

8 Tips for Getting More Comfortable Giving Volunteer Feedback

Several additional things can help you feel more comfortable in the moment. Here are a few:

1. Set up Dedicated Time to Give (and Get) Feedback

Is it a regularly scheduled monthly meeting, at the 90-day mark of service, at a morning “stand up” check in? You decide what works best based on your work with volunteers.

By setting aside time, and communicating what will happen at these meetings to volunteers, no one will feel blindsided or hijacked. If you establish this time for both giving feedback and receiving it, you’ll soon find you’ve cultivated a wonderful give and take with volunteers.

2. Speak from the Heart

It may seem counter-intuitive, but sharing some of our own vulnerability will actually help us connect with volunteers more easily in emotionally-charged moments.

It’s perfectly fine to share that you regret you have to have this conversation, that it makes you a little uncomfortable, that you only wish the best for the volunteer. Speaking this way can disarm people and diffuse the situation so you can both get to the real work at hand.

3. Know the Rules

If you’re not sure about a specific policy or your disciplinary procedures, look it up. Make sure you follow them to the letter.

If you don’t yet have how [volunteer performance issues](#) are to be handled in writing, now is a wonderful time to get them in place for the next time around. Be sure to include a grievance procedure, as well, so volunteers have some recourse in the event of an error or unfair treatment.

4. Find Your Mutual Purpose

When things don’t go as planned, it’s easy to fall into an “us versus them” mentality. The problem is these two-sided relationships do more harm than good and can do nothing to help address problems, mend fences, and get on with your day.

Instead, find where your goals intersect. If you struggle to find something in common, revert to speaking about the agency’s mission and speak to your higher purpose.

5. Describe both Acceptable and Superior Performance

Volunteers may be embarrassed to be the recipient of feedback about poor performance. So, help them save face by offering options.

Describe what’s expected at minimum. Contrast it with what’s been happening. Also, offer up how they might go the extra mile. You may be pleasantly surprised with the results.

6. Ask Questions to Expand Your View of the Issue

Even if you have the most tuned in self-awareness, you’ll miss a few things here and there. When you start a volunteer feedback session, kick it off with some questions. Assume you don’t have the complete picture (because you inevitably don’t).

Even the most intuitive people can’t read minds.

Ask questions so you have a richer picture of what's going on. After describing what you are seeing, ask: So, what's the real challenge here? Pause and listen. Then, ask: "And, what else?" Pause and listen. Repeat.

Keep asking one question at a time until you think you have a full picture. Then repeat back what you think you heard. No doubt, you will learn something you didn't know before.

7. End with Gratitude

No matter how tough it gets, you must take the high road. Re-affirm the volunteer's value to the organization. Even if you are angry or frustrated, find your gratitude. Even if the issues goes unresolved and the volunteer quits (or you must dismiss them), give thanks.

At the very least, you can be grateful you had another chance to practice your feedback skills. Or, maybe this issue has uncovered a weak link in your training or supervisory processes. Whatever it may be, the experience is valuable.

In the end, this practice will help you maintain resilience and strength going forward.

8. Make Small Adjustments as You Go

Each time you give volunteer feedback, reflect on how it went — both what you think you did well and what you might try differently next time. Resist using phrases like "I should have..." The aim isn't to make you feel guilty.

Your ultimate goal is to learn from your mistakes so you can keep refining your practice. Finally, be sure to give yourself a break. Becoming a better leader and manager takes time and practice. It may very well be the most challenging thing you master as a supervisor. So, give yourself credit for stepping out of your comfort zone.

If you courageously keep moving forward, you'll find, little by little, your fears around giving volunteer feedback will wane. You may even begin to enjoy it, and your volunteers will welcome it even more than ever.