



Bruce Trail
CONSERVANCY



Dealing with Difficult Volunteers

A Resource

Contents

BTC Volunteer Policy	1
Step by Step Remedial Guidelines.....	2
Sample Form for Record of Offenses	3
Sample Letter	4
 Resource Articles:	
The volunteer as bully = the toxic volunteer	5
Eight Myths About Difficult Volunteers.....	7
Dealing with difficult people.....	9
How to Effectively Manage Conflict.....	12

The Bruce Trail Conservancy – Volunteer Policy

VOL.03.01 Release/Reassignment of Volunteers

Policy

Volunteers who do not adhere to the policies and procedures of the Bruce Trail Conservancy (BTC) or who fail to satisfactorily perform their volunteer assignment are subject to release or reassignment from their position. Reassignment of a volunteer will occur when a volunteer is unable to continue in their current role, but is able to volunteer in another capacity. Release of a volunteer will be the last resort.

Procedure

1. For a volunteer at the BTC level, two of the BTC President, the BTC Vice President of Programs, or a designate, will meet with the BTC volunteer to discuss the area of concern. For a volunteer at the Club level, two of the Club President, the Club Volunteer Coordinator, or a designate, will meet with the volunteer to discuss the area of concern.
2. If the volunteer assignment has been unclear, or if more training is required, the assignment will be clarified or retraining will be offered.
3. If the volunteer needs to be reassigned, training will be provided for the new role.
4. If the problem still persists, the volunteer will be released from their position.

Step by Step Remedial Guidelines

1. Keep a written record of all instances where problems have arisen. Try to get multiple sources and corroboration from other people within your Club.
2. Inform the BTC President and BTC Executive Director that an issue has come up with a volunteer.
3. Have a one on one informal talk with the difficult volunteer to try and resolve the problem. . Use this as an opportunity to discuss both the volunteer's and the Club's perspective and ways to rectify the problems the volunteer is causing/experiencing.
4. If the problem persists after the one on one informal talk, schedule a formal meeting, with a third person in attendance to act as a witness. This could be someone from your Club or from the BTC Board. In this meeting provide the volunteer with a letter outlining all instances of difficult behaviour that have been documented. The letter should also clearly explain the consequences that will follow if there are any further transgressions. Allow the volunteer to give their view on the matter. Try to resolve the issue. The opportunity for reassignment can also be discussed as a way of resolving the issue.
5. If the issue cannot be resolved, look into reassignment or resignation/dismissal of the volunteer. See policy above.
6. When dismissing a volunteer, acknowledge the service they have given to your Club. Some volunteers have given many years of good volunteer service before a problem arises. Offer the volunteer a dignified exit (ie let them step down themselves from their position). If the volunteer must be dismissed, do so in a private setting, if possible, with a witness present. Make sure you keep a record of the reasons for dismissing the volunteer.
7. If further action is required, advise the BTC President and BTC Executive Director. A person can be prevented from becoming a member of the BTC. This approach should be used as a last resort.

Sample Form for Record of Offenses

Name of Volunteer:

Date of incident:

Witnesses:

Details of issue:

Other people involved:

Report creator:

Date of Report

Sample Letter

Use Club letterhead

Date:

Dear Volunteer,

It has come to our attention that there have been ____ instances of concerns regarding behaviour that you have exhibited.

Specific information concerning difficult behaviour and dates should be given here.

This behaviour is unacceptable within the _____ Club.

Our club strives to provide a rewarding and successful volunteering experience for all, and to that end we must ask that you conduct yourself accordingly.

As such we would ask that you alter or make amends for the behaviour/conflict noted above. If your behaviour is not corrected, you may either be reassigned to a new role or be asked to resign as a volunteer.

Your service to our club has been greatly appreciated in the past, and it is our hope that no further action on the part of the Club will be necessary.

Sincerely

Club President

cc. BTC President, BTC Executive Director

Article #1 - The volunteer as bully = the toxic volunteer By Jayne Cravens, MSc

Reprinted from Charity Village

Summary: Tips and strategies on how to deal with a disruptive volunteer. Make sure you don't ignore the problem, it won't go away on its own.

So many people — media and corporate people in particular — like to talk about volunteers in the most flowery language possible: volunteers as selfless and hard-working and nice and sweet and huggable. Gosh golly, don't you love them?!?

