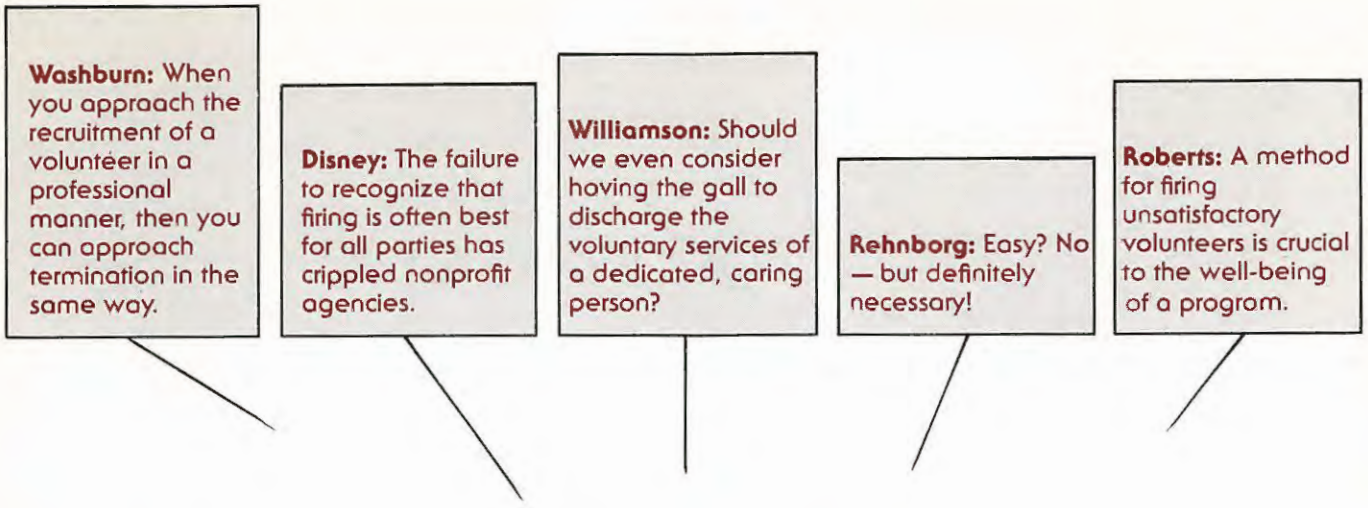

SHOULD VOLUNTEERS BE FIRED?

The concensus, among five professionals in the volunteer field, is "Yes, if . . ." Here are their considerations:

THE STAFF'S POINT OF VIEW — Vanda Williamson

TO TERMINATE OR REASSIGN, TO fire or relieve. Whatever name it's given, the chilling reality is the same for the volunteer: I—a person who has opened my inner self to strangers, offered my talents, skills, hard work, body and soul to this organization, dedicated myself to a concept so that I'm willing to give my services free and gratis in THIS day and economic age—have been dismissed! I'm crushed. My ego feels pin-head sized and dented. I hardly feel guilty of wrongdoing. What a way to treat me!

Should we even consider having the unmitigated gall of discharging the voluntary services of a dedicated, caring person? Let's look at this question from the paid staff person's point of view, particularly from within the school system where I work. I discovered that many teachers were initially reluctant to have a volunteer's services because of a fear of being "stuck" with them.

They were afraid that a volunteer might not adhere to the professional guidelines of dependability and confidentiality. They felt there may be personality conflicts, inappropriate placement, lack of training or unacceptable work. They suspected volunteers would come in for the "wrong" reasons, i.e., to select their child's teacher for the following school year, to pick up gossip on a situation, to snoop or pry into the records, to check out a teacher's discipline methods. They also thought a volunteer might want "in" for political reasons, such as a friend of a school board member who wanted information.

