



MANAGING NEGATIVE VOLUNTEERS

From a couple of experts...

Elle Fletcher of [Finders Keepers](#), a volunteer consulting firm in Cornwall, England:

“Rather than approaching the subject by addressing the behaviour, approach it by addressing the cause. Instead of reprimanding individuals... talk to them. Find out if there is an issue that is making them unhappy and causing them to be difficult.

“When you talk to individuals, you may discover that they are going through a very difficult time in their personal lives, and their demeanour actually has nothing to do with the (volunteer) role. In that circumstance you can suggest they take some time out of volunteering with you, or offer them an alternative role until things have settled, or start having regular one-to-ones so that they can offload to you rather than letting their situation impact on their role, other volunteers, staff and the organisation generally.

“Of course, being negative does genuinely make some people happy! If an individual is exhibiting negativity in some form that is significant enough to cause wider issues, but claims to be happy, you must be more direct, and highlight the effects of their negativity on the organisation (whatever they may be).

“What you must *not* do is let a situation that is becoming detrimental to your organisation in one way or another continue under any circumstances.

“Treating volunteers well extends to the way in which you tell them they’ve done something wrong and the way in which you address issues...As we always say, this situation is all about transparency. You wouldn’t do anything without good reason, so explain the reason(s). People can generally appreciate and understand where you’re coming from if you explain the reasons behind it.”

Susan Ellis, president, [Energize, Inc.](#), an international training, consulting and publishing firm based in Philadelphia:

“Sometimes volunteers are absolutely right to feel angry. The important thing is how to channel such emotion into constructive action.” Let people vent, Susan says. Get their perspective on the problem...what happened, who else was involved, was it an isolated event or a culmination of things,

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etc. Don't make a quick decision. Get as many facts as you can, first. Talk to the paid staff, to see what they might have observed.

“Allow (anger) to be felt, expressed, and replaced by immersion in action. Don't try to subdue or suppress anger, especially if it is justified.

“Your goal is to distinguish between legitimate concern/anger and an incorrect reaction to something that isn't as the volunteer perceives it to be.”

Susan suggests asking top managers to host a meeting, once facts have been gathered and evaluated, to explain the situation – as they understand it -- to staff and volunteers. Then give everyone in the organization the chance to help move toward a solution.