# Soft Confrontation: Dealing With Inappropriate Behavior

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## INTRODUCTION

The objectives of this article are to identify inappropriate behavior by volunteer applicants and current volunteers, to present decision-making techniques to consider such behavior, and to advocate "soft confrontation" to deal with specific inappropriate behavior.

## BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

As Volunteer Administrators, we are caring people who define ourselves as mentors, enablers, and helpers. It is easier for us to praise and give positive feedback than it is to give negative feedback, but we know or come to know that both can be growth-producing and life-enhancing. As supervisors, we determine the boundaries for appropriate behavior in our specific context. Therefore, we have both the right and the responsibility to deal with inappropriate behavior. Confronting unacceptable behavior, rather than avoiding or deferring, is a proactive approach which benefits the mental health of both volunteer and supervisor.

## MENTAL HEALTH DEFINED

Mental health is here defined as the ability to function adequately most of the time in response to the pleasures as well as the pressures of reality. As supervisors, it is necessary for us to define and communicate our expectations for volunteers who are entering or already in our programs. Volunteers function adequately by meeting these expectations for their roles and by not exceeding stated limitations for their assignments.

## THE FOUR D PROCESS

The Four D Process is a decision-making technique to consider volunteer behavior during selection interviews or in volunteer assignments. We *Define* our standards, *Determine* whether the volunteer meets these standards, *Decide* on our suitable behavior, and *Document* the reasons for our decision.

Sometimes we use the term professional to *define* suitable behavior. For example, it is professional to respect the confidentiality of our clients, patients, or users of our agency's services. Therefore, we do not allow volunteers to use client records for religious, political, or commercial pursuits. We expect volunteers to respect agency property and services. Therefore, we limit phone calls on non-agency business. We define our standards through written and verbal guidelines and instructions. We write mission statements, policy and procedure manuals, job descriptions, and program handbooks. During interviews and conferences, we state verbally what we want volunteers to do and what we do not want them to do. Thus we set both our expectations or

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tasks and our limitations or boundaries to define appropriate volunteer behavior.

Next, we *determine* if an applicant meets or can meet these standards, or if a current volunteer is acting in accord with tasks and boundaries. For this determination, we use another decision-making technique, that of interviewing. By means of questions to elicit information and by reflective or exploratory statements, we determine whether we want to accept applicants or retain volunteers.

Questions can be open-ended, forced choice (limited alternatives), or yes-no. Primary questions initiate a subject; secondary or exploratory questions follow up if an answer is insufficient. Reflective statements show our understanding and acceptance of responses. As interviewers, we discover information, clarify issues, and explore concerns.

Primary or basic questions obtain information on skills, background, experience, interests, and goals. Examples:

What have you enjoyed in a former volunteer job?
What didn't you like?
What kind of people are you most comfortable working with?
Are there people you would be unable to work with?
What would you consider to be an ideal job?
How would you describe your energy or activity level?
What makes you really angry? How do you show anger?
Tell me about your family. Who has been most influential?
What has been your major achievement so far?
What was your biggest disappointment?
Is there anything you'd like to change about yourself?

Secondary, follow-up, or probing questions:

I see. Go on. And then? Tell me more. Please continue. Yes? What happened then? And? That's interesting ... what else? Explain ... How did you react to ...? Please define ... for me. I'm not sure I understand. What about ...?

Also, in follow-up questions, we may re-state with a different emphasis if the original answer was unclear or insufficient. Follow-up probes communicate our interest in accuracy and greater understanding. We do not attempt to invade privacy or ensnare the interviewee.

Exploratory questions are helpful to elicit concerns:

What problems do you know of that might affect your work as a volunteer?
Are you under a doctor's care?
Are you taking medication to help with your problems?
I have some concerns about your fitting in to our program.
I need to know more about ... before I decide if we have a suitable assignment for your skills and interests.

After the interview or conference, we make a *decision* based on our standards and on the information we have learned. Our options are: to accept the applicant (or retain the current volunteer); to accept or retain with a specific concern about the person's behavior; to reject an applicant (or to end a volunteer's affiliation with the program); or to transfer or refer the applicant/volunteer to another placement or agency.