The fears of the teachers and school administrators were as numerous as the sands on the beach. Yet their need for additional personnel was great, especially with the new (1973) emphasis on individualized instruction. What they needed was the assurance of a

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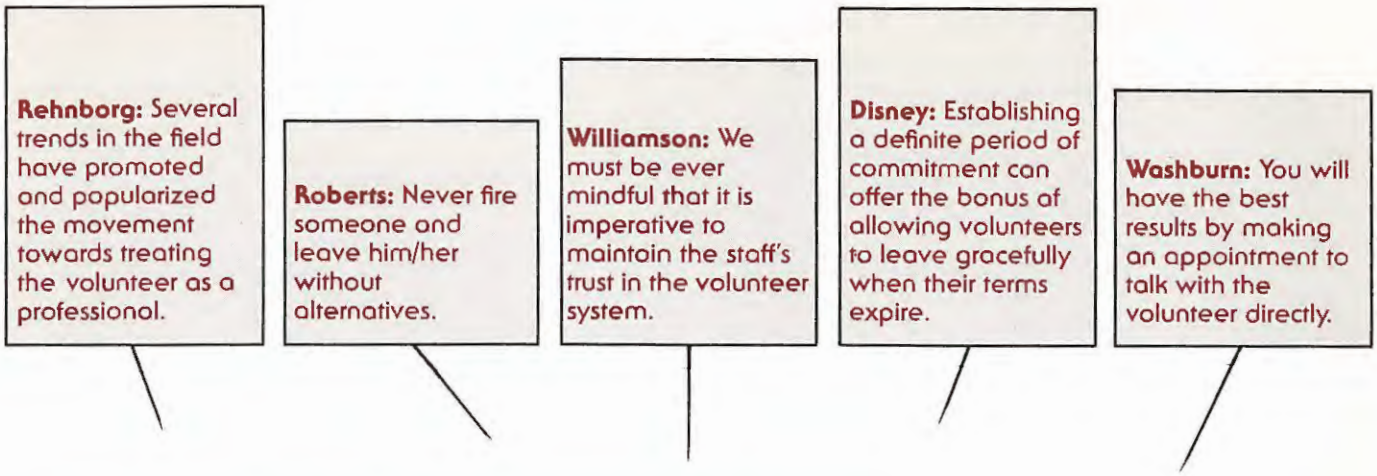

safeguard—a mechanism by which an inappropriate volunteer may be removed swiftly and expeditiously.

In my experience I have found several ways are possible. I try to follow the five basic problem-solving steps, which are to:

- Clearly identify and understand the problem.
- Explore all alternatives.
- Develop alternatives to a solution.
- Formulate a plan.
- Follow up.

The first move, therefore, is to have a separate conversation with both the staff person and the volunteer, and try to identify exactly where the problem lies. Several avenues then open up. For example, it is often desirable to appoint the volunteer to a different staff person whereby personality conflicts may be overcome. It is also possible to reassign a volunteer to a more appropriate and rewarding area for them. Reassignment can be produced through the "terminating" of a project and a necessity for the volunteer to move to another project, where they are *really* needed.

In some instances, it would be better to transfer the volunteer out of the program completely, in which case either a referral and placement agency like a Voluntary Action Center or a Retired Senior Volunteer Program could interview and re-place this volunteer. In Palm Beach County, members of an association of directors of volunteers work closely with each other. If volunteers are relocated, a confidential history is discussed and the new agency can make a knowledgeable decision.

In my experience, I have found volunteers frequently will remove themselves when realizing they are unsuitable and not assisting in the best way possible. Peer pressure has worked, too. Other volunteers concerned about one of their number have watched over that person carefully and in some cases have involved them in other activities.

A hurt and angry volunteer may cry revenge as he/she leaves. Even those that do try to cause trouble usually end up being quite ineffective, as the dedicated, loyal volunteers surge up to quell their words. For this to happen, however, the program must have acted ethically and as compassionately as possible.

Working with thousands of volunteers in my seven years with the school volunteer program, we have had to reject some. One used inappropriate language, one kept trying to write inaccurate articles in the local papers, and one was accused of, but denied, trying to kiss the little girls. These are three people out of over 8,000 that have crossed the thresholds of our schools—only 0.0375%. In the volunteer business, however, we must be ever mindful that it is imperative to maintain the staff's trust in the volunteer system and the perfect integrity of the thousands of volunteers who so magnanimously contribute to the running of America.

