

Volunteers from Hell: Handling Problem Behavior



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Coaching Exercise

You are a new volunteer manager who has recently become aware of a potential problem situation involving one of the volunteers with your organization. You have begun to hear stories and vague complaints about difficulties linked to this volunteer. You have heard no details about what the specifics of this situation are or why exactly there are problems. When you look at the personnel record for this volunteer the only thing you see is a cryptic note from your predecessor which says, "Arghh!" You try to contact your predecessor for more information but learn that she has been sent to the Caribbean for a two-year rest period. You decide that it would be wise to meet with this volunteer and try to figure out what might be happening.

Below are some examples of types of interpersonal attitudes and problems, ranging from the individual who is conflict-oriented to the individual who is almost overly friendly. The volunteer you are dealing with will represent one of these styles.



The Cantankerous Complainer

Nothing about your program or your group is satisfactory to the Cantankerous Complainer. This individual expresses constant dissatisfaction about everything and everyone, including all suggestions that you make toward resolving the difficulty. Negative comments are made about everyone, everything, and about anything else that arises during the conversation.



The Puppydog

The Puppydog is a disorganized but friendly person who is enthusiastic about practically everything, but seems to have no ability to get anything to work correctly. He or she bounces from one thing to another during the conversation, and never seems to be able to explain what exactly they are dissatisfied with or why they think it has gone wrong, much less what they think needs to be done differently in order to fix it. Sometimes the Puppydog may not even realize that things are going badly. The Puppydog is not good at managing his/her own time and is even worse at helping you manage yours.



The Dreamer

The Dreamer is dissatisfied with a service or product because they have their own vision of perfection which is often beyond the reach of anyone or anything. Often blessed with ideas of their own, and very often with good ideas, the Dreamer has a standard of performance that they ask of others which is simply beyond the ability of a system to produce. Sometimes the vision of a Dreamer does not match the vision of the program, in which case problems result as the volunteer imposes their own vision on the mission of the program.



The Needy

The Needy does not so much complain or argue but simply must have someone to talk to. All conversations seem to expand and change direction, eventually coming back to concentrate on some aspect of the Needy person or their life, or sometimes focus on you or your life. Little concrete information arises about what might be done to correct any particular problem situation.



The "Boss"

The Boss only wants to tell people what to do, not help the group reach a cooperative decision or to help do any of the work that is determined necessary. The Boss is all Chief and no Indian, and views his/her primary responsibility as giving orders. If the Boss is not officially put in charge they will go off on their own or seek to undermine the authority of those who are in charge.



The 'Maybe Later'

Like to watch a work assignment disappear? Give it to the 'Maybe Later' and you'll never see it again. The 'Maybe Later' is willing to accept work but seems incapable of completing it in a timely fashion. While not outwardly resistant, they will impede the progress of the group by forcing others to pick up after them or to take over for them.



Your Worst Nightmare

This individual might represent a combination of some of the styles above or even a totally new type of problem personality not mentioned so far. We affectionately refer to this individual as 'Freddy Kreuger.'

Chapter Two Analyzing the Situation

Introduction

The first thing to do when dealing with a problem volunteer is to determine what is really going on. Part of this is determining the extent of the problem situation (and, indeed, whether there really is a *problem*), but the more crucial element involves attempting to determine the root cause of the problem.

Detecting Impending Problems

There are some common warning signs that indicate approaching problems in workers, paid or volunteer. A combination of these calls for a re-interview with the person and/or a re-examination of the job assignment to uncover what is behind the behavior. Warning signs include:

1. The quality and quantity of work begins to decline. The worker makes many mistakes.
2. The worker often comes late to assignments.
3. The volunteer simply does not show up for work or meetings.
4. There is a palpable lack of enthusiasm.
5. Rarely, if ever, does the worker make suggestions or show initiative.
6. A normally verbal and open volunteer or employee becomes silent and closed-down.
7. The worker continues to avoid parts of their job—especially those that are more complex or disagreeable to them.
8. Workers blame others for their own errors or short comings.
9. They are less agreeable, affable or cooperative; they whine or complain regularly.



