

TACKLING DIFFICULTIES

Any organisation is going to experience moments when things are misunderstood, assumptions are not shared or there is a different view of what the best future looks like. Sometimes these differences will be relatively minor and easy to resolve, sometimes they will require more conscious interventions.

For Christians, understanding that we inevitably fall short of perfection and can be forgiven may be helpful in avoiding any tendency to panic when things don't go as hoped.

Starting points

There are some particular things that it's helpful to remember when working to minimise or resolve differences with volunteers:

1

Challenges will arise

No human being is perfect so some challenges are inevitable.

4

Be alert to issues as they emerge

This can help you find simple ways forward before things get out of hand.

2

Keep the purpose central.

What you are doing has a purpose – the purpose of the church as a whole and of a particular task.

5

People vary enormously.

Even when you remember and act on all the points mentioned, you won't be able to control every volunteer's reaction.

Sometimes a reasonable, considered way forward will still not satisfy everyone and sometimes it's right to decide that the task takes precedence over keeping everyone happy.

3

Set up volunteer roles in a clear way

This can minimise problems that arise, as well as giving a better foundation for dealing with those that do.

Practical Practicalities

Coping with differences and challenges encompasses both trying to avoid unnecessary problems and dealing with them when they arise. Below are some suggestions for both situations.

Avoiding problems

This is mostly about setting things up clearly.

It is also useful to be aware of assumptions that you or the volunteer may have. Different churches and projects have often evolved varied approaches that may deal with local priorities or challenges that have arisen in that specific place. It is better not to assume that everyone will automatically know and understand your local patterns. Giving people an early opportunity to raise issues and questions is helpful.

It is important for a new volunteer to:

- know what they are doing and why
- know who is responsible for offering guidance and support
- know and understands the current systems and any relevant guidance or procedures
- know how to raise questions and make suggestions

In a more formal situation with volunteers, clarity is aided by things like volunteer role descriptions, a simple document that outlines mutual expectations and an induction. These enable everyone to be aware of what is being done, why and how.

*See www.cuf.org.uk/workingwithvolunteers for a **Sample Role Description and Mutual Expectations Template**.*

Practical Practicalities (continued)

Tackling challenges that arise

Once you have set things up clearly, addressing issues is often about listening and responding positively when it is apparent that systems or relationships are not working as well as they might.

Almost irrespective of context, there are some issues that often arise with volunteers. For some suggested responses see *Tackling Specific Difficulties*.

If you work fairly formally with volunteers it can be worth having an agreed process to work through, that starts with an informal chat but shows ways forward to a more formalised resolution, including, if necessary, asking a volunteer not to continue in a particular role. Different approaches could be more appropriate in a parish church context, for example using mediation, but for an example of a simple but formal problem solving procedure see *Problem Solving Procedure Template*.

The following informal process can be useful for working through issues

Listen – attentively to the people involved

Respond positively – attentively to the people involved

Reflect – on what they have said and what impact their comments and suggestions might have on how you do things and on other people involved

Consult – if necessary. Will others be affected by this? Who do you need to consult so that a final decision is positively accepted? (And avoid just asking ‘favourites’ what they think).

Decide – is the decision yours or someone else’s? What is the response to the suggestion or complaint? You don’t have to agree with every suggestion or complaint but you do need to decide a way forward.

Communicate – the decision and the reasons to the individual and to others who have been involved.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDY:

A volunteer not following guidance given:

Martha is a fairly new volunteer helping with a young people's group. She has had an induction, including guidance on expectations for working safely with young people. During one of the sessions the group leader finds that Martha is in a room alone with one of the 12 year olds, having a chat.

How might this be followed up by the group leader?

Listen – the group leader listens to what is going on in the room, without comment about her concern. By listening to both the helper and the young person she finds out why they were having a private chat and is also able to judge whether the atmosphere is supportive and healthy.

Respond – the group leader remains in the room and at a suitable moment checks whether the young person would like to go down to help make the drinks for the break, go back to her group or remain where she is. She opts to return to the group.

Reflect – The group leader reflects whilst she is listening. Is it better to speak to the helper immediately or at a later date? Which will be most effective in helping Martha to follow the guidance about not being in a private space with a young person but avoid her feeling undermined or accused? She also reflects that if Martha hasn't followed the guidance given to her, it may be necessary to make the point more clearly in future to new volunteers.

Consult – this isn't necessary in this case. The group leader knows that Martha has not followed the guidance and consulting others would just magnify the issue.

Decide – The group leader decides to have a quiet word with Martha after the young person has returned to her group. She decides that this is best because the session is half way through and Martha will then be able to finish the session and the leader can check at the end of the session whether Martha seems happy and affirm her before she goes home.

Communicate – The group leader compliments Martha on her positive, supportive relationship with the young person and mentions that although there will be times when it is helpful to talk to a young person alone, this must be done somewhere visible to others, either by being in a quiet corner of a public space or by leaving the door open. She listens to Martha's reaction to this information. If Martha acknowledges that she now remembers the guidance the group leader simply affirms this. If she is more defensive, the group leader reminds her of the guidance and that it is designed both to keep young people safe from harm and to protect volunteers from damaging accusations.

The group leader could then have a more general chat to help Martha move on from this particular issue.

The group leader makes a note of this incident so that if questions arise or follow up is necessary she can refer back to her notes.

Take heart! This may sound like a huge amount of thinking or action but it all takes place in a relatively short space of time and although it can feel briefly awkward, effective action is best for all concerned.