A TWO-WAY STREET — Sarah Jane Rehnborg

IT IS NO LONGER UNUSUAL TO hear people talk about "firing" a volunteer. Yet, to dismiss a volunteer is a far more difficult and complex task than it may sound. It reminds me of the situation in which a person has carefully chosen and wrapped a gift for a friend, only to have it dismissed as not good enough, not worth keeping.

We can understand the firing of a paid employee. After all, there is a financial exchange involved in that relationship that allows an organization to demand a certain level of acceptable job performance. Lacking the visible, quantifiable exchange of money, volunteer service often is relegated to the level of a gift relationship, rather than an exchange relationship with an agency.

The exchange concept is central to viewing a volunteer as a professional with corresponding rights *and* responsibilities. Several trends in the field have promoted and popularized the movement towards treating the volunteer as a professional. Ellen Strauss described the professional volunteer through her highly publicized Call for Action program. A formalized contract to volunteer, she said, requires a written volunteer commitment, training, supervision,

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as training, supervision, appropriate and evaluation, growth opportunities, even dismissal if necessary.

The National Organization for Women's controversial stand on direct service volunteering, as abusing and misusing the talents of women, further solidified the movement. The efficacy of many volunteer service opportunities came to be analyzed carefully by both volunteers and directors. Is the volunteer assignment the best use of the applicant's talents? How will this position, and the agency's commitment to the volunteer, enhance and develop the individual?

Viewing volunteer service as an avenue for career exploration and skills development also requires the application of professional standards to the volunteer experience. The full range of personnel practices should accompany the volunteer commitment if it is to have the exchange value we advertise.

Exchange requires a two-way commitment. The agency must offer certain valuable services to the volunteer, such challenging placements, recognition and promotion. In return, the volunteer must offer certain valuable services to the agency, including reliable and responsible job performance, and the use of personal talent and experience in the position. This exchange is a two-way street—the giving of "gifts" is mutual.

Volunteers readily "fire" agencies by leaving their placement when the agency does not meet its responsibilities. To maintain the integrity of the exchange, agency volunteer directors also must assume their responsibility of replacing volunteers who are unable to fulfill their exchange. Altering a volunteer's job placement and finding a more appropriate position within the agency or in the community, is part of the director's job.

Experience has shown that treating the volunteer as a professional encourages professional behavior on the part of the volunteer. "Firing"—or changing an inappropriate volunteer placement—is part of the exchange required in the professional contract. Easy? No—but definitely necessary!

FACING REALITIES OF VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT — Diane M. Disney

SCENE: A CONFERENCE ROOM containing about twenty-five executive directors and board members of various nonprofit and governmental agencies. They are meeting for part of an eighteen-hour, six-week seminar called Methods and Madness in Agency Management.

QUESTION: "How many of you have ever fired a paid employee?"
RESPONSE: Four or five participants raise their hands.
QUESTION: "How many of you have ever fired a volunteer?"
RESPONSE: Embarrassed silence followed by nervous glances. At most, two people raise their hands. Others say such things as, "Well, not fire *exactly, but..." and "If you mean wanting to let one go, then...."*

Regardless of the participants' level of experience, this scene or one very much like it occurs every time this management course is given. Some topics, apparently, continue to be imbued with ritualistic taboos in polite society. And firing volunteers is one of them.

Again and again, the failure to face the realities of personnel management and recognize that firing is often best for all parties has crippled nonprofit agencies. It has led to tension, dissatisfaction, rumors, poor morale and minimal productivity. Yet each of these is avoidable with a little planning, structure and directness.

What generally happens when a volunteer is not performing as the supervisor would like? First, there is often a reluctance to offer direct criticism because "after all, the time *is* being donated." When inappropriate behavior continues, the supervisor finds it awkward or impossible to comment or make corrections because there is no formal evaluation procedure. Constructive suggestions are especially hard to offer when the volunteer has no written job description. So what does the supervisor do?

