

Termination Trepidation: Disciplining & Terminating Volunteers

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: Volunteer Risk Management

Have you ever stayed in a failing relationship even when you knew it wasn't working out? Or worse—even when you knew it was bad for you? Pulling the plug on bad relationships is a critical skill in both the personal and professional sense. When it's time to terminate a team member, many managers experience complex, conflicting emotions—especially when you realize it's sendoff time for a volunteer—a person who has offered their services and love for your mission without expectation of compensation. Think about the last time you terminated a volunteer... was it easy? Have you ever terminated a volunteer?

Why is it so hard for most nonprofit leaders to discipline and terminate volunteers?

- We naturally assume that volunteers are good people, probably not deserving of discipline or termination
- We believe we should take all the free help we can get; we sometimes opt for quantity over quality
- We get confused about [employee versus volunteer status](#) and wonder if it's okay to let volunteers go without a process similar to the approach used in employee terminations
- We worry that by letting a volunteer go, we might jeopardize relationships with our other volunteers, or we expose our nonprofit to negative feedback or reputation harm

The truth of the matter is that the potential liability is greatest if you continue to engage a volunteer who isn't supporting your mission, or retain a volunteer who is putting themselves or others in harm's way. Don't aim to retain volunteers who put your mission at risk. Volunteers can be disciplined or terminated appropriately, for reasons such as shirking one's duties, driving negativity and conflict among coworkers, or blatantly disregarding critical policies around workplace safety, anti-harassment, anti-discrimination, and the like.

Try these tips to establish appropriate volunteer discipline and termination practices at your nonprofit. Remember to always strive to apply discipline and termination procedures fairly and consistently.

- **Promote understanding before reaching the point of no return.** When a volunteer enlists to serve your nonprofit, integrate disciplinary and termination information into the volunteer's onboarding or training program. Volunteers must recognize from the outset that there are behavioral expectations in your workplace, and that volunteers can be disciplined or terminated if their behavior warrants it. Some volunteers may help you out by 'self screening' or dropping out of the program early if they know they cannot uphold your expectations.
- **Offer coaching or training before discipline.** If a volunteer has clearly committed harm or has egregiously violated a workplace policy, then immediate disciplinary action or termination may be necessary. But for minor violations or errors, positive support may be all a volunteer needs to blossom in his or her role. Before you bring the hammer down on an unsuspecting volunteer, offer role-specific or skills coaching or training to empower the volunteer meet your expectations. Every volunteer wants to be successful, and providing meaningful opportunities to succeed is one of the most important duties of a volunteer manager. And always pause and reflect before doling out discipline. You might just realize that the volunteer may not have been given the initial training or support she needed to fulfill her responsibilities.
- **Explore lateral moves before termination.** Sometimes it's necessary to let a volunteer go even when he or she is not a threat to your mission. The volunteer simply may not be performing well, and may be usurping valuable time and resources that could be better spent in the hands of another volunteer. Before expelling the harmless-but-fruitless variety of volunteer, consider speaking with the individual about other volunteer roles available within your organization. A lateral move to a more fitting role may

enable the volunteer to continue service while feeling more fulfilled and effective. If you don't have the right role available, consider encouraging the volunteer to contact one of your friends to apply for a role at another nearby nonprofit.

- **Discipline and/or terminate with care.** After trying the tips above, or to remedy situations caused by the harmful variety of volunteer, it might be time for real discipline or termination. Adopt a clear discipline policy and communicate it to volunteers during their orientation. Apply the policy consistently and fairly at all times. Of course, you have fewer options for disciplining volunteers compared to employees, but strong disciplinary measures may include a week or a month of volunteer probation, or the 'demotion' of a volunteer to a volunteer role with less responsibility or less frequent client contact. Depending on the infraction, you might offer disciplinary measures before terminating the volunteer. Remember to clearly communicate that the volunteer is close to being let go, and must modify his or her behavior in order to continue serving your mission.
- **Watch for shifting anti-discrimination laws.** A key concern of a manager who is considering terminating an employee is whether the employee may have grounds to sue the nonprofit for wrongful termination. This legal exposure is a grey area in regards to volunteer termination. Though only [a few states have extended anti-discrimination and workplace harassment protections to volunteers](#) and unpaid interns, more states may follow in the future. Be mindful of shifts in your state laws, and watch for [cases like this](#) that may set a precedent for volunteers to effectively claim anti-discrimination and anti-harassment protections under the law. Even if you have no legal requirement to protect volunteers and provide avenues for recourse (should they experience discrimination or harassment), remember that your nonprofit's reputation is always at stake. Resolve to treat volunteers fairly and honorably, and foster a workplace culture that rejects discrimination and harassment.
- **Conduct volunteer exit interviews.** If you left a job or volunteer role angry, might you be more willing to sue or threaten your employer in some other way? Conversely, if you leave a job with positive feelings, you will probably be far less likely to wish any harm upon your employer. I hope this fundamental reasoning holds true for most people—even volunteers. Exit interviews provide closure to a volunteer's service while offering the individual one more opportunity to make a positive impact on your mission. Similarly, nonprofit leaders can benefit from analyzing exit interview data to understand what their volunteers' experiences have truly been like. Of course, the exit interview is also a chance for you to make one final positive impression, to ensure that the volunteer is not departing disgruntled and vindictive. For any departing volunteers that you would consider for 'rehire,' ask this question during the exit interview: "If there was one thing our nonprofit could call on you for in the future, what would it be?"

Like with personal relationships, it's smart to be selective in the workplace. Cultivate a volunteer team that is effective, that promotes and abides by your nonprofit's values, and that stewards your mission and assets. There's no time for termination trepidation in the hearts of volunteer managers.

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