Working with Volunteers – Problem Solving Procedures

There are three types of issue that anyone working with volunteers may have to deal with. <u>They are:</u>

- A complaint <u>about</u> a volunteer
- A complaint <u>by</u> a volunteer
- Unsatisfactory performance by a volunteer

• Complaints

When a formal complaint is made to an organisation, the same basic procedure should be appropriate whether a complaint is by, or about a volunteer. The point of having a complaints procedure is that the organisation acts (and is seen to act) in a fair and appropriate way to address the problem. The procedure must be written down and made known to all new volunteers and to those who work or have contact with volunteers.

Your organisation's standard complaints/grievance procedures can provide a basic model for this. However, it is vital to ensure that procedures relating to volunteers are appropriate to their unique place in the organisation. Avoid convoluted processes, which are overly bureaucratic or inaccessible to volunteers, but as a minimum, the following issues should be addressed:

1. **Who is the first point of contact for a complaint?**
   Most likely, it will be the Volunteer Manager, but whoever it is, suggest an alternative in case he/she is unavailable, e.g. on holiday, or is the subject of the complaint.

2. **If the complaint is not resolved at the first stage, what will happen subsequently?**
   It is not always necessary or appropriate to have a whole series of stages in a complaints procedure. Remember- the aim is to provide a clear and fair process which is appropriate to the voluntary nature of the relationship.

3. **Where does the final decision lie?**
   Is there any option to appeal against it?

4. **How long should each stage of the process take?**
   Be realistic

5. **Who will be involved?**
   Both the complainant and the subject(s) of the complaint should be allowed to bring someone along for moral support- friend or colleague.

6. **How will the process be recorded?**
   As a formal process, every stage should be clearly and accurately recorded. It is also a good idea to confirm arrangements and decisions in writing. All information from the process (written or verbal) should be accurately recorded and kept confidential.

Working within such a procedure can help to 'depersonalise' the process, making it a less emotional experience for the subject of the complaint, and therefore, increasing the likelihood of resolving the complaint without permanent damage to the relationships between individuals and with the organisation. If you find yourself in the position of arbiter or referee in a complaint, it is vital that your handling of the situation is seen to be fair and open. When dealing with a complaint by or about a volunteer, you should be very clear about:

- The particular incident of concern;
- Any previous incidents taken into account;
- Any remedial action to be taken, e.g. an apology, training, money to be paid back, etc.
- Any new behaviour expected;
- What will happen if the arrangements agreed are not adhered to.

Of course, all of this can and should be overridden in the case of a particularly serious incident. It should be clear to all what 'a particularly serious incident' is. This is best dealt with in a Code of Practice, which means you must give this some consideration now!

NB If the incident involves a criminal offence, the police should investigate, not the organisation.

What sorts of conduct might result in asking a volunteer to leave immediately?

Try and compile a list that describes the sorts of incidents that would result in a volunteer being asked to leave. Be realistic! Not all 'serious' problems will require such drastic action, but the safety of clients, staff and volunteers is paramount.

For example:

- Violence/physical abuse
- Inappropriate relationships, e.g. service users
- Sexual or emotional abuse
- Possession/use of or sale of alcohol or drugs during work
- Theft/financial abuse
- Reckless or careless behaviour
- Fraud/Misrepresentation
- Bullying or harassment

Look at organisational policies, e.g. on conduct, harassment and discrimination. A few of these may be specific to employees, but most will be applicable to everyone in the organisation. A good Code of Conduct should clearly outline the "Do's" and "Don'ts" for volunteers. It should also be fully explained at induction and incorporated into a Volunteers' Handbook.

Dealing with Poor Performance

Sometimes volunteers are unable to live up to their intentions or unwilling to live up to your expectations. Dealing with this situation obviously requires a different approach to handling a formal complaint. No set of rules can cover all circumstances that may arise, so instead of laying down a formal procedure as above, try to specify clearly and concisely the process necessary for the safe and efficient performance of work and for the maintenance of satisfactory relationships with clients, volunteers and staff.

Processes for dealing with problems with a volunteer's performance should usually be incorporated into standard support and supervision arrangements, in the first instance at least. Supervision should emphasise and encourage improvement in a volunteer's conduct and should not be viewed as a means of imposing sanctions. Problems with a volunteer's work should always be addressed on a one-to-one basis and good supervision should follow a pattern in dealing with problem behaviour:

1. The volunteer is made aware of the particular behaviour causing concern, and the consequences of this behaviour, e.g. for the client, organisation or volunteer, are made clear.
2. Offer the volunteer some motivation to change, focusing on the positive benefits of the desired behaviour and avoiding negative motivations, i.e. threats.
3. Ensure that the volunteer understands the change expected by explaining exactly what s/he needs to do and agreeing on some measurable goal or target.
4. Make sure that the volunteer gets the opportunity to practice the correct behaviour. Ensure s/he has enough time and support to make the change.
5. Recognise and praise the new behaviour to reinforce the change.

Even if the above steps are followed, the volunteer's behaviour may not change, and it is vital that you follow through with further action. Where ongoing problems lead to a formal complaint, the agreed complaints procedure should be implemented (see above). Depending on the nature of the volunteer role and the tenor of the relationship between volunteer and organisation, you may feel it is appropriate to develop a formal 'disciplinary type' procedure for volunteers (but don't use employment related language- call it a Problem-Solving procedure!). While the actual process would be similar to that described above, you could formalise it by:

• Putting the procedure in writing
• Setting a limit on the duration of the procedure; and
• Recording the process in a standardised format.

All of this simply emphasises the seriousness of the situation, and you need to be sure that this approach is both effective and appropriate to the voluntary nature of the relationship. If a problem goes this far, it may be simpler and more appropriate to the needs of both the volunteer and the organisation to simply agree to end the relationship. However, if the problem is with a specific aspect of the volunteer's performance, and not their attitude in general, there are alternatives to asking him/her to leave. You may consider these options:

• **Reassign** to a new area of work;
• **Retrain** to refresh or develop skills;
• **Revitalise** by offering some time out/break from their voluntary work;
• **Refer** to another organisation or a source of help;
• **Retirement,** making sure to recognise their contribution and encourage ongoing (social) links to the organisation.

However, if it does come down to asking a volunteer to leave, it is unlikely to be either pleasant or easy for you or for the volunteer. Minimise the blow by keeping the following tips in mind:

- Be certain about your decision. Write down your reasons for asking the volunteer to leave, or talk it over with your supervisor, if necessary.
- Always tell the volunteer in person and in private, but be mindful of your own safety if you think there is any danger of a bad reaction.
- Keep it brief and be direct. Have it in writing if you think this will help to emphasise the finality of the decision.
- Don't get drawn into argument or negotiation- that stage has passed.
- Tell others who need to know that the volunteer has left- the volunteer's supervisor, clients, personnel or reception for instance. You don't necessarily need to say why. Listed below are a range of useful policies and procedures that can help you be prepared to deal with difficult situations involving volunteers. All new volunteers should be made aware of these as part of their induction.

Problem Solving Procedures- these will outline the processes that the organisation will follow when a problem involving a volunteer arises.

Complaints Policy and Procedure- this sets out the process that the organisation will follow when a complaint is made about, or by a volunteer.

Difficult situations can be prevented or minimised in the first instance, by providing clear communication about the role and the expectations to all volunteers at induction, before beginning their role.

Code of Practice- a set of guides which set out the do's and don'ts of your volunteers.

Equal Opportunities Statement/Policy- this sets out the organisation's values and expectations in this respect.