One option is to complain to the executive director and ask for special intervention. Another is to "cover" for the volunteer until patience ends and a scene results. A very common technique, for example, is to withdraw privileges. In this case, the supervisor (and sometimes other workers) will begin to strip the volunteer of all signs of involvement without ever saying anything directly. A volunteer's desk is moved, coffee cup broken, name omitted from the newsletter, nameplate recycled. Staff hopes that eventually the volunteer will feel so out of place he or she simply will fade away. But such lingering departures can last a seeming eternity, and all the while the agency is suffering. For a more wholesome, less draining approach, these steps might be considered.

1. Set the stage for hiring the volunteer

Begin with a clear definition of tasks, a determination of hours, a design for training, and a delineation of reporting and supervisory relationships. When recruiting a paid staff member, an agency knows it is looking for someone to fit a particular slot, not just a warm body with an affinity for stapling. The same level of awareness should precede the search for a volunteer. Establishing a definite period of commitment can offer the additional bonus of allowing volunteers to leave gracefully when their terms expire. There is then no suggestion of the lifelong indenturing that volunteer positions often seem to embody.

2. Hire carefully

All too often agencies use the "warm body" approach to involving volunteers: "Grab that one before it gets away" or "Get a body, *any* body, as long as it's warm, as soon as possible." Both variations pay minimal attention to credentials and maximum notice to time pressures. Yet seldom does the need for a volunteer arise without warning; it is much more likely to be known weeks or months in advance.

This knowledge can allow time for careful hiring practices, including interviews and possibly written applications. Taking an extra day or two for hiring can

Diane Disney, as a management consultant, develops and presents training programs for governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations. She serves on numerous volunteer boards and committees and recently was named to a special commission to study the feasibility of establishing an office of citizen participation within the Rhode Island legislature.

save months of unhappiness later and can minimize greatly the need to fire at all. Such a cautious, thorough approach has proved highly successful for volunteer positions as diverse as agency evaluator (United Way of Southeastern New England) and paraprofessional career counselor (Opportunities for Women).

3. Evaluate regularly

If volunteers are to be regarded vital to the agency, they should be treated with the same professional respect and courtesy as paid employees. They should not be treated with the condescension they often receive as people who "don't really know much" about the agency's business. This respect extends to frequent feedback on an informal basis as well as regularly scheduled sessions for formal appraisal. Formal review sessions provide a framework for setting performance objectives and allowing volunteers to express their own views of their performance. They also provide a setting for sharing both positive and negative comments about performance, a setting that is much more conducive to professional, adult behavior than is the casual meeting.

Evaluation sessions also can enable the supervisor to gain information necessary for distinguishing mistakes made from ignorance, those made from carelessness, and those from willfulness or malice. The first two probably can be corrected through training or reassignment; it is the third type that calls for dismissal.

4. If you must fire, fire quickly and cleanly.

In extreme cases, a supervisor might witness behavior warranting instant dismissal, such as physical abuse of clients, distribution of confidential files, drunkenness on the job, or other actions detrimental to health, safety and reputation. Generally, however, one faces instances of tardiness, inattention to detail, gossiping, poor recordkeeping, or failure to work assigned hours.

In calling such deficiencies to a volunteer's attention, the supervisor should try to get the volunteer to agree to correct them by a certain date. When that deadline arrives, the two should review performance together. (One additional trial period might be approved, but it certainly should not exceed one month.) If the inappropriate behavior has not been corrected, the supervisor must then terminate the volunteer directly and firmly, but not maliciously. On such occasion, the supervisor will probably be a bundle of raw nerve endings with a cotton-filled mouth, tearing eyes and shaking hands. A few minutes of such trauma, however, is a small price to pay for agency peace and effectiveness.

Rehearsal of comments often can help lessen the tension. So, too, can a set of written guidelines and performance evaluations. When overall incompetence or unsuitability is the problem, one can sometimes soften the blow with statements such as these used by a Massachusetts personnel officer:

> What we have here is a classic mismatch. On the one hand, we have a dedicated individual with talents in a variety of areas. On the other, we have a position that requires a totally different set of skills. Trying to fit these two together any more can result only in unhappiness, frustration and poor performance. We will all be better off by recognizing the mismatch. Then we can find someone else for this position while we help locate another position that has requirements more closely in line with your skills.

