

# Volunteer Dissatisfaction

## You Can't Fire Me, I'm a Volunteer!

If you've worked in volunteer management for any length of time, you've probably heard some version of this fear-inducing refrain. Your first encounter with it may be as a direct threat, a mild joke, or overheard when the volunteer speaking doesn't know you're around. And I'm going to tell you the truth: there is no easy resolution to this comment.



Fortunately, there is only one wrong choice. But unfortunately, ***the wrong choice is the one you most want to make: to pretend you didn't hear it, accept it as a joke, or apologize*** to the threatening individual hoping they will forget it and move on.

You're much better off understanding the gravity of the situation, doing some institutional soul seeking, and looking at how things have evolved from the perspective of what's most likely a long-time volunteer. What's actually going on and what can you do about it?

### Behind the Curtain

When someone shares this sentiment, what they're really saying is, "I disagree with what is being asked of me. This is different than my past experience here and I'm going to refuse!" Put another way, this comment is a powerplay by volunteers who don't believe in the current leadership. ***Understanding both recent changes in the organization and the relationship of the person to these changes can help.***

The first time I heard a volunteer say this, it didn't refer to my direct leadership: it was about someone I supervised. I overheard two volunteers talking and convincing each other it was OK to refuse specific directions given by their supervisor. I selfishly chose not to intervene, thinking this was their problem to handle, not mine.

A few months later, the same two people were "poisoning the well" by sowing discontent with other volunteers. At that point, it became very much my problem because the cancerous attitude was spreading and began to cripple our ability to provide services efficiently and effectively. As they say, once the coach loses the locker room, there's not much point left in keeping the coach.

### Addressing Volunteer Dissatisfaction

The right way to handle disgruntled volunteers is simple. ***The core thing to remember is that communication is key: people fear what they don't understand, and all too often volunteers are kept in the dark when nonprofits change strategy or processes:***

- ***Listen to concerns and invite volunteers to freely share solutions and challenges.*** What changes don't align with their take on the broader vision of the nonprofit, and are they even aware of your goals and overarching strategies? Perhaps a bit of context can sort things out.

- Identify how tasks and roles fail to advance the organization's mission, or clarify how they do. Identify the disconnect so you know what intervention will be most effective.
- Respond! Based on insights from the first two steps, take the appropriate action. This might include explaining changes in your goals and operations and sharing why those were made, and how new strategies can lead to more impact on those you serve.
- If possible, invite feedback about the changes and any new roles and processes. ***People who are allowed to provide input, even when that input isn't incorporated, are more likely to have buy-in to processes instead of trying to sabotage them.***

In my case, once I realized the problem was expanding, I intervened. I explained the changes and new processes to each volunteer, allayed their fears that they would no longer be useful, and helped them understand how the changes would enable us to serve even more people. All it took was a quick chat to help them realize these changes were good for everyone!

Remember that if you're too busy to deal with a disgruntled volunteer now, the biggest threat isn't that she or he will quit; it's that she'll quit, take all of her friends with her, and besmirch the good name and reputation you worked so hard to build up—all because you were afraid or too busy to bring her into the loop.