10. They avoid interaction with colleagues; they make sure they are unavailable for any social interaction.
11. They ignore timelines and due dates for projects.
12. Co-workers and direct supervisors complain about the worker and their performance.
13. Reports reach volunteer managers of the worker "bad-mouthing" the organization, program or key leaders.
14. They explode over insignificant instances; reactions are out of proportion to incidents.
15. They project an attitude of "nothing is right."

Finding Out What is Really Happening

Consider the demonstration of any of these behaviors a warning that something is wrong; a combination of several of these needs to be seen as symptomatic of a serious underlying problem. Take one or more of the following steps and responses:

1. Meet in private with the person. Describe what specifically has been observed and ask them if there is an underlying issue that needs to be discussed. Do not place any interpretation on the observed behavior; allow them to explain it if they will.
2. Avoid rushing to judgment of the feedback that is being given. Listen attentively, do not interrupt and allow silent spaces in the conversation that can allow them time to gather their thoughts and consider how to express themselves. Encourage honest feedback through body language, attentive listening and avoidance of defensiveness.
3. Determine the real issues motivating behavior:
 - Has something changed in their personal

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life that is forcing a shift in priorities, energy allocation, concentration, etc.? A critically ill child at home can distract a typically enthusiastic volunteer and cause many of the problem symptoms noted here.

- Are they the victims of mis-information? Do they believe as a paid worker that they are to be replaced by a volunteer? Certainly that could cause a lessened amount of cooperation!
- Are they upset about a specific occurrence and thus "fighting back" by reducing their productivity?
- Have they simply burned out? Volunteers, like paid workers, can stay in a job or location beyond their energy limits. We'll talk about this more in our next chapter.

4. Ask the volunteer or staff member what they see as a successful response to their issues. What would be best for them? A time-out or leave-of-absence to regain their old enthusiasm? A move to a different assignment? A full release from the perceived burden of staying?

5. Agree on a time frame for the resolution of the problem. If leaving is the chosen option, select the time frame best for the program. Allowing a disgruntled volunteer to stay for a month when the volunteer manager feels they will continue to contaminate the work climate is unwise even in the face of the volunteer's assurances that they'll be positive and productive.

When behavior becomes abnormal or negative, consider the actions as symptoms and warnings of problems about to erupt and take steps to intervene swiftly. Remember that the "problem" may be the person involved, but it might also be the situation that exists or the relationship among several persons that is the root cause.

Questions to Determine Problem Behavior

Very often, particularly in minor problem behavior, there will be no real "villain." Two people in the organization might just be not getting along, or they may even have a simple misunderstanding in which neither is really at fault. These innocent situations often create larger difficulties, however, if unaddressed. A

good volunteer manager can sometimes intervene and assist the parties to look for their own solution to the situation before things get out of hand. The best process for attempting this involves talking with the parties involved on an individual basis and getting them to describe their version of the difficulty as well as what they think they could do to address the problem. Note that the solution offered here is not for the volunteer manager to act to solve the problem, but rather to encourage and assist the involved parties to identify what they themselves can do to resolve the difficulty.

The following are some good questions to use during the interview with a problem volunteer. They are grouped into examining the background of the situation (including how the problem volunteer feels about what is happening), creating possible solution options, and creating an implementation plan for helping the problem volunteer address the situation:



1. Background Investigation

- ✓ How are things going?
- ✓ Why do you think they are going so well?
- ✓ How could things be better?
- ✓ What problems are you having?
- ✓ Why are those problems happening?
- ✓ What factors in the situation caused the problems?
- ✓ Are the difficulties related to a single person or to most persons?
- ✓ How long has the situation been this way?
- ✓ What happened prior to this situation?
- ✓ Is there a time when this seems most likely to occur?
- ✓ Does this behavior happen with everybody or only with some people?
- ✓ What problems does this person's behavior cause?
- ✓ Why do you think the person behaves that

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- way?
- ✓ What would a person get out of behaving that way?
- ✓ How are other staff and volunteers reacting to the behavior?
- ✓ Have you talked with the person about the behavior?
- ✓ What was the person's reaction when you talked with them?

