will need lots of encouragement to stick with her. Try not to create a barrier between Maudie and her team by admitting she can be hard to work with. Give the same information to both sides of the partnership. Praise any efforts at team planning and implementation. It's hard work at first but reaps big benefits in personal satisfaction and growth.

#### THE DISAFFECTED

*Gloria Semple* just doesn't enjoy working for the Swamptree Little League. No one can understand why she stays with it. Her own boys are grown up and moved away, but Gloria keeps turning up every spring. Gloria is always complaining about the coaches, the sponsors and especially the League organizers. They are "stupid, pig-headed men." Gloria can always be heard in the stands explaining how to duck the rules so carefully considered by the League Executive. When something goes wrong, Gloria seems almost pleased - "I told you so. They don't know anything!"

You are the President of the Swamptree Little League. How would you handle Gloria?

Even Gloria herself may not understand why she continues to volunteer for the Swamptree League. Gloria must be told how her comments will influence others, especially newcomers. "I worry when I hear you criticize the coaches."

Gloria's concerns may never have received a proper hearing because people find her so negative. You should act quickly when Gloria suggests that policy can be ignored or 'bent.' Gloria needs to understand the purpose of the rules and her significant effect as a role model for young players and their parents. Let her know she can provide leadership to the league. Try to support Gloria's positive behaviors, like volunteering on a hot dog day, doing team laundry, and scheduling the games with a friendly comment or hug. Enlist Gloria's support when developing new policy so that she will feel ownership of it. Be sure to talk with her.

Try to determine if Gloria's personal style is to be highly critical. How does Gloria react in other situations? Is she the same? If so, you may content yourself with the knowledge that everyone receives the same negative response.

## Chapter 3

# PRINCIPLES FOR DEALING WITH DIFFICULT VOLUNTEERS

1. **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.
2. **Don't try to confront difficult situations when you're so upset that you're not rational.** (Could this be you - 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.
3. **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 supervisor, the agency's president, or a senior volunteer) 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...".
4. **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 be by a third party, I usually will not act on it.

An example or two may prove helpful.

*Fred*, a new volunteer with the Teens Alive program, is seen to strike a child when she talks back to him.

☞ *Don't* - Run over to him and say "Are you crazy? We don't hit kids here."

☞ *Do* - After you have confirmed the child is startled, and nothing more, take him promptly out of the room and say, "I saw you strike that child. That behavior is totally unacceptable."

This may even be grounds for immediate dismissal, but Fred will have no doubt that the behavior was inappropriate.

*Effie*, a long-term volunteer with the Food Bank program, is seen putting food in her own handbag.

☞ *Don't* - Lecture Effie about the immorality of stealing from the poor.

☞ *Do* - Take Effie aside and let her know you saw her putting food in her purse. Wait for Effie's explanation before laying blame.



5. **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.

6. **Indicate a shared commitment to finding 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 work together to lessen or eliminate this problem?"

or

- "How can we develop a plan for dealing with this issue?"

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

## Chapter 4

# WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS: FIRING A VOLUNTEER

**F**iring is a last resort. You've applied all phases of the Volunteer Retention Cycle. You've confirmed your expectations, you've clarified the volunteer's role and assured yourself that they do understand it. You've given direction about how behavior can be changed to make it acceptable. You've tried to develop mutually acceptable plans.

You've tried to direct the volunteer to other projects, perhaps other agencies but nothing works. Time to bite the bullet:

1. If the safety of the client, other volunteers or the volunteer herself is at risk, act immediately. In most situations, however, try to collect at least three examples of unacceptable behavior that you personally have seen.
2. Outline your observation and the result. Don't use long words, beat around the bush, or try to soften the blow with additional phrases. You may want to schedule an interview for Friday afternoon to allow the volunteer time to work and collect her thoughts. Don't apologize for your decision. It should not be a surprise if you've done the preparatory work. Your decision was the result of the volunteer's behavior. Rehearsal helps:

- "Mr. Jackson, I must terminate your volunteer activity here at the Centre."
- "Mrs. Wilson, you can no longer deliver Meals on Wheels for the Clappings Corner United Way."

3. If possible, try to open doors to future volunteering opportunities. Can you in good conscience direct them to the Voluntary Action Centre. Could they come back after a period of treatment, or respite? Is there an opportunity to thank them for any aspect of their work?<sup>8,9</sup>

*Mr. Peepers* worked in the Horizon Community Health Clinic as a Volunteer Receptionist. He was a friendly sort, anxious to make patients feel welcome as they waited to see the Doctors.

Jim was Mr. Peepers' neighbour. Mr. Peepers was surprised to see him at the Clinic for he knew Jim had his own family physician of long standing. You can't imagine his shock when he saw the tentative diagnosis - AIDS. Mr. Peepers was bursting to tell someone. He phoned his wife. Just then the doctor walked in.

The failure to maintain confidentiality is a reason for instant dismissal in most settings. Volunteers are expected to sign an agreement to guard confidentiality and failing to do so is considered most serious. No first warning is expected.

In this situation your first responsibility is to be sure Mr. Peepers has in fact violated confidentiality. Second-hand information may be misinterpreted and unreliable. Has the Doctor really heard what he thought he did? If in doubt, you cannot discharge Mr. Peepers. But, if he confirms the Doctor's story, your task is clear.

In private - away from clients, other staff, and volunteers, remind Mr. Peepers of the importance of the confidentiality agreement he has signed. Let him know of your disappointment in his behavior and the necessity to terminate his volunteer services. Don't apologize for your action. You are responding appropriately. Identify skills you have seen Mr. Peepers demonstrate: "Mr. Peepers, you have a caring attitude with our patients. I wish you well in your future volunteer efforts."

If you genuinely believe this incident will not be repeated, you may want to suggest that Mr. Peepers consult a local Voluntary Action Center for a similar placement elsewhere. If you are unsure, don't make any further suggestions.

# SUMMARY

**D**ealing with volunteers can be difficult, but in most cases dealing with volunteers can be a source of joy, admiration and awe. As a manager, you have the opportunity to help volunteers accomplish their dreams, to feel good about their contribution to the community and to feel good about themselves.

This doesn't just happen. You as a volunteer manager must work at it. You must put in place the systems that encourage it. You must nurture the behaviors that support it and you must handle effectively the conditions that threaten it.

The purpose of this monograph is to suggest how you might begin this process. You have many allies close at hand to help you - good books, thoughtful courses in volunteer management and most of all your colleagues. Share with them your triumphs and trials so that together we may all get better.

# FOOTNOTES

1. For a fascinating discussion of building support for volunteers, see Susan Ellis' book, From the Top Down.
2. Any book by Sue Vineyard is worth reading. It's like a lively discussion with a good friend. My personal favorite is Marketing Magic for Volunteers. For more information, see the Bibliography.
3. Marlene Wilson, Effective Management of Volunteer Programs.
4. Gernon and Gernon, Train the Trainer, OAVB/C, Toronto, 1988.
5. Another Sue Vineyard gem.
6. Ken Blanchard, The One Minute Manager.
7. Rick Lynch, "Designing Volunteer Jobs for Results," Voluntary Action Leadership.
8. V. Williamson, S.J. Rehnborg, D.M. Disney, J. Washburn, and L.B. Roberts, "Should Volunteers be Fired?", Voluntary Action Leadership, Fall 1979.
9. John Buck, "How About Firing the 'Big' Volunteer?", Voluntary Action Leadership, Fall 1981.

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