

How to Tell Your Volunteers Good-bye

You can make it a constructive experience for everyone involved.

By Mark Fox and Lindsay Sheehan

While there's a wealth of resources on how to recruit, select, train, and manage volunteers, little advice exists on how to orchestrate volunteers' exit from your organization. And yet, if planned correctly, that departure can be an opportunity to strengthen your volunteer program and improve the quality of the volunteer experience. Here are the keys to creating a positive leave-taking:

Give poor performers a chance to improve

First, be sure you have processes in place to ensure that termination is *not* the first recourse for a poorly performing volunteer. If there's a problem, the volunteer should be made aware of it and given a chance to improve. The best way to accomplish this is to perform performance assessments on a regular basis.

The evaluation process should be collaborative.

Let volunteers know in advance (preferably in a volunteer manual) the criteria you'll use to evaluate their work. Then, when it's time for the performance appraisal, meet and provide feedback you've gathered from supervisors, co-workers, and clients who have worked with the volunteer. Give concrete examples of effective performance.

The evaluation process should

be collaborative. You and the volunteer should reach a consensus on answers to the following questions:

- **In which areas** is the volunteer performing well?
- **In what respects** could the volunteer's performance be improved?
- **How could this improvement** be facilitated?
- **Are there ways** in which the volunteer's skills could be utilized elsewhere in the organization?

Let volunteers know in advance the criteria you'll use to evaluate their work.

Offer a probationary period

If volunteers are performing poorly, tell them how you'd like their behavior to change, and let them know you'll give them time in which to improve. A period of one to three months is usually sufficient. During this probationary period:

Solicit feedback from clients, co-workers, and others in close working contact with the volunteer. Ask them how the volunteer is performing and how performance can be improved.

• **Convey this feedback** to the volunteer in a constructive way that highlights strengths and weaknesses and makes suggestions for improvement

• **Provide training, coaching, mentoring, or other support** to help the volunteer strengthen areas that need to be improved.

At the end of the probationary period, meet with the volunteer. If performance has improved, explain that you'd like the volunteer to continue working for you. Give positive feedback on improved performance and, if necessary, point out areas that need continuing development.

If the volunteer hasn't made any improvement during the probationary period, however, you have the following choices:

- **Reassign** the volunteer to a role that's a better fit.
- **Prolong** the probationary period in the hope that the volunteer can eventually develop the skills necessary for effective performance.
- **Terminate** the volunteer.

Have a termination policy

When volunteers join your organization, let them know the circumstances under which they could be fired. Typically, termination will occur if a volunteer has engaged in any of the following:

- **theft**
- **unauthorized use** of nonprofit resources (such as computers or vehicles)
- **unauthorized accessing** or release of confidential information
- **volunteering while under the influence** of drugs or alcohol
- **illegal, unethical, violent, or unsafe acts** (including harassment, racism, or discrimination)
- **inability to perform** assigned responsibilities effectively.



Be sure these reasons for termination are in writing, along with a statement outlining volunteers' rights and responsibilities. For an example, see Figure 1.

Before terminating a volunteer, investigate any alleged wrongdoing. If you then decide to fire the volunteer, follow these guidelines:

- **Meet** with the volunteer. It's a good idea to have another staff member in the meeting with you to make it less likely that a disgruntled volunteer will react in a way that is confrontational or abusive.

- **Be clear** that you're terminating the volunteer's employment.

- **Don't argue** with the volunteer. If you've followed a good appraisal and investigation process, the rationale for terminating the volunteer should be clear-cut. Non-committal silence is the best response to a volunteer who is venting.¹

After the termination interview you should:

- **Follow up** with a letter of termination, restating the decision and outlining any termination requirements.

- **Inform** volunteers, paid staff, and clients who are affected that the terminated volunteer is no longer working for your organization.

Make good use of exit interviews

Exit interviews should *not* be used when a volunteer has been fired. A terminated volunteer is unlikely to provide constructive feedback. But when volunteers decide on their own to leave, an exit interview can help you learn a great deal about how you can improve your volunteer program.