One key consideration is addressing inappropriate behavior as soon as possible after it occurs, before it becomes habitual through silence and tacit approval. Allowing time for improvement is important, but when deadlines arrive, action must be taken. As someone from The Samaritans in England has said, "The quicker the chop, the less the pain." Prolonging a case of misemployment can only worsen morale, increase tension and spread dissatisfaction. It also sends out loud, clear signals that volunteers are second-class staff members not worthy of professional treatment.

Volunteers clearly are very special people whose donation of time and effort warrants extra consideration. It does not warrant treating them like figurines in a glass menagerie, however. On the contrary, they should be encouraged to grow, learn and seek fulfillment as they help an agency—even if this means accepting the reality that not everyone is perfect for every job.

APPLYING PROFESSIONALISM — Julie Washburn

HOW DO YOU FIRE A VOLUNteer? Or do you fire a volunteer? The real question is, Did you hire the volunteer? How was the volunteer interviewed and placed? Was a volunteer agreement or contract drawn up with job title, responsibilities, reporting procedures, expectations, and a review process written in specific terms?

When you approach the recruitment of a volunteer in a professional manner, then you can approach the termination transfer with the same professionalism. Volunteers are really unpaid staff and deserve the same (or better) personnel policies that your organization has for its paid staff.

Julie Washburn is the executive director of the Volunteer Service Bureau of Orlando, Fla. and president of the Florida VAC Directors Association. She also is a national trainer for the Girl Scouts and serves on the board of the Association of Volunteer Bureaus.

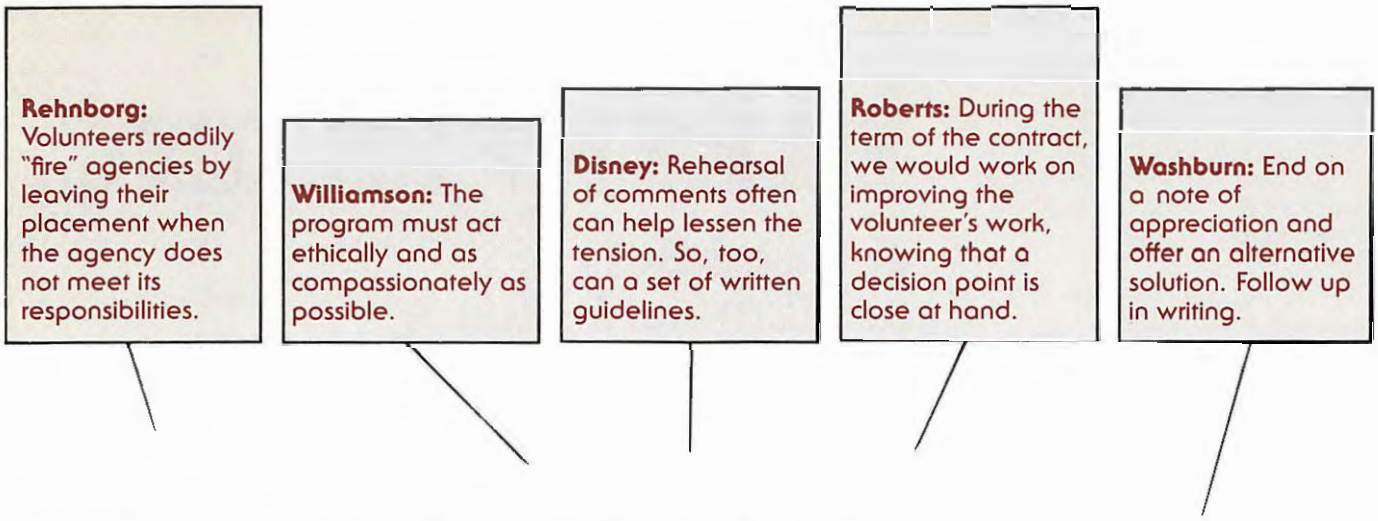
Whether you are developing an effective system to prevent a bad situation from arising or are handling an immediate problem-volunteer, you will have the best results by making an appointment to talk with the volunteer directly. Asking the right questions during the interview or conference can make it possible for you and the volunteer to reach an acceptable agreement. One of the following methods can be utilized depending on the seriousness of the problem:

If trouble is developing . . .

