



Dealing with Volunteer Performance Issues

The performance of your volunteers directly impacts your organisation's overall success. If issues are left unaddressed, they can become deeply embedded, leading to greater negative consequences for your volunteers, organisation, and clients. Tackling challenges early makes a world of difference and benefits everyone.

In simple terms, performance refers to the ability to produce required results, measured against standards such as accuracy, completeness and speed. However, performance issues can also relate to insufficient skills or ability, poor work ethic, behavioural or inter-personal issues, and more.

Start Well

Poor performance can often stem from a volunteer being placed in a role that isn't the right fit for them. Taking care during the recruitment process helps minimise the chances of engaging unsuitable volunteers. Be sure to assess an applicant's ability to perform the necessary tasks during interviews and reference checks to set everyone up for success.

Set Realistic Targets

Role descriptions are vital when addressing performance issues, and will help a volunteer understand the targets or outcomes expected of them. Ensure these targets are achievable, and communicate clearly how the volunteer can achieve them. Small gaps in someone's ability or knowledge can generally be resolved with training.

Identify the Issue

Regularly checking in with your volunteers and having your finger on the pulse of your volunteer team will help you to identify any issues early.

Reasons for performance issues vary greatly. They can often stem from a person's ability or lack

thereof, and/or poor motivation. Other reasons might include personal issues; not feeling supported in the role; not understanding expectations; not believing in or supporting the ethos of an organisation; or not relating well with a colleague.

Before you address a performance issue, take an objective look at the situation. People with low ability may have been poorly matched to the role or may no longer be receiving the support that previously helped them to perform well. Make sure the volunteer has all the resources they need to perform their duties well. Listen to comments from others, and make sure you have clear evidence of poor performance to support your discussion.

Take Action

Treat all volunteers fairly and consistently. Don't shy away from addressing issues out of fear of hurting feelings or because someone seems a bit intimidating. It's important to give volunteers the chance to improve their behaviour. Be upfront, direct, and empathetic in your approach.

Use respectful, non-confrontational language when addressing performance concerns. Statements like "You're doing it wrong" can feel accusatory. Instead, ask open-ended questions to understand any challenges the volunteer may be facing.

Consider having them complete a self-assessment of their performance and compare it with your own observations. Provide constructive feedback, suggest solutions, and offer ongoing support.

While volunteers aren't covered by the Employment Relations Act, it's best practice to follow similar processes, such as verbal and written warnings, to ensure fairness and clarity.

Improve Performance

Start by giving the benefit of the doubt, then take action to address any concerns. Work together to develop a clear strategy or action plan, offering support and regular feedback along the way. Set a realistic timeframe for improvement to keep progress on track.

- **Resupply** – does the volunteer have what they need to perform their tasks well and meet expectations? If not, what do they need?
- **Retrain** – provide additional training, either externally or internally. A mentor to work one on one with them might be appropriate. Ask what development and support they might need.
- **Redesign** – can the job be redesigned to suit the person's abilities? What tasks can be delegated to someone else?
- **Reassign** – is there another role within your organisation that better suits their skills and knowledge?
- **Release** – sometimes a volunteer may not be a good fit and it is time for them to move on. With a range of not-for-profits seeking volunteer support, the right role or organisation could be elsewhere.

Review Your Programme

If your organisation regularly encounters performance issues, it may be an opportunity to identify areas for improvement within your volunteer programme. Strengthening the following aspects can enhance the quality of your programme and create a more positive, effective experience for everyone involved:

- Recognising and valuing volunteers
- Developing a clear strategic vision for volunteer involvement
- Understanding and utilising the skills of volunteers
- Ensuring adequate resources for the volunteer programme
- Selecting strong, supportive Volunteer Coordinators
- Upholding best practices and positive behaviour
- Regularly evaluating and refining the programme
- Keeping processes simple and accessible

By focusing on these areas, you can create a thriving volunteer programme that benefits both your organisation and its volunteers.

In Conclusion

Losing great volunteers due to the impact of a poorly performing or misbehaving volunteer can have serious consequences. To keep your volunteer programme running smoothly, address issues promptly and effectively while keeping the bigger picture in mind—regularly evaluate your programme. Prevention is always better than having to find a solution later.