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Disengaging a Volunteer: What to Do When Supervision Fails

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Abstract: Eventually, most Extension professionals will need to disengage a volunteer. The decision to disengage a volunteer should be a last resort. Disengagement is an admission that volunteer supervision has failed. Useful alternatives to and steps in avoiding volunteer disengagement are provided. A systematic approach for disengaging volunteers is presented.

Introduction

In any volunteer program, eventually, there will be a need for the volunteer administrator to deal with either an ineffective, unmotivated, unproductive, or high-maintenance volunteer. Depending upon the specifics, many options and alternatives for remediation exist. However, intervention is required. When all options have been exhausted, disengaging the volunteer from service to the organization becomes the last alternative. Branson and Long (1992) point out that dismissing a volunteer in an unprofessional manner only worsens the situation and may invite a lawsuit, negative media coverage, and a tarnished image for Extension.

Before volunteer disengagement is considered, the Extension professional must be confident that both the volunteer and the situation have been evaluated and an intervention or remediation plan has been put into place. Often, simply talking about the situation will either provide resolution, enlighten the Extension professional as to the full picture or illuminate extenuating circumstances, or motivate the volunteer to either step up and fulfill his or her responsibilities, or resign of his/her own accord.

Alternatives to Disengaging a Volunteer

The decision to disengage a volunteer from service should be regarded a last resort. Disengaging a volunteer is an admission that volunteer supervision has failed. Either screening, placement, or volunteer role design was faulty (McCurley, 2006). Often, the volunteer's performance is substandard because the person and task weren't well matched or the volunteer doesn't understand what's expected (Branson & Long, 1992).

McCurley provides several useful alternatives to disengaging a volunteer, including:

- Re-supervise (review expectations)
- Re-assign (transfer to a new position)
- Re-educate (different approach to teaching â maybe one on one)
- Re-vitalize (provide a sabbatical)
- Refer (to another agency for a fresh perspective)
- Retire (with dignity).

When disengagement occurs, how can an Extension professional terminate a volunteer's service? Since volunteers aren't paid, why would an Extension professional want to fire a volunteer? (McKee, nd). Often times, an Extension professional simply lets the unproductive or counterproductive volunteers continue doing what they want to do, when they want to it. Unfortunately, this lowers the morale of everyone else involved (McKee). If the volunteer is not furthering the Extension mission, helping to achieve the goals of the program, or is precipitating low morale among others, then the situation must be resolved.

Avoiding Volunteer Disengagement

The three most important steps in avoiding volunteer disengagement include:

- Placing the volunteer in the position providing the best possible fit between the requirements of the position and the talents, interests, skills, and abilities of the individual.
- Making sure that a volunteer position description is signed annually by both the volunteer and the Extension professional.
- Requiring all volunteers to attend orientation.

The worst, yet easiest action for the Extension professional is to simply ignore the situation. As difficult as it is, the volunteer needs to be advised of the situation and given a chance to respond and improve. Make sure that personality conflicts or style issues are not the root of the problem.

Difficult disengagement situations are generally avoided if position descriptions are developed and implemented, with effective supervision and clear communication practiced by both parties. An effective orientation program will prepare the volunteer for the role and help the volunteer to feel qualified for the assigned task. Be sure to document all meetings and keep a personnel file on all volunteers. Documents included in the volunteers file should include the following:

- Volunteer Application

- Results of Background Check

- Notes from interview questions

- References

- Signed Volunteer Position Description(s), Behavioral Standards, etc.

- Evaluations

Prior to counseling with the volunteer, the Extension professional should seek input and gather information from a variety of sources. Schedule an appointment with the volunteer to discuss the situation. Begin with a specific outcome in mind that will result in needed change, making sure all possible options have been considered. If the best alternative is disengagement, proceed toward that outcome. The volunteer may have been waiting for someone to provide an opportunity to move on. A tough conversation arises when the volunteer has no idea of the problem. Regardless of the conversation's outcome, it is important to be calm and sensitive; even if the volunteer is not. Although the session may be difficult, the alternative of ignoring the problem is more detrimental to the program.

A Systematic Approach for Disengaging Volunteers

Whether the reason for dismissal is that the volunteer is not fulfilling agreed upon responsibilities or is simply difficult to work with, action needs to be taken. However, disengaging a volunteer should be done systematically and fairly and be accomplished by following a pre-determined protocol (Heida, 2008; McCurley, 2006; McKee, nd). Following is a systematic approach to disengaging a volunteer from service.

1. Does the volunteer clearly understand his/her responsibilities? (Has the volunteer signed a position description? The position description outlines the required duties and establishes the Extension professional as the volunteer's supervisor.)

2. Has the Extension professional (serving as a volunteer administrator) carefully researched the issue to gather and document all facts? (Have multiple, diverse sources been contacted to obtain unbiased, fair information?)

3. Has the Extension professional met and counseled with the volunteer to advise him or her of the situation and developed a remediation plan? (Generally, two interventions should be scheduled prior to terminating a volunteer from service, except in situations involving violence, sex, or drugs.)

4. Are any extenuating circumstances influencing the situation? (Is the volunteer under stress? Has the volunteer's situation changed? Are other circumstances contributing to the situation?)

5. Has the volunteer been formally evaluated? (Has the concern been identified in a written evaluation? Has the evaluation been signed by both the volunteer and the Extension professional?)

It is important to remember that disengagement is a natural part of every relationship. When the time comes to formally disengage the volunteer from service, McCurley (2006) offers five suggestions. Conduct the meeting in a private setting to respect the volunteer's dignity. Be factual and concrete. State exactly what is being done, and give specific examples of why the volunteer is being dismissed. The point of negotiation and remediation has passed. The final decision has been made. Communicate to the volunteer that the objectives of the organization are not being met and that it is the best interest of all involved for the volunteer to move on. A follow-up letter should be sent thanking the volunteer for his or her time and reinforcing the fact that the relationship with the organization has concluded.

Following this protocol, volunteer disengagement, which is clearly the last alternative, may be avoided. Although the Extension professional may want to either ignore or avoid the situation, for the best interest of the organization, its programs, clientele, and other volunteers, the decision to disengage must sometimes be made. The goal of the organization is the priority, not the feelings of the volunteer or the Extension professional.

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