2 Creation of Options

- ✓ What do you think you might do if the situation/behavior doesn't change?
- ✓ What has been your response?
- ✓ What has been the person's reaction to your response?
- ✓ Why do you think this response didn't work?
- ✓ Are there other responses you might consider?
- ✓ How do you suppose the person will react to these?
- ✓ What are the pro's and con's of that course?
- ✓ What other options do we have?
- ✓ If you had it to do over again, what would you do differently?
- ✓ What would you advise someone else to do in this situation?
- ✓ What would you advise someone else to do to avoid this situation?

3. Implementation

- ✓ Of the possible options, which would best fit with your situation?
- ✓ What will you need before trying to implement the solution?
- ✓ How will this affect other volunteers and staff in your department?
- ✓ Is there a way to best communicate this change to these others?
- ✓ Are there any advantages to the way we now do things that we want to preserve?
- ✓ How will you monitor responses to this attempted solution?
- ✓ Is there anything I can do to help make your plan work?

- ✓ When can we talk about this again?

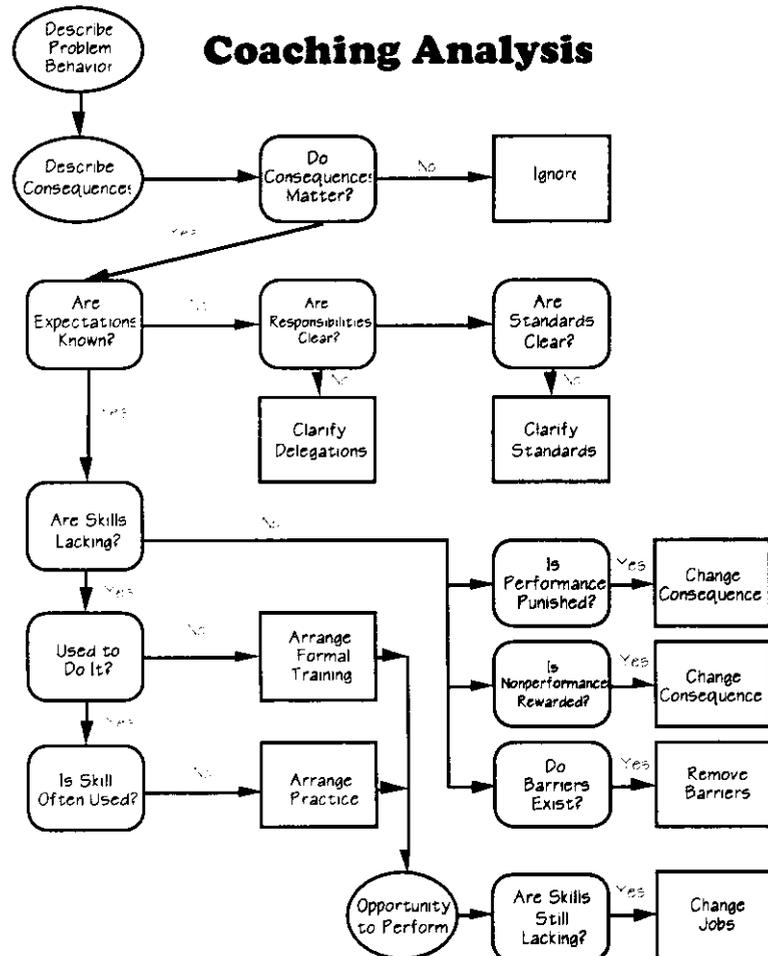
Analyzing Behavior

We'd like to offer two processes you might use in thinking through a problem situation. The first is a question-path to suggest how to deal with a problem situation, such as a deficiency in knowledge or performance.

You can see the question-path below. You will note that it is designed to help you "coach" the problem volunteer, allowing you to determine how the problem situation might best be approached. It offers a logical way of thinking through your options, and is applicable to a wide range of problem situations. Simply follow the arrows to see the recommended action.