I'm not fond of using fuzzy language to talk about volunteers, because I find it degrading and disrespectful. It devalues volunteers and their role in organizations.

While I was in Australia leading workshops on volunteer management earlier this year, one of the very hot-topics that volunteer managers wanted to talk about was volunteers as bullies. So many were facing a toxic volunteer at their organizations who used abusive language with other volunteers, paid staff and even clients, disrupted meetings and plans that other volunteers were leading or organizing, and were uncooperative regarding policies and procedures. These toxic volunteers were capable of bringing meetings, planning, events, and even entire programs to a halt.

Yet the volunteer managers felt powerless to deal with the bullies. Why? Because these volunteers had often been at the organization longer than the volunteer managers had; because the volunteers were also financial donors; because the volunteers had been honoured in the past regarding their service, or because the staff was afraid of the volunteers and didn't want to provoke them further. Volunteer managers told me that just one volunteer complaint - including complaints about being reprimanded for not following policy -- would result in senior leadership displeasure with the volunteer manager. One person said that her supervisor, in regards to complaints by a long-time volunteer who did not want to follow policy, said "I just don't want to hear it. Make her happy."

One avoidance tactic upper management uses regarding bullies is to require everyone to go into a conflict management workshop. Those workshops can be really great for other issues, but don't solve the problem of a bully. In fact, volunteer managers report to me that bullies either come up with a way to beg off attending such or are brilliant at hijacking such workshops, portraying themselves as victims and using the tactics they learn at the workshop to divert responsibility from themselves regarding bullying behaviour. And I have to admit that I've seen it happen myself.

Since those workshops in Australia, I've kept my eye out for good resources regarding bullying in the workplace. One that I found was a blog from the Open University, *Office conflict: the impact of workplace bullying*. Another terrific resource is *How to deal with workplace bullying and how to tackle bullying at work*, also from the United Kingdom. My favorite resource, however, regarding petty tyranny in the workplace is the book *The No Asshole Rule — Building*

a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't, which I've blogged about before. Robert I. Sutton's book is about paid employees, but it most definitely applies to volunteers.

My own advice as well:

- **Document, document, document.** Have dates, places and details about the actions of a toxic volunteer in writing. Have details in writing on the consequences of the bullying, such as other volunteers not participating in activities if the toxic volunteer will be there, volunteers dropping out of participation altogether, little or no new volunteers participating in certain activities, and complaints from other volunteers, paid staff and clients. Be ready to present these to your supervisor, the head of your human resources department, and even the head of your organization. Don't wait to be asked to present this information, and don't be discouraged if your initial presentation of such doesn't prompt action; it may take several presentations to get the message across that the toxic volunteer must be let go.
- **Be consistent in applying the rules to *all* volunteers**, so there is no possibility of a toxic volunteer claiming you are singling her or him out, something she or he will be tempted to claim to other volunteers and to paid staff with whom she or he has a long-term relationship. This starts to create an atmosphere where the toxic volunteer will start to feel unwelcomed and will indirectly encourage her or him to move on.
- **Be willing to lose the bully**, as well as her or his allies among your volunteers, and to answer questions from staff or other volunteers who express displeasure at their departure. If you create an environment where the bully cannot engage in toxic behaviour without having consequences for that behaviour, that volunteer will probably leave your organization, but not without a dramatic exit, like a fiery letter or email or an emotional final meeting, and she or he may successfully encourage other volunteers to leave as well. Say goodbye and wish them well and calmly move on, focusing on your remaining volunteers, reaching out to volunteers who left because of the toxic volunteer, recruiting new volunteers, staying dispassionate and staying positive.
- **Never, ever trash talk the bully to other staff or volunteers**, even if you consider those staff or volunteers sympathetic to you. Those words could come back to haunt you. Be above reproach in any comments you make about the toxic volunteer, even among allies. It's fine for volunteers to share complaints with you regarding a bullying volunteer, but keep it dispassionate and don't allow them to cross a line where they could be accused of being bullies themselves.
- **Be on the lookout for misinterpretations and misrepresentations of your actions**, and ready to respond to such immediately, quickly and decisively.

Above all, don't think that the situation will somehow work itself out. It won't.

