



Royal Agricultural Society

Tip Sheet: Having Difficult Conversations with Volunteers

We all face difficult conversations at times. But we can turn these conversations into opportunities. You have the opportunity to:

- Help your volunteer succeed
- Develop your leadership abilities
- Avoid bigger challenges
- Positively impact your mission and objectives for your event(s)

It's necessary to have a conversation with a volunteer when:

- A client complains
- Other volunteers complain
- Their behaviour is offensive
- There is friction between the volunteer and other volunteers
- The volunteer does not follow the rules
- Work suffers
- The volunteer is antagonistic

More specifically it's necessary to have a conversation with a volunteer when:

- A volunteer's behaviour is disruptive
- A volunteer's attitude is counter-productive
- A volunteer's behaviour changes
- A volunteer is chronically late or absent
- A volunteer disrespects your leadership
- A volunteer has an agenda
- A volunteer shows poor judgement

Preparation is key to a successful outcome when having a difficult conversation with a volunteer.

Take a moment to think about:

- Your vision for your event/committee – it is based on meaningful volunteer contributions to your organisations mission?
- How meeting the challenge head-on will free you to focus on advancing your cause (whether this is an event, or a functioning committee etc.)
- How your proactive steps will keep this challenge from ballooning into something bigger.
- How you are helping the volunteer succeed.
- How your leadership skills will grow.

- How your volunteer run event/committee will be viewed as a professional, well-run event/committee that others will be inspired to volunteer for.

The elements of a successful outcome

Preparations are critical before, during and after the conversation.

- Remind yourself that you are the best person for this challenge
 - Prepare and practice your opening statement
 - Do not apologise for the conversation
 - Do not speak for the volunteer
 - Do not diminish the person(s) who made the complaint
 - Allow ample time for feedback and discussion
 - Follow up with diligence
 - Give yourself credit
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Before the conversation

Remind yourself that you are the best person for this challenge

- You know this volunteer better than anyone else.
- You care about this volunteer and want to see them succeed.
- By being proactive, you can keep the situation from getting worse and therefore making it worse for everyone, including the volunteer.

Practice your opening statement

- be direct – don't drag it out; be kind but get to the point.
 - be very specific – don't confuse the volunteer by hiding the message behind chit chat.
 - Assure the volunteer that the conversation is meant to help the volunteer succeed.
 - Don't overload the opening statement with praise meant to "soften the blow."
 - Make clear your intent to mediate a solution that works.
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During the conversation

Don't apologise

- Apologising for the conversation negates its importance.
- Refer back to the mission/objectives of your event/committee (etc.)
- Restate expectations.

Don't coach the volunteer

- Remain neutral and hear them out.
- Assure them that you are confident in finding a solution that satisfies everyone and furthers mission goals.

- Be emphatic, but don't immerse yourself so deeply in the volunteer's feelings that you lose neutrality.

Don't diminish the source of the complaint

- Remind the volunteer that everyone has a voice.
- Acknowledge, but don't agree to condemn personalities.
- Remember that listening does not imply agreement, so use phrases like "I understand what you are saying."

Allow time for discussion:

- Don't judge frustrations, judge actions.
- Ask for confirmation that the volunteer feels heard and understood.
- Ask for confirmation that the volunteer has heard and understood your position.

A structure for managing the discussion/meeting

The following structure will help give your meeting with the volunteer the best chance of success:

1. Find a quiet space (no interruptions) and welcome the person. Be aware they may be confused or unaware of any problem or nervous about what you might say.
2. Say what the meeting is about: describe the situation as you understand it, including the impact or consequences of what is happening, and explain you want to understand their perspective and find a positive way forward.
3. Listen to what the person has to say. And then reflect back to them by rephrasing and summarising what you are hearing without judgement. This is important both to demonstrate empathy and to check your understanding.
4. Give your viewpoint, once you are clear about theirs.
5. Look for common ground about your mutual perceptions of the problem.
6. Look for solutions together. For example: can you adapt an existing role, help the volunteer into a different role, offer additional training or buddy support, provide closer supervision, or release the volunteer with dignity?
7. Check the person's commitment to improve/address the situation.
8. Identify specific actions (What? How? By when?).
9. Discuss what support might be required.
10. Agree on a time to review together.
11. Finish on a positive note.
12. And finally, keep a record of the conversation, a true reflection of what is discussed. And ensure you have a way of monitoring and following up on any actions agreed.

It is a good idea to have a problem-solving polity in place, as part of your wider volunteer policy. If you don't have one, reach out to the RAS for support.

After the conversation

Follow up

- Check in with all stakeholders soon after the conversation.
- Keep the dialogue open.
- Prepare a strategy based on your policies such as verbal warning, written warning, termination.
- If the volunteer is terminated and other volunteers are upset, hold an open meeting for those volunteers and clear the air by encouraging the sharing of their perceptions while outlining the organisations position.

Give yourself credit

- Take pride in your leadership.
 - Learn from your conversation.
 - Journal your thoughts.
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What if the situation persists?

Having a difficult conversation does not always guarantee the problem will be resolved.

When the situation persists:

- Look for other ways the volunteer can serve.
- If termination is necessary, part with a clear ended and wish the volunteer well.
- Allow yourself time to feel disappointed.
- Remind yourself that avoidance would have created bigger problems.
- Remember that not everyone is a fit for your event/committee.

And prepare for the future by:

- Creating policies and procedures that spell out expectations and disciplinary action.
 - Creating probationary periods.
 - Review your volunteer recruitment ads and strategies to ensure you are not signalling that “any warm body will do.”
 - Enlist new people as advocates and make volunteering an elevated position.
 - Reject potential volunteers from roles, not the organisation.
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Tips to successful outcomes when dealing with challenging situations

Dealing with egregious behaviour? Enlist the help of a panel. A panel, consisting of yourself and key volunteers/staff/members accomplishes 3 things:

1. It shows a united front.
2. It eliminates the “he said, she said” element.
3. It encourages staff involvement in the complexities of volunteer management.

Be clear about termination status:

- By simply just “not calling” the volunteer, you give implied permission to continue to represent your organisation.
- Engage with your volunteer team. Don’t discuss specifics but do let them know that your organisation and the volunteer in question have “parted ways.”
- Refer back to the mission and your dedication to providing impactful volunteer involvement.