You begin in the upper left hand corner by describing the problem situation and its consequences. You then ask yourself if the consequences matter, that is if they are substantial enough and detrimental enough to warrant attention.

Coaching Analysis



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If the answer is "no," your best action is to do nothing. If the answer is "yes," then you proceed to determining whether the volunteer understands the expectations, responsibilities and standards of the position.

If these are not the source of the problem, then you examine a decision-tree involving the skills needed to perform the work, leading eventually to the possibility of training.

If the problem is one of attitude toward the job then you can examine whether the consequences of poor behavior have been adequately explained and applied in this situation.

While a seemingly simple tool, this process may help you in examining all the possible alternatives in analyzing problem behavior.

A second process for evaluating problem behavior was originally developed by Rick Lynch. It consists of a performance analysis chart in which the manager evaluates the employee based on their ability to perform the work and their interest in performing the work.

On the left side of the chart, the manager evaluates the knowledge held by the volunteer, indicating their possession of the skills and ability necessary to do the job. This rating is given on a 1 to 10 scale, with 10 being the high rating. A horizontal line is then drawn across the chart at this rating point.

On the lower side of the chart, the manager evaluates the volunteer in terms of their attitude about the job, whether they have the willingness to perform this type of work. A vertical line is then drawn across the chart at this rating point.

The intersection of the two lines may indicate what type of remedial action is

appropriate.

If, for example, you rated a problem volunteer as having a attitudinal desire to do the work (a "7," for example) but also rated them as deficient in knowledge about the work (a "3", for example), then the intersection of these two lines would fall into the quadrant of the performance analysis chart which suggests that "training" is the way to address this performance problem - the volunteer is willing to do the work, but just doesn't know how.

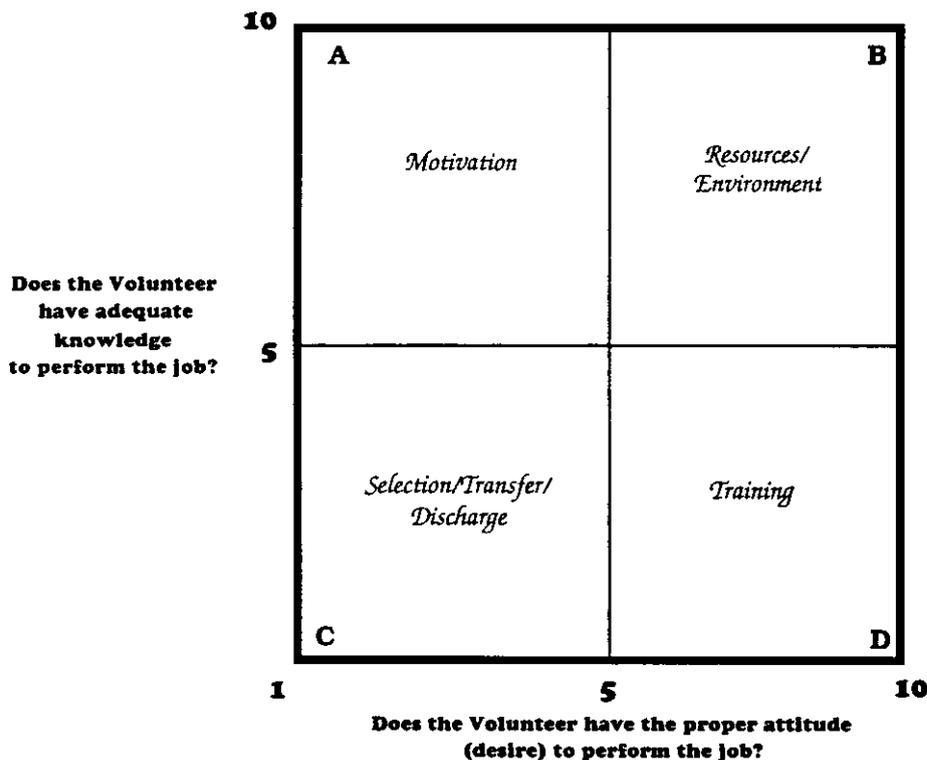
Similarly, a volunteer rated as high in knowledge but low in attitude would probably be one who needed to be re-motivated. A volunteer rated high in knowledge and high in attitude, but who still was not performing satisfactorily is probably an individual who is being prevented from working effectively due to some outside influence or a lack of appropriate resources.