In your policy manual, explain that volunteers are expected to take part in an exit interview, and describe the interview's purpose (see Figure 2). Documenting this expectation makes it clear that exit interviews are a natural part of the volunteer experience.

Ideally, the exit interview should be conducted by someone who didn't directly supervise the volunteer. In medium to large-sized nonprofits, a human resources professional would be ideal. The interviewer should search out answers to questions such as these:

- **How satisfied** was the volunteer with the support and resources provided?

- **Was the position** a good fit for the volunteer?

- **What aspects** of the volunteer program can be improved?

If an exit interview isn't possible (because the volunteer has left the area or is otherwise unavailable), mail the volunteer an exit questionnaire. In the questionnaire, cover the same questions you do in your exit interviews (see Figure 3).

Take the chance to give feedback

Exit interviews provide an excellent opportunity to recognize volunteers' contributions.² When giving this feedback:

- **Be sure it's genuine.** If you're not sincere, the volunteer will likely realize this and feel shortchanged or disappointed.

- **Speak** with warmth and enthusiasm.

FIGURE 1: Example Statement of Volunteer Rights and Responsibilities

Volunteers have the right to . . .

- an adequate orientation to the organization
- a clearly written job description
- be assigned to a job that suits their personal preferences, motivation, skills, experience, and qualifications
- be trained to do their job
- a suitable place to work
- a satisfying job
- know their supervisors and how to contact them
- be provided with adequate guidance and supervision
- protection, safety, and insurance when carrying out their assigned tasks
- have their personal information held confidentially
- have their out-of-pocket expenses reimbursed
- be involved in decisions that affect their areas of responsibility
- have their concerns and complaints heard
- be respected by co-workers, clients or members, and staff
- feedback about their performance
- be recognized for contributing their time, experience, ideas, and skills
- say "no"; volunteers should not be coerced into doing tasks against their wishes or that they don't feel qualified to do
- take time off for a holiday or for personal reasons
- resign from their position

Volunteers have the responsibility to . . .

- ensure they have the time necessary to take on a volunteer position
- work within the policies and rules of the organization
- respect the privacy of staff, clients or members, and other volunteers
- be reliable and dependable
- complete agreed hours and tasks
- inform the organization when they will not be available to volunteer
- be loyal to the organization
- speak up about important issues or concerns
- attend orientation and training sessions
- follow directions given by supervisors
- be team players and support staff and other volunteers
- be considerate about the views of staff, clients or members, and other volunteers
- identify their limitations and expectations
- be accountable and accept constructive criticism

Source: Graham Cuskelly & Christopher Auld, *Volunteer Management Program, Retaining Volunteers*, http://www.ausport.gov.au/clubs/documents/Vols_Retaining.pdf.

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• **Recognize** both overall contributions and specific examples of work that was particularly noteworthy.

• **Wait** till the end of the exit interview to give the feedback so that it won't affect the volunteer's appraisal of the volunteering experience.

Saying goodbye on this upbeat note will make it more likely that the volunteer will speak well of your organization in the community. It will also reinforce volunteers' feelings that their contributions are valued and that the time they've given has been worthwhile. ■

Mark A. Fox (mfox1@iusb.edu) is professor of management and entrepreneurship at Indiana University South Bend. This article was written while Dr. Fox was a student in the Master of Arts in Counseling and Organizational Consulting program at the Adler School of Professional Psychology in Chicago.

Lindsay Sheehan is the volunteer coordinator at Trilogy, Inc., a provider of behavioral health care services in Chicago.

Footnotes

¹McCurley, Steve, "How to Fire A Volunteer and Live to Tell About It," *Grapevine*, <http://www.casenet.org/program-management/volunteer-manage/fire.htm>

²Cuskelly, Graham and Auld, Christopher, *Volunteer Management Program: Retaining Volunteers*, http://www.ausport.gov.au/clubs/documents/Vols_Retaining.pdf

FIGURE 2: Human Resources Manual Extract

NOTICE: Volunteers are requested to provide at least one month's notice of their decision to terminate their involvement with the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) or the specific program(s) in which they volunteer.

