

Volunteer Management Tip Sheet #4



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See reverse side for tips on the following additional topics:

Organizational Practices for Effective Volunteer Supervision

Handling Volunteer Performance Problems

Supervising & Retaining Excellent Performing Volunteers

Stress-Free Volunteer Supervision

Supervising volunteers is not just the volunteer coordinator's job—it's everyone's job! Share these tips with site, department or program staff, volunteer team leaders, and others who directly oversee service activities. Following these tips will increase the likelihood that staff members view volunteers as a way to ease their workload, not add to it. This, in turn, will increase requests for volunteers and make the volunteer coordinator's job easier!

10 Tips for Effective Volunteer Supervision

1. Supervision works best in the context of a cultivated relationship and ongoing positive recognition.
2. When working with corporate, school, college, or youth groups use written agreements, confirmations and follow-ups. An (adult) individual should be designated as the group's contact person. Request a meeting if a major problem arises, and reassign the group if need be (i.e. they may volunteer, but not do the problematic task.)
3. Make liberal use of "job aids": step-by-step instructions, often with diagrams or other visuals, to help people do a task. Post them in the area where service is done. Use language and format that works for your audience's literacy, English speaking ability, etc.
4. Model the behavior you want to see in the volunteer.
5. Catch people "doing something right" – and tell them! Provide the positive feedback when you observe it, or in a post-service debrief that same day.
6. Use on-the-job coaching. Engage volunteers in informal conversation during which you can also bring up improvement needs. Ideally do this when you observe the behavior that needs to change, or very shortly after.
7. Be specific in providing performance improvement feedback. A good format to follow is: "I noticed that [*specific observation of the behavior or action done*] ... This is a problem because [*how behavior impacts the program, consumers, other volunteers, etc.*] ... I must ask you to [*behavior you want them to do instead*] ... If this continues we will need to...[*consequences if not changed*]."
8. Hold periodic team debriefs (everyone on that shift) and ask for volunteers' feedback.
9. Practice "active listening", i.e. acknowledge not only the facts but the emotions that seem to be at play. Always provide an opportunity for the volunteer to validate, or to correct, the emotions you attribute to them. For example, "*I noticed that you were a bit short with Ms. R. today when she asked for an extra bag of groceries. It seemed like that request stirred up some pretty strong feelings in you.*" The response may help you learn how you can offer support.
10. Involve key volunteers in designing procedures and creating solutions to commonly-encountered problems. Because they can see things from both volunteer and program perspective, they often have the best ideas.



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"10 Tips for Effective
Volunteer Supervision"

Stress-Free Volunteer Supervision

Organizational Practices for Effective Volunteer Supervision

1. Establish and reinforce that volunteer supervision is "everyone's job" : the shared responsibilities of volunteer coordinators, site staff, and team leader volunteers.
2. Set up a reporting structure that includes both site staff and any volunteers who are in supervisory roles. These volunteers' position titles should communicate their authority.
3. Everyone that will supervise a volunteer should review the position description, which is the basis for mutual expectation-setting and addressing performance problems.
4. Involve supervisory staff and volunteer team leaders in shaping position descriptions. *(See **The Volunteer Request Process** in Tip Sheet #2: "Intake Techniques for Long Term Volunteer Engagement".)*
5. Offer professional development training to both line staff and volunteer leaders who supervise other volunteers. This eases the burden on busy volunteer coordinators by increasing volunteer management buy-in and skills throughout the organization.

Handling Volunteer Performance Problems

1. Conversations about performance may be formal or informal, depending on the organization's size, organizational culture, and number of volunteers.
2. Include feedback about strengths as well as challenges, even if the primary purpose of your conversation is to address a performance problem.
3. Often when a volunteer is not meeting performance expectations, they are already aware of it. Offer support, training, reasonable accommodation, or release.
4. In offering support, it can be helpful to make this open ended. "How can we support you?" allows the volunteer to state what she or he needs.
5. Keep in mind that when release is the appropriate choice after a process that includes active listening and offers of support or additional training, it may come as a relief to both parties. Remember to acknowledge and thank the volunteer for their service.

Supervising and Retaining Excellent-Performing Volunteers

1. Increase an excellent-performing volunteer's scope of decision making authority or autonomy in carrying out their current role.
2. Having career ladders for experienced volunteers, and/or offering a variety of different volunteer opportunities, makes it possible to "release" a volunteer (from the position) while still retaining them (for the organization).