A volunteer who rates low in both knowledge and attitude is one who is either in the wrong job or the wrong organization.

Why Volunteers May Fail to Perform

There are a number of possible reasons to examine and consider when attempting to identify why a volunteer might not be performing as

Performance Analysis Chart



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expected. They include:

- The volunteer is not really motivated to do the work in the first place, or has lost motivation over time.
- The volunteer does not know what they should do or how they should be doing it.
- The volunteer does not understand or agree with the reason for doing the work or doing it the way that you believe it should be done.
- The volunteer has not been consulted in the nature of the work assigned to them and resents this fact.
- There are no incentives for the volunteer to perform to standard and no negative consequences for poor performance.
- The volunteer thinks their performance is at an acceptable level.
- There are other obstacles or other people preventing the volunteer from performing.
- The volunteer has other concerns which are considered more important than performing the work.
- The volunteer is deriving some sense of satisfaction out of the misperformance.



they look deeper if there is a pattern of discord among many different people. Is the problem really the people or is it coming from some other cause?

One deeper issue that deserves a close examination in a conflict-ridden organization is the climate within its walls.

The climate is the overall setting in an organization; it is the "feel" of the workplace and is determined by the norms or unwritten rules of behavior that exist. Norms center around procedures, communication, friendliness, ethics, access to information, relationships, clarity of purpose or assignments.

They determine how energy is spent, how pleasurable it is to work there and how growth is encouraged:

- If available energy can be spent accomplishing the goals of the agency, people feel productive and good and tend to work well together; if, however, energy must be spent on trying to survive, figuring out what needs to be done or working around unresolved conflicts, prima-donnas and murky communication, people will be less likely to be productive or stay on as a volunteer.
- If relationships are frowned upon between workers or categories of workers, it will seem less "friendly" to work there and trust will not be established, resulting in suspicions, turf issues and direct conflict.
- If appropriate "fun" and freedom are discouraged, volunteers will not stay too long. Life is hectic and stress-ridden enough, without adding more of the same in volunteer work assignments. Keep in mind that people spend their time and energy where it is most rewarded, offers the best return and provides the greatest satisfaction. Who would want to work in a setting where no one is friendly, no fun is allowed and available energies must be spent on just trying to survive?

Each of these should be considered in attempting to analyze the performance problem.

Is It A Problem Person or A Problem Climate?

Sometimes a volunteer program that is experiencing an inordinate number of conflicts may have a problem that goes deeper than the people involved. Just as a manager must uncover the real issues in a conflict, so must

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To assess their climate, volunteer managers will need to identify existing norms with the input of several perspectives such as volunteers, paid staff, hierarchy, middle-management, board members, supporters, etc. Establish a atmosphere of trust and confidentiality in the discussions that focus on issues not people; keep participants on track, record specifics and do not allow anyone to "shoot down" another's feelings and perspectives. Look both at the unwritten rules that govern behavior, called "norms" and those "SUPER-norms" which are behavior rules that have grown so strong they have been turned into written mandates.

Keep in mind that some rules are beyond debate - they may be mandated by higher authorities such as rules around handling of bodily fluids to protect people from blood-borne pathogens in health care facilities.

The purpose of a discussion of norms is to separate positives and negatives. In this discussion:

1. Identify norms and rules; categorize them into non-negotiable (mandates) and negotiable (non-mandates).
2. Examine assumptions people might have about any norms or actions that may seem non-negotiable but in fact are not. Look especially at what some consider "sacred cows," those things that have gone on for years such as the Holiday Bach Concert that everyone hates but thinks is untouchable. Maybe it's time to nudge Bach out of his favored spotlight and do something that won't cause as much resentment!
3. Look at the list of non-negotiable factors in your setting. If they are a source of conflict, how can that irritation be reduced? Can the length of time or exposure a volunteer has to this factor be reduced? Is there something that would make a mundane or boring assignment take on new significance? Stuffing envelopes is awful if a sole volunteer is given 5000 to do at home but a "stuffing party and potluck" of 10 volunteers becomes fun. How can the "must" work be re-configured to cause less conflict and more satisfaction?
4. Look at the list of norms categorized as non-mandated. Are there norms that govern how people come on time to work? Their reliability? How volunteers and staff work together? How relationships are encouraged or discouraged?