Article #2 - Eight Myths About Difficult Volunteers By Sue Vineyard

Reprinted from Energize Inc From New Competencies for Volunteer Administrators

Summary: Examining some of the myths surrounding dealing with difficult volunteers. This article is written for Volunteer Coordinators, but is a useful resource for anyone who has a difficult volunteer in their Club.

Let's look at some myths in regard to these very troublesome volunteers. This list may help you clarify the depth of problems you face because of difficult volunteers. If you find yourself believing one of the following, you may have to readjust your thinking as you plan your strategy in dealing with identified problems.

The MYTH statements that confound problems & make them worse

1. **Ignoring a problem will make it go away.**

WRONG. It may go underground and be more difficult to confront, but it will not go away, unless, of course, you plan to simply wait for the person to die, the height of avoidance.

2. **No one else notices. I'm the only one who is suffering.**

You must be kidding. Others see the problem and can shift their anger or frustration to you, wondering why you don't take control and stop the negative behavior.

3. **I can fix/change the problem person.**

WRONG. You can't and shouldn't. That's not why you're there. "Fixing" volunteers will drain your energy, time and effectiveness and ignore the 98% of volunteers who are doing a great job. Keep in mind, I am not talking about people who are causing minor problems and simply need to be set straight m talking about real trouble-makers who are dysfunctional.

4. **There's good in everyone. I just need to give them time to show it.**

WRONG. There are some nasty people. How they got that way is not your problem or challenge. Savior is not in your job description. Time won't fix everyone and in the meantime you'll lose good people and possibly hurt some clients who don't deserve to put up with abuse.

5. **If I confront them, it will make things worse.**

Not if you do it carefully and calmly. NOT confronting difficult behavior will cause more trouble, however.

6. **If I confront them they'll leave and the program will die.**

If your program rides on the whim of one individual, you need to look for a new job. That is simply too much control, power and dependence for one person.

7. If I'm really the caring and all-accepting person I should be, I can handle them.

STOP IT! You are beginning to believe your own press clippings. You're a volunteer administrator, not a saint. Don't see other people's dysfunction as somehow a test of your worth. They are the problem, not you.

8. If push them out they will be mad at me.

Maybe. Maybe not. If they become angry, so be it. You did what was best for the program and the people it serves. Sticks and stones and all of that....

Others may actually be relieved to be out of a situation that was uncomfortable for them.

All of the above are MYTHS. They are WRONG. Eight times wrong. (Well maybe only 7 ½ times wrong.)

Article #3 - Dealing with difficult people By Paulette Vinette, CAE

Reprinted from Charity Village

Summary: Difficult personalities can be challenging. In this short article two different types of difficult personality are used as a case study. Her way of suggesting improvements is by criticizing. Mary can be difficult to deal with because she deals from the negative side of her personality. Joe, on the other hand, is short tempered and abrupt. He saves his critical observations for in-person meetings and bullies staff over the phone in between meetings.

Having worked with more than ten not-for-profit organizations as a paid staff person, and thereafter with over 50 as a consultant, I have learned valuable lessons about how to deal with difficult people (replace with members, volunteer, donors, as applicable). This article is a sharing of my personal learning; it is by no means scientific.

The nexus of not-for-profit organizations is the involvement of volunteers. It is their organization. In most cases, these individuals donate their time and talent. This sets up an interesting dynamic regarding their expectations of those working with them. High-performing organizations set up clear roles and responsibilities to direct “who’s on first”. However, certain personalities can create an atmosphere that also has to be dealt with.

Case: Mary is committed to being a very active volunteer; so much so that she shares her opinions by e-mail with a very wide distribution list of volunteers and staff. Her way of suggesting improvements is by criticizing. Mary can be difficult to deal with because she deals from the negative side of her personality. Joe, on the other hand, is short tempered and abrupt. He saves his critical observations for in-person meetings and bullies staff over the phone in between meetings.

It's not you; it's them

Difficult people are just that - difficult to deal with. For their own reasons, they have adopted an unconstructive stance with you and/or others (or in some cases everyone) and they are not likely to change that easily. Such behaviour can be described as: explosive, sarcastic, deprecating, blaming, acquiescing, negative, indecisive, complaining, and more. So the first lesson is to put their behaviour into perspective: it is their behaviour. They own it. A safe place for you to start is to control your reaction to their behaviour, and then find ways to manage your relationship with them.

