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Dealing with annoying volunteer habits and issues

Have you ever worked along side a volunteer who had poor personal hygiene, foul smelling clothes or breath, or an annoying personal habit like making clicking noises? Or worse, the volunteer drinks heavily in the evening and then exudes the smell of alcohol, often mixed with the equally fetid smell of coffee and cigarettes, all day at work?

Or, worst on the list of most challenging issues, the volunteer's breath and pores exude a spicy aroma that makes you ill; the volunteer's clothes are clean, but he or she appears to bathe infrequently, and you're positive that saying anything would be culturally insensitive.

Steps to Provide Feedback in a Difficult Conversation

Seek permission to provide the feedback. Even if you are the volunteer's line manager, start by stating you have some feedback you'd like to share. Ask if it's a good time or if the volunteer would prefer to select another time and place. (Within reason, of course.)

Use a soft entry. Don't dive right into the feedback - give the person a chance to brace for potentially embarrassing feedback. Tell the volunteer that you need to provide feedback that is difficult to share. If you're uncomfortable with your role in the conversation, you might say that, too. Most people are as uncomfortable providing feedback about an individual's personal dress or habits, as the person receiving the feedback.

Often, you are in the feedback role because other volunteers have complained to you about the habit, behavior, or dress or worse you overheard them complaining about the volunteer in question. Do not give in to the temptation to amplify the feedback, or excuse your responsibility for the feedback, by stating that a number of staff or volunteers have complained. This heightens the embarrassment and harms the recovery of the person receiving feedback

The best feedback is straightforward and simple. Don't beat around the bush. I am talking with you because this is an issue that you need to address for success in this organisation.

Tell the person the impact that changing his or her behavior will have from a positive perspective. Tell the volunteer how choosing to do nothing will affect their role within the organisation.

Reach agreement about what the individual will do to change their behavior. Set a due date - tomorrow, in some cases. Set a time frame to review progress in others.

Follow-up. The fact that the problem exists means that backsliding is possible; further clarification may also be necessary. Then, more feedback and possibly, disciplinary action are possible next steps.

Start with a soft approach to set the volunteer at ease, but don't beat around the bush.

The volunteer's level of anxiety is already sky high and making more small talk while he waits for the bad news to emerge, is cruel. Once you've told him that you want to discuss a difficult topic, move right in to the topic of your difficult conversation.

Tell the volunteer directly what the problem is as you perceive it.

If you talk around the issue or soften the impact of the issue too much, the volunteer may never get that the problem is serious. If you reference the problem as "some of our volunteers do the following," the volunteer may never understand that you mean him.

Whenever possible, attach the feedback to a business issue.

This is not a personal vendetta; the difficult conversation has a direct business purpose. Perhaps other volunteers don't want to participate on his team, and you've noticed the lack of volunteers. Perhaps his appearance is affecting the perception of customers about the quality of the organisation's products. Maybe, an irritating mannerism has caused a customer to request a different sales rep. Make the business purpose of the conversation clear.

You also need to let the volunteer know that not only is the behavior affecting the organisation and the volunteer's, it is affecting the volunteer's career. Express directly the impact you believe the behavior is having on the volunteer's potential promotions, raises, career opportunities, and relationships in the workplace.

Training all your staff or volunteers is not an appropriate solution.

Some Volunteer Managers think that they will provide a grooming and professionalism seminar for all volunteers to attend. The volunteer with the problem, may or may not get the message via the training however you will have subjected countless others to training they didn't need.

Training should not be used as a means to correct the personal problems of individuals. In some cases just the individuals who are perceived by organisation members to have the problem were trained - this is offensive and discriminatory. Address the issue with the volunteer - individually.

Be sensitive to the fact that different cultures have different norms and standards

Your organisation could ask volunteers to embrace the cultural standards of the workplace in which the volunteer is working.

Be sensitive to the difference in cooking and eating traditions, too.

A lady confided to that her fellow volunteers had laughed at her and made fun of her because she always smelled like curry and garlic and other pungent spices. She toned down the amount of spice in her cooking, but she was injured by the thoughtlessness for years.

If an volunteer has repeatedly tried to correct a hygiene issue such as bad breath, and is not making progress, suggest that the volunteer see a physician to determine if an underlying medical condition might be causing the problem. Your thoughtfulness could save an volunteer's life.

If you are the volunteer's supervisor, you owe it to the volunteer to hold the difficult conversation. Especially, if other volunteers have complained to you, understand that if you don't hold the difficult conversation, the volunteer's colleagues will, and, they may not hold the conversation effectively with the goal of minimising embarrassment and discomfort.

A bottle of deodorant might show up on the volunteer's desk. Soap has been placed in volunteer mailboxes. Nasty notes have also been left in volunteers inboxes and on chairs. None of these actions contribute to a harmonious workplace.

*Adopted from an original article by
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