Divide norms into positive or negative, being careful to offer specific examples of the consequences of each category. Identify those norms that have some positive and some negative aspects. Use creative problem solving to find ways to encourage and strengthen the positives and reduce or eliminate the negatives.

5. Examine how the organization enforces the norms - gently or harshly? If, in a program that prides itself on people coming to work on time, a new volunteer shows up late, how will the positive "on time" norm be projected to them? Will a supervisor chide them for being late, put them down, attack them for tardiness or will they be informed that there is concerted effort to come on time and accept responsibility for not conveying this to them properly? It's the difference between the warm fuzzy approach and the cold prickly!

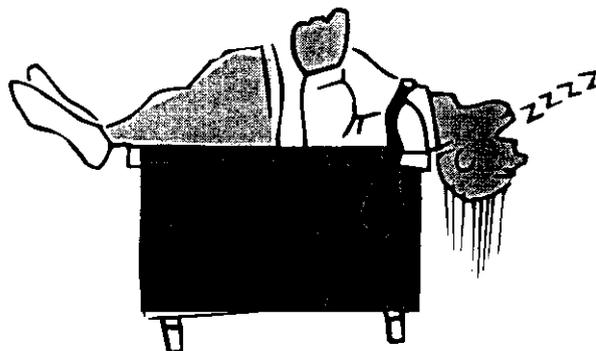
Positive climates enable people to put their energies into accomplishing the goals and vision of the organization and is characterized by a sense of trust among workers, paid and non-paid. The climate sets the tone for what is accomplished and how people feel while working there. This in turn determines their length of stay, their productivity and what they tell others, a form of personal recruiting.

When conflicts seem to be popping up regularly between workers in an organization, it is wise to look to its root cause. Often it is discovered that the problem is not the people but the climate in which they work.

Not Becoming Part of the Problem Yourself

It is critical not to become a contributing part of the problem, something which is easier to do than you may think.

Managers will often avoid dealing with problem volunteers, for several reasons:



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1. You may not want to admit that you have a problem volunteer because you think it reflects badly on you and your supervisory skill.
2. You don't want to confront the volunteer because you're too nice and you think that as a volunteer they should be allowed some latitude.
3. You're friends with the volunteer and don't want to appear to be criticizing them.
4. You're wrapped up in your own work and don't need any more problems to deal with.
5. You may feel sorry for the volunteer, feeling that the lack of performance is not really their fault.

Avoiding problems seldom eliminates them, and usually allows them to build into more complex and troublesome situations. Being a manager means being willing to deal with managerial problems.

You can also become part of the problem by how you approach a problem situation. Here are some common ways for a manager to exacerbate a problem situation:

- *Overreacting.* Some managers explode at petty situations, lashing out at others, especially when they are harboring some resentment for past transgressions.
- *Whining.* Some managers will spend their time complaining to others about the problem rather than directly dealing with the person involved.
- *Lecturing.* Some managers will treat offenders as though they were children, lecturing to them rather than talking with them. This technique doesn't even work very well with children.
- *Nuking.* Some managers avoid confronting problems until they unleash a massive retaliatory strike, annihilating everyone in their path.

Probably the prime sin that a manager can have is laziness, which in the case of problem volunteers often results in lax

interviewing and screening processes, which allows the problem person into the volunteer program in the first place. Always remember that interviewing is the key quality control element in volunteer management.

The steps we've outlined earlier in this chapter advocate a calmer, more rational, and more progressive approach. They view the manager as a coach and consultant to volunteers, recognizing that none of us are perfect, all of us have and cause problems occasionally, and most of us are amendable to improvement if we are approached in the right way.