EXIT INTERVIEW

Volunteers are requested to attend an exit interview. The purpose of this interview is to accomplish the following:

1. Bring closure to the volunteer/organization relationship.
2. Obtain feedback about the overall volunteer experience for the purpose of ongoing volunteer program development.
3. Obtain feedback about the specific program in which the person has been volunteering for the purpose of ongoing development of that program.

Exit interviews for board members will be conducted by other board members.

Source: *Exiting*, www.actontario.org/website/policy.nsf/fe2eb7a17383a57885256d51005613fa/7506520a5bff3bc48525692600705467!OpenDocument

To Learn More

Resources

Dickey, Marilyn, "How Exit Interviews Can Help Charities Improve Conditions for Their Remaining Employees," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, www.philanthropy.com/jobs/2004/06/24/20040624-771089.htm

McCurley, Steve, "Sample Volunteer Management Policies," www.casenet.org/program-management/volunteer-manage/sample-manage.htm

Penner, Monika, "Saying Goodbye: Exit Interviews," *Charity Village*, www.charityvillage.com/cv/research/rvol41.html

Other examples of rights and responsibilities statements:

- [/www.helpnow.org/volunteers_rights.php](http://www.helpnow.org/volunteers_rights.php)
- www.volunteering.com.au/become_a_volunteer/rights_responsibilities.asp
- www.adec.org.au/volunteerrights.html

Articles from Nonprofit World (available at www.snpo.org):

- "Are You Making It Hard to Volunteer?" (Vol. 22, No. 5)
- "Evaluating Your Organization from a Volunteer's Point of View" (Vol. 18, No. 1)
- "How to Attract the Best Volunteers" (Vol. 14, No. 4)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Volunteer Management (www.snpo.org/lino).

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Send old AND new address, with mailing label if possible, to:

The Society for Nonprofit Organizations
5820 Canton Center Road, Suite 165
Canton Michigan 48187

**The post office WILL NOT forward copies of *Nonprofit World*.
So let us know BEFORE you move so that you won't miss any issues.**



Figure 3: Extracts from an Exit Questionnaire from Trilogy, Inc.

Date: _____

Name (optional): _____

I have been involved with the volunteer program for:

- 3 to 6 months 6 mos. to 1 year 1 - 2 years Over 2 years

I have been matched as a:

- Reading tutor Special projects GED tutor Mentor
 Math tutor Other (specify) Computing tutor

Please answer the following questions as either:

Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD), or Not Applicable (N/A).

(circle one)

- | | | | | | |
|----|---|---|----|-----|---|
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 1. My initial contact with the Volunteer Coordinator was helpful and informative. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 2. Information about the program was presented in a clear manner. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 3. Information about the program was presented in a concise manner. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 4. I was adequately trained and informed prior to starting my volunteer experience. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 5. The Volunteer Coordinator made an appropriate participant match for me. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 6. The Volunteer Coordinator provided adequate support and guidance. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 7. I felt comfortable bringing comments and suggestions to the Volunteer Coordinator. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 8. I felt comfortable bringing my concerns and complaints to the Volunteer Coordinator. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 9. The Volunteer Coordinator was available when I needed assistance. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 10. I feel I have benefited from my experience as a volunteer. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 11. The amount of time I volunteered was adequate to meet my needs. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 12. I felt satisfied in my role as volunteer. |
| SA | A | D | SD | N/A | 13. I feel I have made an impact in the life of my participant(s). |

If you could change three things about Trilogy's volunteer program, what would you change?

1st: _____

2nd: _____

3rd: _____

What are the three things you liked most about being a volunteer at Trilogy?

1st: _____

2nd: _____

3rd: _____