



# The Value and Supervision of Volunteers

A STAFF-TO-STAFF WORKSHOP

*Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival*

## Supplementary Scenarios

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# SCENARIO:

## The Social Climber

A returning volunteer reaches out to you to indicate that they only want to volunteer in one very specific role, because they feel it will offer them the best opportunity to network and advance their career. The team the volunteer wants to work with is a very small department with tight deadlines and professional contacts. You sense that the department's need for professionalism might not benefit from this individual's inexperience and desire to network. How would you manage their expectations?

### **How would you handle this scenario?**

Suggest to the volunteer that there might be a better fitting department that still offers a similar learning experience. Suggest another team for them to volunteer with that is related to their area of interest. For example, if they want to work in the Communications Department, suggest an alternative to start out with, such as distributing marketing material, which will give them an opportunity to find out more about programming and opportunities available at your organization.

Work to find a compromise that puts the best interest of the individual and organization into play and reminds the volunteer that you need volunteers to be flexible and that you appreciate their willingness to try something else. If the volunteer still refuses to be flexible in what they're doing, then it may be in the best interest of the individual and organization that the volunteer look for that specific role at another organization.

# SCENARIO:

## The Rule Breaker

You notice that a volunteer who you assigned to a stationary position has been wandering away from their post, chatting with patrons and is generally unaware of the disruption in operations they're causing. How would you communicate the importance of their assignment to them?

### **How would you handle this scenario?**

Inform volunteers as to how the tasks they are performing fit into the goal or mandate of a specific department or project. It is a good idea to communicate to volunteers that times often fluctuate between busy times and slow times. When things start to slow down on shift, it's a great time to chat with volunteers to give them the bigger picture of how the organization works and why their position is so important. This is also a great time to really get to know them and their skills which might benefit both you and the volunteer down the road.

If it is clear that the volunteer does not understand the task at hand, give them a chance to show you how to complete the task. This will help you identify what part of the instructions is not clear.

Volunteers can also use this time to get to know each other and form tight bonds on shift. If at all possible, think about rotating the volunteer into another position so that they can experience different positions and situations during their shift.

# SCENARIO:

## The Know-It-All

A very talented returning volunteer who was promoted to a role with a higher level of responsibility five years ago refuses to review the revised position description for their position this year and does not want to attend training, citing that it's basically the same, so there's no need. What would you do to encourage them to review the description and attend the session?

### **How would you handle this scenario?**

It is best to start with a compliment by first saying you're aware of how well they've done with the organization and respect their dedication. Next, follow up with a comment about how the position descriptions change yearly and that it is in their interest to read it over.

You can also tell them that new volunteers in that role will be looking to their experience for answers and if they do not review the basic information of the role or attend training, how do they expect to answer these questions from other volunteers? With their experience and dedication to the role, it is their responsibility to stay on top of changes and keep up to date with role-specific training. This strategy plays into their strengths of knowing everything while addressing the need to fulfill their responsibilities in this higher level position.

Ask the volunteer to pitch the role at orientation or at a training session and act as the support for new volunteers in that role. This way you are providing them with more responsibility and they will feel that they have to know the role inside and out in order to present the details about it. If they still refuse, inform them that it is an expectation for them to review the position description and stay informed in order to fulfill that role as a volunteer. Given the type of volunteer you're dealing with, they likely won't take it this far.

# SCENARIO:

## The Saboteur

Despite your best efforts to create a welcoming environment for your volunteer team, one person in particular seems intent on disrupting the peace by taking too long to return from a break, procrastinating on a task you assigned to them, and generally seeming annoyed. How would you try to improve their experience?

### **How would you handle this scenario?**

The volunteer obviously seems like they are not enjoying themselves and may need to be re-assigned to a new task. It would also be necessary to speak to the volunteer about breaks and why it is important for people to come back on time to ensure everyone gets a break. There may also be real-life problems that are distracting the volunteer from completing the task. Engaging the volunteer as to why they are distracted would be the first step to understand their actions. Do not assume you know what the issue is and take the time to talk to the volunteer to identify why they are acting out in a disruptive manner. Once you understand the cause of their behaviour, you can then take steps to correct it.

