



Don't say these four things to an angry volunteer (and what you *can* say)

By Marla Benson

Editor's note: Marla Benson, founder and principal consultant of [Volunteer Relations Consulting Group](http://VolunteerRelationsConsultingGroup.com), founded the Volunteer Conflict Management SystemSM, from which this article is adapted. Marla holds the professional designations of Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) from the Society For Human Resource Management and Certified Mediator from the Mediation Training Institute, and is certified in alternative dispute resolution through the ADR program at Purdue University. She can be reached at mbenson@VolunteerRelations.com. We appreciate her sharing this information with VIS members.

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Volunteers are often the eyes and ears of an organization—by giving time and expertise, they are personally invested—and their feedback is critical to our growth. Sometimes, that feedback may come in a form that is more emotionally charged than a volunteer program administrator would prefer. As a matter of fact, at times, that energy may look and feel like a personal dispute or be infused with anger.

When we listen carefully, the actual context of the volunteer's message may be similar to what any customer might provide to an organization in the form of customer feedback. What every customer deserves when sharing feedback, is that they are met in a manner that is:

- **Safe:** responses do not mirror any negative emotions.
- **Non-judgmental:** listening openly without imposing personal bias.
- **Empathetic:** putting ourselves in the other person's 'shoes' to best understand the issue(s) at hand.

Here are some tips to support you in providing your volunteer with safe, non-judgmental and empathetic responses, while not (unintentionally) upsetting your volunteer further.

1. Don't Smile at an Angry Volunteer

Why you may want to:

We think that a smile will lighten the mood or show friendliness or openness.

2750 Killarney Drive, Suite 202, Woodbridge, VA 22192 p 800.222.8920 f 703.739.0761

Why it doesn't work:

A smile to an angry volunteer sends a message that you may be condescending toward their issue or not take them seriously. A smile may come across as an attempt to sway them from being angry, but keep in mind that they may have a right to be angry—and for some, it's how they're used to getting their issue across.

What to do instead:

Your body language and vocal tone should be neutral, yet present, to encourage the person to continue until they feel heard and can move on to exploring solutions.

Use these body language, listening, and helpful tone techniques instead:

- Eye contact (easy does it ... not too intense, just be present).
- Neutral face — not happy, nor sad.
- Head nods (show that you're listening by acknowledging what they're saying).
- Face the person directly (don't turn away like you're ready to run out of the room).
- Open, unclenched body—no crossed arms, no clenched fists.
- Use a quieter-than-normal vocal volume than you would during an average conversation.

2. Don't Tell an Angry Volunteer How They Feel**Why you may want to:**

We think we are being empathetic when we use phrases like:

'I can see that you are really angry...'

'You are (unhappy, furious, upset, crushed) because...'

Why it doesn't work:

It's not unusual for an angry volunteer to experience an array of emotions. When you try to tag someone else's emotions with words like unhappy, angry or upset, that can simply inflame the person further. Their reaction may be to deny the words you are using. Now, you have diverted the conversation into an argument.

What to do instead:

Use empathetic, neutral phrases to indicate that you are listening and doing your best to relate. These can be used without causing a negative reaction because you are not attempting to define the volunteer's exact emotions. (Truth: they may not even know what they are feeling, so just be supportive and let their story flow).

'I can appreciate that you appear to have strong feelings about this.'

'I can hear the intensity in your voice.'

'I can appreciate that you feel passionate about this...'

3. Don't Push Your Solutions**Why you may want to:**

We think we are providing enlightened, personal wisdom when we use phrases like:

'Well, what you should do is...'

'That's an easy fix, all you have to say is...'

'When that happened to me, I...'

Why it doesn't work:

To provide an angry person with your solution may lead to a solution that doesn't stick (because they are not in the right frame of mind to hear it), or that they now want to argue with you about.

What to do instead:

You'll want to lead the person towards their own solutions by using gentle, supportive questions.

'What do you think your options are?'

'If you were advising someone else in your situation, what would you tell them?'

'Are you asking for my advice?'

4. Don't Hijack the Conversation

Why you may want to:

We think we are being sympathetic when we tell our stories.

'Your situation is just like the time when I was...'

'I know exactly what that's like, when I...'

'You're so lucky, when that happened to me...'

Why it's doesn't work:

When you attempt to sympathize by starting to share a story of your own, you can see the volunteer take a deep breath and sigh with the realization that they aren't going to be able to complete their story. You've now hijacked the conversation to being about you.

What to do instead:

Use good listening questions:

'Tell me more about how...'

'When that happened, what did you do next?'

For the most part, your role with the angry volunteer isn't to say much at all, but to encourage him/her to discuss the details of their issue. It's the only way for them to express the information of the situation, and clearing a path that will allow solutions to come to fruition.

With your empathetic and supportive listening skills, the once-angry volunteer now feels heard and will be more open to exploring mutually beneficial solutions that are best for the volunteer, the organization and YOU!