

Effective Supervision

One of the principle reasons why volunteers leave prematurely is lack of effective supervision.

What Is It?

An arrangement for two people, in this case the volunteer and volunteer manager, to meet regularly in order to evaluate and develop the volunteer's personal efficacy within their voluntary work. This is achieved by the volunteer being given the opportunity to reflect and review their work in a supportive environment. The manager listens, reflects back, challenges and praises the volunteer who is thus helped to modify their behaviour, gain new insights, celebrate their learning and achievements and take responsibility for themselves. Giving supervision involves influencing the supervisee in three ways:

- Formative: helping the person to develop and grow in their voluntary work role.
- Normative: Informing the person how they are performing relative to a notional norm.
- Restorative: Increasing the person's feelings of confidence and satisfaction in their role as volunteer. Praising and celebrating their achievements with them.

Why Bother With It?

Volunteers who know that their supervision will be provided at a regular time, and without interruption feel valued and respected. They tend to be more effective and conscientious in their work. They also tend to be less likely to leave and to have high loyalty to their voluntary agency. Because they know they have a regular supervision session they are able to store up questions and concerns rather than making unscheduled demands upon their manager's time. If supervision is given well the volunteer is helped to learn how to reflect upon their work and find their own solutions where possible. Providing regular supervision enables the volunteer manager to identify problems before they come to a head.

Do All Volunteers Need It?

No, all volunteers need some form of interpersonal support but not all require supervision. Supervision is appropriate if the volunteer is doing something fairly stressful, especially with other people where there is a requirement for them to show initiative and in emotionally demanding situations. There is a particular need for supervision if the volunteer is not working closely with other volunteers.

Do I Need Special Training To Do It?

Yes, in an ideal world. However very basic skills such as listening to your supervisee and showing you are listening by summarising and repeating back what they have said can be very helpful. Some training in basic counselling skills would be useful and will help to reduce the stress on you of giving supervision.

Won't I End Up Becoming A Counsellor Instead Of A Volunteer Manager?

This is a risk. You need to be clear what your role is and what you feel capable of managing. Sometimes volunteers' personal issues get entangled in their voluntary work and it can be useful to explore this within supervision. However if the volunteer is talking more about their non-voluntary work life than the time they spend as a volunteer and this goes on for several supervision sessions it might be appropriate to suggest they discuss their personal issues with a counsellor. You should be aware of what counselling support is available in your area to refer people to. It is important to make such a referral sensitively.

How Can I Stop It Being So Time Consuming?

Time spent supervising is often time saved in dealing with crises and the extra recruitment work of finding new volunteers to replace those who have left prematurely. You could invite established volunteers to supervise more recent recruits and you could organise group supervision sessions. If you have decided that offering supervision is appropriate then you need to be whole hearted about it: ensure that you don't cancel sessions and that you communicate to your volunteers that their attendance is an important part of their commitment to their voluntary work.