# SCENARIO:

## Group Work

Similar to our study of the pitfalls that supervisors can sometimes encounter, we will now focus on the kind of volunteers who can make a shift difficult. As with the scenarios provided above, these scenarios focus on problematic behaviour that your staff may encounter on shift. These behavioural issues can be found in John Lipp's *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Recruiting & Managing Volunteers*.

Divide your attendees into four groups. Assign them one of the following difficult volunteers:

- *The Gossip*: While on your break you happen to overhear a volunteer talking loudly nearby about how unimpressed they are with the executive director of the organization. They're describing them in very unkind terms to anyone who will listen.
- *The Negative One*: An unforeseen hiccup has occurred during a volunteer's shift that requires them to re-do a large portion of the task they just completed. They're pretty displeased about this development and are clearly displaying it, bringing the positivity down with them. They also begin to criticize how the system in place must be wrong since the issue occurred.
- *The Harasser*: After pairing up an older, more experienced volunteer with a young high school-aged volunteer, you begin to notice that the older volunteer is taking tasks away from the younger one, often giving them a glare or a condescending lecture in the process. The fact that they're trying to complete the tasks of two volunteers on their own is slowing down operations considerably.
- *The Prejudiced One*: While sitting in on a volunteer leader's debrief to their team, you notice that the leader is actively discouraging the older volunteers from taking on more challenging roles available during the shift, stating that they should probably just take it easy. Despite the protestations of the volunteers, they still decide to relegate them to a corner, so to speak.

# SCENARIO:

## Group Work

### How would you handle these scenarios?

#### **The Gossip**

These volunteers love gossip, especially when an organization is going through change. The best way to stop gossipers is to ensure information flows directly from one source like your Volunteer Office. Keeping people in the loop makes other volunteers less inclined to listen to gossipers. A directive approach may be necessary to let the individual know their behaviour is inappropriate and won't be tolerated.

#### **The Negative One**

These volunteers never see anything as being right. They are quick to find flaws and if you are trying something they will probably suggest that it won't work. While these volunteers' impact is usually minimal, they can keep people's spirits down and create a toxic work environment for other volunteers. When dealing with these individuals, listen to them and keep it positive. Do not get sucked into their negativity. Humour is a good way to sidetrack negativity. It is best to keep these individuals away from public positions as they are not the type of people you want to be the face of your organization. They may also corrupt other volunteers, so it is best to keep them away from recent recruits as their influence and negativity may grow. If you're unable to work with these people and properly place them, then you may need to remove them altogether.

# SCENARIO:

## Group Work

### How would you handle these scenarios?

#### **The Harasser**

The harasser is a combination of the know-it-all and the saboteur combined. However, they have a much more intense approach. Through direct and indirect intimidation they can make others feel uncomfortable. They may use threats and make demands of co-workers. These people have a one-track mind and are often willing to compromise when it comes to how things are done. This type of behaviour should never be tolerated. Their behaviour is unacceptable in every part of society, whether it is at work or during their leisure time. These volunteers should be removed once their behaviour and actions have been verified and documented by a staff member.

#### **The Prejudiced One**

The prejudiced volunteer can have many prejudices about many different things. Common prejudices include age, sex, sexual orientation and nationality, and can also include an area someone grew up in. A common prejudice that is seen a lot in volunteering is that some individuals believe that older volunteers aren't fit or capable of volunteering. On the flip side there is also a belief from some prejudice volunteers that younger volunteers aren't experienced or responsible enough to be in a supervisory role. These behaviours, if accepted can lead to a hostile work environment, a mass exodus of good volunteers and even legal trouble for your organization. Every person regardless of whether they are paid or not should be able to work in an environment where they feel safe, appreciated and not judged for who they are (Lipp, 2009).