People who work from their negative side are often unaware of how they affect others. I have learned that by changing my attitude toward them and changing my viewpoint about what makes them “wrong”, I can more easily begin to find ways to work well with them.

A practical tool in the not-for-profit world is *process*. Following bylaws, policies, procedures, guidelines, rules, etc., can serve as impartial defences against difficult members, volunteers or staff. A supportive tool when using process is agreeing on the *desired outcome*. This can

galvanize emotions, efforts and intentions in a shared direction. In our example, Mary was asked to only e-mail the chair with her concerns and that person would deal with them as appropriate. Joe was approached by the chair, who explained that his aggressive verbal style was not appropriate and would not be tolerated. Joe was asked to discuss his concerns with the chair directly and the chair would work with involved parties to rectify any problems.

Realize you have options for dealing with difficult people

Many times, you can turn a bad situation to your advantage by disarming people with kindness and allowing them to feel important. Arrogant people are often hiding behind vulnerability and insecurity, so paying them compliments can alleviate their need to be defensive. Dominant peoples' strong energy can sometimes be channelled by allowing them leadership roles (the positive side of that energy). However, it is important that the parameters of their role be explicit and agreed upon.

Under no circumstance should staff or volunteers tolerate bullying or any form of behavioural abuse. In such cases, it is advised to use an independent, third-party to facilitate your conflict resolution. And remember, verbal abuse is abuse. It is not okay. If the difficult person is your superior (chair, president, boss, etc.) then you need to discuss your concerns and ask for a resolution; if none is offered, you still have choices.

Difficult people come in many guises

Not all difficult people are aggressive; some are quite passive. Some are habitually indecisive. Some are just plain pessimistic. Some never speak their mind and just act gloomy. Body language sends very effective messages - both ways. Study theirs and watch yours. If you fold your arms, raise your voice, interrupt, or unconsciously clench your fists your body language will likely be observed.

Any discussion seeking a resolution should include giving and getting feedback - an open-minded, two way conversation. Open-ended questions are best to bring out root causes for difficulty. Such conversations can become quite emotional. Remember, if you have to criticize, criticize only the behaviour and not the person. Expect and ask for the same. Turn criticism into an opportunity statement. Successful negotiations require a win/win. Each party should feel they have gained in some way.

Timing is another tool to use when dealing with difficult people. In our e-mail mode of rapid response, resist the urge to reply until you have had sufficient time to calmly and positively select from your response options. For me, this is an overnight approach. My best strategic approach decisions often occur during my morning shower.

Decide to manage your relationship with difficult people

Avoid becoming a victim of a difficult person's personality or communication style. If you surface conflicts, clarify options to move resolution forward. Use a decision-making system. Interrupt politely and get specific. Reassure and follow through. When necessary, draw the line.

If you identify positive intent and keep the momentum moving in a positive direction, you increase your chances of improving your relationship with difficult people. Don't paint them into a corner; suggest new options for improving your relationship. Tell your truth and actively listen.

Finally, no matter how your experience in dealing with difficult people turns out, remember that each exchange, whether good or bad, is a lesson on how to deal with others.

And oh, what if that difficult person is you? You can train yourself to "catch" yourself when you're negative, defensive, and pessimistic, or whatever your negative streak might be. Resist the urge to blurt "it" out; do not react quickly. If you feel defensive, ask others to restate their comment and listen carefully (not defensively). Paraphrase what you think you heard. Commit yourself to staying open-minded. If you are wrong, admit your mistake; consider sharing what you have learned from it. Get help.

Article #4 - How to Effectively Manage Conflict By Jack Shand

Reprinted from the Charity Village

Summary: Conflict can be particularly harmful in organizations that rely on volunteers who increasingly have fewer hours to give and are not going to stick around in an unpleasant environment. This article examines ways to deal with conflict and how to stop conflict before it starts.

Conflict is well defined by the Chinese proverb that says there are three truths: your truth, my truth, and the truth. Conflict can play out with co-workers, in boardrooms, among volunteers, at annual meetings with members, and in working relationships with stakeholders. It's pretty much inevitable in organizations where you have passionate people committed to changing lives and who are not always going to be unanimous on the best means to accomplish worthy ends.

