

## Emergency Exits

**There's a wealth of material available on the recruitment of volunteers. But what about the other end of the process?**

**Mark Restall delves into the thorny issue of de-selecting volunteers.**

Having to ask a volunteer to leave is probably one of the worst tasks a volunteer co-ordinator has to perform, and seems at odds with the overall ethos of volunteering. Unfortunately it is sometimes necessary. But cases requiring dismissal are rare, and there are a range of options for dealing with problems before they get that far.

### **Assessing the problem**

Firstly you need to ask, is a dismissal necessary? What appears to be a serious problem may in fact be an example of a training need. People learn in different ways and at different paces. The 'problem' may in fact end up highlighting ways to improve your induction and training.

Often volunteers may be unaware that they are doing anything wrong. This is why it is so vital to have adequate supervision and regular supervision meetings. After all, a volunteer can't be expected to improve or change the way they work if an issue hasn't been brought to their attention.

### **Change as good as a rest**

Perhaps the volunteer needs a change of role. They may be bored in their current one, or feel underused. Are there any other suitable positions in the organisation? It may help to look at volunteering in terms of a series of tasks rather than roles. This means that people aren't necessarily locked into a rigid off-the-peg role, and could have more say over their voluntary work. Again, this is a problem that can be spotted earlier through adequate supervision. Communication is a vital part of volunteer management.

If a volunteer is not suited to the role they are assigned to - or any others at your organisation, remember that they may have much to offer a different organisation. Make sure that they are aware of this, and refer them to their local volunteer bureau and any other organisations that you feel may be able to make use of their skills. Having a trial period for your volunteers allows you to see whether or not they are suitable, as well as giving the volunteer a chance to get a taste of the role.

### **Point of no return**

But with the best will in the world, there may be some situations which can only end with asking a volunteer to leave. This could be because the volunteer has committed some form of gross misconduct - severely breached the equal opportunities policy for example. It is when things get to this stage that you should be thankful that you have a disciplinary procedure in place. If you are reading this and do not have one, the information service of the National Centre for Volunteering can provide information on drawing up such policies.

Disciplinary procedures are important not only because they give volunteer managers clear guidelines on how to proceed, but also because they allow volunteers to see that decisions are not being taken on an arbitrary basis.

Apart from some rare exceptions, volunteers are not covered by employment legislation and cannot take organisations to tribunal for unfair dismissal. However, it is obviously very bad practice to dismiss someone without adequate reasons. Apart from the moral case, volunteers who have been treated poorly tell their friends and family about their experience. These people then tell their friends and family. Word of mouth can affect not only the volunteer programme, but the credibility of the organisation itself.

### **A hard decision to take**

It does jar with the spirit of volunteering, but sometimes you do have to dismiss a volunteer. Some situations are that serious. A volunteer who is disruptive can have a negative impact on the organisation, the client group, and their fellow volunteers. Some behaviour simply cannot be tolerated.

While volunteering is concerned with values far removed from the profit motive and narrow economic views of efficiency, if it is to be valued then it does need to have some level of quality, however this is judged.

Once a volunteer has been through the disciplinary procedure and a decision has been made to dismiss, the volunteer has to be informed. Such a meeting can be very stressful for both parties.

### **Be prepared**

While it has to be performed with sensitivity, it also should be a clear and direct meeting. Prepare for the meeting. Know what you are going to say in advance. You also have to be prepared psychologically for the volunteer's reaction, whether it be upset or anger, acceptance or denial.

For once in volunteering, this is not a two way process. The volunteer should have had a chance to put their case earlier in the disciplinary process. Engaging in debate, let alone arguing, simply muddies the waters at such a meeting. An unequivocal message has to be imparted to the volunteer. For this reason some people suggest that the decision comes better from someone with a degree of seniority.

A letter should be sent to the volunteer, detailing the decision. They should be reminded of their right to appeal. This right is important. Volunteers need to know that they will be treated fairly by their organisation. Being able to appeal prevents dismissal decisions being seen as the whim of individual volunteer managers.

To sum up, the first thought should be 'what is the cause of the problem. What are the alternatives to dismissal?' Much of this depends on communication with the volunteer. Follow disciplinary procedures to ensure everything is open and accountable. If a decision to dismiss is taken, be clear and direct.

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