If we choose to accept or retain, we can either give or withold feedback. If we choose to accept or to retain with a specific concern, we need to give feedback to explain this concern. We describe the inappropriate behavior and set limits through a contract (a set of statements to which both persons agree, containing clear expectations and a time frame for change). For example, we may say to a volunteer: "We need to talk about your excessive use of the agency's phones for personal calls. According to the *Handbook*, volunteers may make brief, necessary, local calls. When this month's phone bill arrived, I saw that you had called your relatives in Minnesota, New Mexico, and Alaska. This is an abuse of your telephone privileges. You will need to pay the long distance charges and limit future calls to local exchanges only. If you are not willing

to accept this, you may not continue to volunteer here."

If a volunteer's inappropriate behavior is caused by a misunderstanding of an agency or program guideline, or by a lack of knowledge about tasks, explaining or clarifying the set limits will probably enable the agency to retain the volunteer.

Rejection of an applicant or termination of a current volunteer challenges our supervisory skills. In both instances, it is the mark of a highly functioning and mature volunteer administrator to be able to discuss pertinent issues calmly and professionally. With an applicant, we can use neutral phrases about the inability to fit the applicant's skills to the program's needs. Or we can provide specific feedback which may help the applicant in future interviews.

But when we end the affiliation of a current volunteer who has established a long relationship with other volunteers, staff, and the agency, we especially need to use good interpersonal and communication skills to present reasons for our decision.

In situations in which the applicant's interests or the current volunteer's behavior do not fit into an available assignment, we can refer or transfer. Our knowledge of placements in other community agencies enables us to help the person to discover a more suitable assignment. Effective networking among volunteer administrators adds to the strength of volunteering. We can only win by finding a good match for every potential volunteer. We lose if we try to retain unsuitable applicants or poorly-functioning volunteers.

The last step in the Four D Process is to *document* our decision. This documentation can be in the form of minimal notes or as a more structured record on the application or timecard. Documentation provides a reminder in case of future questions by noting specific verbal and nonverbal behavior observed during the interview or on an assignment. Hospital personnel know the rule, "If it's not documented, it didn't happen."

## "SOFT CONFRONTATION"

This is a reasonable, appropriate, and responsible approach for supervisors. It consists of negative feedback, given to help the receiver. It is constructive if the intention is to improve communication by letting the volunteer know how her or his behavior affects others. It is gentle in intention and firm in delivery.

To prepare for soft confrontation, schedule a private interview and plan the agenda. Use I-messages and be specific about observed behavior. Be descriptive and objective but not judgmental. Give feedback about behavior that can be changed. As an example, we may tell a current volunteer: "I noticed that you were giving out campaign literature to visitors while you were covering the Information Desk today. Hospital policy does not allow this. Please do not do it again."

Provide only the amount of feedback that can be absorbed; do not overload with many and various concerns at one time. After describing the unacceptable behavior, soft confrontation concludes by stating the behavioral change required *and* the consequences of no change. In the foregoing example, we can say, "If you do this again, you may not volunteer in a public contact assignment."

Permission is an important component of soft confrontation for both giver and receiver. Ask permission to provide feedback. The receiver has the option (permission) not to listen or, having listened, the option not to change. Permission in an initial interview can be invited by saying, "I believe that your particular interests do not match our needs. Would you like to know why I think this?" If the person withholds permission, we still have to deal with the original issue, but now we have additional behavior to consider.

## INAPPROPRIATE APPLICANT BEHAVIOR

Examples of applicant behavior which arouse concern during an interview are:

1. Unsuitable appearance indicating that the person will not conform to dress code or cleanliness requirements, or any specific nonverbal behavior that is clearly out-of-bounds and can be described. For an illustration, an applicant who compulsively rearranges the office files and moves office furniture around during

the interview is showing describable behavior that is not appropriate to the situation.
2. Evidence of substance abuse, such as a strong odor of alcohol and slurred speech, red eyes, shakes, or needle tracks.
3. Inability to give a reasonable, coherent, and acceptable motivation for volunteering. An applicant who mentions that she intends to find out just why her neighbor received program funds as soon as our confidential client records are available is definitely not a suitable candidate. Listen for hidden agendas.
4. Expression of intense religious or political convictions which imply an intent to proselytize for these beliefs.
5. Excessive fear of making an error or constant criticism of others.
6. Talking aloud to self (not just reminders, but two-way conversation).
7. Emotional instability or immaturity. But judge this in relation to the applicant's age and life experience. We do not expect teenagers to have fully formed goals and philosophies, but we do expect them to act and think appropriately for their ages.
8. Lack of an effective support system. Does the applicant have a source of emotional support, or does it seem as though we are the potential "mother"?