Whether the disagreement is civil or more volatile, conflict usually prompts a flight or fight response in those involved. Conflict is unsettling and makes all of us uncomfortable.

Conflict can be particularly harmful in organizations that rely on volunteers who increasingly have fewer hours to give and are not going to stick around in an unpleasant environment. Nonprofit employees who work with volunteers and who are held accountable for organizational results are on the edge of the blade when managing staff-volunteer conflict: one miscalculation can result in the axe.

So how should a nonprofit leader best deal with conflict in the organization? These tips can be used when conflict arises:

- **Volunteer to volunteer correction is sacrosanct.** Staff may feel they are being helpful and constructive when correcting a volunteer but to do so can be perilous. Indeed, staff may know more about better practices in governance and operations than most volunteers, however, the messenger must always be the volunteer's peer, not an employee. The chair (whether the board chair or a committee chair) has the responsibility to communicate expectations and hold members accountable. This duty must be part of the orientation and training for volunteer leaders.
- **Heed the hierarchy.** Related to the first point, employees other than the executive director should communicate any real or potential conflict with a volunteer to the executive director (or the human resources manager). The executive director can then raise the concern with the board chair for appropriate follow-up. In effect, you are simply getting help from your supervisor.
- **Get to the heart of it:** Be prepared for conflict with questions that may help to move the matter forward more positively. These may include:

- How did the conflict arise?
- Do we all have the information we need to make a decision? If not, can we agree what information we need to obtain and share?
- What interests do we share here?
- Where do we agree?
- Is consensus possible? (consensus: I can live with and support it)

There are scores of resources on the Internet including guides for conflict management and resolution.

- **The power of apology.** Before the conflict rises to a boiling point, think hard (and quickly) whether this is where you want to make your last stand. If it is a simple misunderstanding and you feel comfortable doing so, say you're sorry. An apology usually disarms the most engaged antagonist. It need not be an admission that you were wrong but rather that there was a misunderstanding. For example, "I could have been clearer in explaining what the board wants to see accomplished with this initiative and I'm sorry it resulted in a misunderstanding between us." As **Dale Carnegie** wrote, "The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it."
- **Empathize.** I know it's easier written (or said) than actually lived in the heat of the moment, but be sensitive as to why the other person is so oppositional and see if you can determine the underlying cause. Try to reflect on their interests as well as their position. "The angry people are those people who are most afraid," wrote **Dr. Robert Anthony**. Consider why the person is so upset — perhaps they just don't understand and so are feeling inadequate (something I can sure relate to whenever I have a computer issue I can't fix).
- **It's so important I'm prepared to own it.** When you have a co-worker or member who is convinced they are right, and you feel that you may be able to live with their preferred course of action over your own, ask whether they (or for that matter, you) are willing to take full ownership of the decision and be accountable if it proves not to work out. "I can see you feel strongly about this so I wanted to know that if we agree, are you comfortable taking ownership and responsibility for the decision?" This may work in one-on-one situations, but not so with a group such as a board of directors (once a board decides, all directors must own the decision).
- **Be polite and calm.** How we speak and what we say with our body language can push a conflict from mild to miserable. Use phrases (without being patronizing) such as "I understand" and speak softly. Use professional language and don't be inflammatory or personal. Try to gather facts without appearing to cross-examine the other person.
- **Invest in relationships.** If we think of how we respond to conflict with loved ones, it quickly becomes evident that a valued relationship is worth extra effort and compromise to keep intact. Individuals who work in silos, or who tend to be the lone

wolf around the office, make it difficult for co-workers to understand who they are and what they care about. Communication and understanding are the best investment to mitigate conflict. Take the time and make the effort to get to know your colleagues.

There will be times with a colleague that a conversation over coffee will mend fences and bruised feelings. This is usually a good tactic for minor conflicts in day-to-day work. Remember to listen and be open to how you (or your actions) are perceived.

Some times of the year, and some events in the organizational calendar, bring on more stress than others. Heed the good advice of health professionals to also take care of yourself so that when there is conflict at work, you are not faced with the added challenge of dealing with it when you're emotionally overwhelmed or physically tired.