In a personal conference, explain what you perceive to be the situation. Listen to the volunteer on a feeling level. Then suggest alternatives that would fill the volunteer's needs better and relieve him/her of the job he/she has failed to do or is handling poorly. This often gives the volunteer the opportunity to indicate that he/she wants a change or does not understand the organization's expectations. Often a volunteer is waiting for someone to do something.

If a serious problem exists . . .

If time permits, hold two conferences. In the first conference, discuss problem areas. (Be sure to *listen.*) Agree in writing on changes that will be made by



both parties by an agreed time and the consequence if not accomplished.

In the second conference, review what has happened. If results are positive, set new objectives. If the volunteer has failed to comply with the agreement, then initiate action, such as termination.

If the situation is intolerable . . .

Have a face-to-face conference. First affirm what the volunteer has contributed, i.e., time, faithfulness, willingness. Then, state what the volunteer has done that is totally unacceptable. In specific terms explain the termination of his/her placement. Take the responsibility for that decision. Finally, end on a note of appreciation and offer any alternative solution, such as a referral to the local Voluntary Action Center for more appropriate placement. Follow up with a written communication.

As soon as you have handled your problem case successfully, begin to develop interviewing techniques, volunteer job agreements and job reviews. These will reduce greatly the possibility of having to "fire" one of your volunteers again.

A MATTER OF PUBLIC RELATIONS — Laura B. Roberts

AT THE RHODE ISLAND HISTORICal Society, the most common volunteer assignment is that of museum docent, guide or interpreter. A well-informed, helpful guide, who cuts through the barriers—both physical and intellectual—that many of our visitors sense separate them from our exhibits, clearly enriches the value of a museum visit. School programs, for example, that demand a low ratio of students-to-guide depend on volunteers who will interact with students in a constructive way.

Our volunteers are vital to our museum programs, yet face pretty strict standards of performance. When they are interpreting the research and work of professional curators to the general public, those staff curators naturally are concerned about the quality of their presentation. When volunteers are the only interface between the staff "insiders" and the "outsiders" who visit the museum, they represent the institution to the public.

The educators who supervise these volunteers are inevitably caught between the demands of professional staff and loyalty to dedicated but perhaps ineffectual volunteers. In the face of this pressure, a method for firing unsatisfactory volunteers is crucial.

As the Rhode Island Historical Society is a relatively small institution, we are close enough to our volunteers that we have not formalized a firing procedure. As we grow, however, I foresee instituting a contract period for all volunteers. Every four months the commitment between the Society and volunteer would be reviewed and, we hope, renewed. During the term of the contract, we would be able to work on improving the work of the volunteer, knowing that a decision point is close at hand. As with any contract, both sides benefit from clarifying the working relationship. I hesitate, however, from instituting this while my program is still limited, feeling that our staff can monitor the work of twenty-five people individually.

My rule of thumb is never to fire someone and leave him/her without other alternatives. Whenever possible, I try to find another assignment here for them. The volunteer who doesn't give a good tour may be able to write materials for other guides or for teachers.

If for some reason we cannot continue to employ a volunteer, I try to give him/her ideas for other placements. At the Museum of Science, for instance, we frequently find that volunteers with personal problems can not tolerate the hectic pace of such a lively museum. Through the local Voluntary Action Center we are familiar with other agencies, their atmosphere and demands. If we can't give volunteers a name and phone number at another place, we can send them to the VAC itself. It's a policy I have carried here, where the rather small community of museums can keep track of each other's programs pretty successfully.

In the end, it's a matter of public relations. A poor guide is bad PR, but so is an insensitive volunteer coordinator. A public institution has many commitments: to its collection, to its community, and to its supporters. We can't put one of those commitments ahead of any other.

Laura Roberts is curator for education at the Rhode Island Historical Society where 25 volunteers give tours of the John Brown House and Museum of Rhode Island History to adults and children, and a sizable volunteer corps of college students have internships in historical society administration and operations.