## INAPPROPRIATE CURRENT VOLUNTEER BEHAVIOR

Problem volunteers are those whose behavior is outside the boundaries of acceptable limits for their roles in the agency. They show dysfunctional patterns (not just isolated incidents) by continued acts or statements which are clearly unsuitable and unacceptable. Dysfunctional behavior patterns are shown by:

1. Victims who act helpless or passive and frequently ask to be rescued.
2. Social isolates who are reclusive and depressed.
3. Persecuted ones who say: "It's not my fault. Other people are responsible for all my problems."

4. Scapegoaters who distrust and dislike persons of different racial, religious, cultural, national, or social backgrounds or lifestyles.
5. Substance-abusers.
6. Power-players who have a strong need to control or a healer complex. Their attempts to rescue clients may interfere with the professional staff's roles in the agency.
7. Perfection-seekers who are extremely anxious about errors.
8. Acters-out who break and/or test rules constantly.
9. Persons who take agency property or misuse agency services.

There are, however, some inappropriate and less serious behaviors or isolated incidents which we can ask the volunteer to change. It is as important to find out the volunteer's concerns as it is to explore the issues we have. For instance, a volunteer who frequently criticizes agency policy or professional staff may actually be in an assignment that is unsuited to her or his interests and skills. Or, the volunteer may not know the reasons for the policy. Or, the professional staff member's expectation for the volunteer may differ from ours. Through feedback and interviewing questions, we can explore issues, ask for change, and even improve volunteer-staff relations.

If certain volunteers profess to dislike each other, a strategy is to assign them to work together on an important and time-limited task. When the task is done, hold a meeting with these volunteers to talk about both the work and the process of working together. This strategy can improve understanding and encourage acceptance of differences.

## CONFRONTATION: AVOID IT OR PRACTICE?

Of course we prefer that everyone likes us all the time. Unfortunately, with maturity, we conclude that this preference is irrational and unrealistic. So even though we believe that soft confrontations will help people to achieve their goals by learning how their behavior affects others, we may still avoid or delay confrontation because it is uncomfortable. We hope that

the problem will go away. Although sometimes the problem person goes away, this is not a final solution because our avoidance remains.

We can learn soft confrontation, giving negative feedback in a constructive and loving way, by practicing roleplays with trusted staff and friends, by taking a course in or reading about assertiveness, by telling ourselves that we can do it and we want to do it (self-talk), or by imagining a totally successful confrontation with a win-win result (visualization).

Roleplays are the most emotionally gratifying technique to practice giving feedback since roleplays themselves are therapeutic. We can do reverse roleplays, in which we play the role of the person whose behavior is causing problems. This mini psycho-drama enables a walk in another person's attitudes. During roleplays, we can rehearse, invent, and try alternatives. We can ask creative questions, make hypothetical statements, and develop tentative or even final conclusions.

In learning soft confrontation, it is most useful above all to be aware of our true roles as administrators who carry out the mandate of our agency. By remembering that our programs exist to serve our patients and clients and that volunteers provide the means to help accomplish the agency's mandate, we can convince ourselves to make a commitment to the necessity of confrontation.

CONCLUSION

This article has identified types of inappropriate behavior by incoming and current volunteers, described decision-making techniques (the Four D Process and types of interviewing questions), and advocated for soft confrontation. In conclusion, here is advice from a wise therapist and mentor: "People don't get cured. Only leather gets cured. People can make the choice to change. Trust them."

As enablers and helpers, let us trust that volunteers *can* choose to behave appropriately and, by so doing, fulfill their chosen objectives and their volunteer assignments.