

## fact sheet 12

# supervising volunteers ... an essential function

### valuing volunteering

*“It’s critical. It’s the glue that binds the volunteer program (sic) together, linking training, ongoing motivation, evaluation, recognition, employee/volunteer relationships. One reason supervision is hard to talk about is that it is something of an umbrella term that covers so many tasks. In many ways it is an approach to working with people.” (Lee & Catagnus 1999)*

#### What is supervision?

Whether it is referred to as supervision, coaching, coordination, leadership or mentoring, it is about making sure that there is a good balance between the needs and interests of the organisation and those of the individual volunteer. The terms supervision and support are often used together or even interchangeably. In theory, supervision is about the work itself and support is about the person doing the work, but in reality they are on a continuum and supervision cannot be isolated easily from other aspects of volunteer management. The supervisor’s ultimate goal is to empower the volunteer to do his or her job as well and as independently as possible. In essence, supervision is about forming and maintaining effective two-way relations between two workers, and it therefore entails all the complexities and nuances of human relationships.

#### Why supervise?

Supervision is vital if a volunteer is going to do a good job. Its functions are:

- To discuss the volunteering role and its responsibilities
- To share perceptions about how the work is progressing
- To monitor work and work performance
- To evaluate work and work performance
- To clarify priorities and set goals
- To identify training needs
- To improve confidence and competence in doing the work
- To recognise and deal with problems
- To provide a framework for agreed change.

Good supervision involves influencing volunteers in three ways:

- **Managerial** (or normative): making sure they are doing what is expected of them and informing them how they are performing relative to a norm
- **Educational** (or formative): helping them to develop and grow in their voluntary work roles through the provision of feedback, training, etc
- **Supportive** (or restorative): increasing their feelings of confidence and satisfaction in their role as volunteers and praising and celebrating their achievements.

#### Who should supervise?

The question of who should supervise depends on the nature of the organisation, but a volunteer *must* have a named supervisor. In a small to medium sized organisation, the supervisory responsibility usually falls to the volunteer coordinator. In a large organisation with many volunteers, more than one person may have responsibility for volunteer supervision. If this is the case, it is important that the exact division of labour is well-understood by all parties involved. In some instances, it may be appropriate to have a buddy system, in which new volunteers are paired up with more experienced ones. Whilst this can be very helpful, it does not mean that the volunteers do not also need a named supervisor.

Good supervisors can empower volunteers by:

- Being committed themselves to the mission and work of the organisation
- Being competent themselves
- Being able to delegate
- Being caring
- Being accessible and approachable, with good listening skills
- Being consistent and having integrity
- Providing role descriptions and volunteer agreements

- Offering appropriate induction and training
- Providing feedback, especially on the impact of the voluntary work
- Sharing information.

### When should supervision take place?

Supervision is an ongoing process, consisting of day-to-day line management and sometimes of structured supervision sessions and formal reviews/evaluations. When it takes place will depend on the nature of the organisation, the volunteer role and the abilities of the volunteer. It is usually appropriate to hold formal supervision sessions – which are regular, uninterrupted and confidential – if the volunteer:

- Is new
- Is required to show a great deal of initiative
- Is doing something that involves a high level of interpersonal work
- Is doing work that is very demanding emotionally
- Has only intermittent contact with other volunteers.

Even if volunteers have regular supervision sessions, there should be someone they can go to if they need to ask for advice in between meetings. In certain instances, it may be possible to run group supervision sessions. However, it is important that the volunteer supervisor has an 'open door' policy so that volunteers can see her/him in private if necessary, and that s/he meets all volunteers one-to-one, at the very least, once a year.

### Checklist for supervision meetings

- How do you feel about your volunteering generally?
- What has been going well?
- What has not been going well?
- Do we need to review any goals that we set last time?
- How do you feel about your workload?

- Are there any new skills that you would like to gain?
- How are you getting on with others in the team?
- How is your volunteering fitting in with the rest of your life?
- Have you any ideas for improving/developing things within your role?
- Are there any particular issues that you would like to bring to the attention of the team?
- Are there any goals that we should set between now and next time we meet?

### How to supervise effectively ... some more tips

It is important to explain the organisation's supervisory system to volunteers at the beginning of their placements. They may not necessarily expect to be supervised and may need to have the benefits of supervision explained to them. Ensure that they understand the process.

Define high expectations – never fall into the 'only a volunteer' trap – and keep them focused on their goals. Try to ensure that they see the results of their work quickly, by aiming for small achievements that can be built upon.

Never waste a volunteer's time.

Adapt your supervisory style to the individual or group that you are working with; one size does not fit all.

Create a work environment (in the widest sense) that enhances productivity. Ensure pleasant working conditions and foster a team spirit.

Communicating effectively is essential, especially if volunteers do not work on site and/or the supervisor is away frequently. Ways in which this can be done include: volunteer forum, volunteer notice board, volunteer pigeon holes, routing slips for incoming literature that include volunteers,

suggestion boxes, newsletters, memos, emails, focus groups and other group discussions, post, email, phone (voicemail, phone trees, teleconferencing, etc), bulletin boards, listservs / egroups, private pages on website/intranet, chat rooms, volunteer liaison position that is taken on by one of the volunteers, etc.

Keep good records on all volunteers. Know volunteers' names and keep in touch with them over time; do not let them fade away.

Express your appreciation whenever you can, in as many different ways as possible, and mean it. The ratio of praise/positive feedback to negative feedback should be 4:1!

Schedule time to debrief and evaluate, both:

- volunteer performance (at end of a trial period, annually, etc)
- volunteer satisfaction (occasional surveys including exit interviews).

### Dealing with problems

The problems a volunteer supervisor is most likely to encounter are:

- Performance problems (for example, timekeeping or the quality or quantity of work)
- Behavioural problems (for example, offensiveness, laziness or arrogance).

In both cases, early troubleshooting and the prompt resolution of problems will aid morale and enhance volunteer retention. Written policies and procedures for dealing with disciplinary and grievance matters are essential and must be followed correctly. Terminating a volunteer's involvement with the organisation is possible but should only be used as a last resort if all other avenues of action have been exhausted.

### Further reading

(Publications available in the Volunteering Ireland library)

- Jarene Frances Lee & Julia M Catagnus, 1999, **What we learned (the hard way) about supervising volunteers: an action guide for making your job easier**, Energize
- Steve McCurley & Rick Lynch, 1996, **Volunteer management: mobilizing all the resources of the community**, Heritage Arts Publishing
- Volunteer Development Agency, 2001, **As good as they give: providing volunteers with the management they deserve – workbook three: managing and motivating volunteers**

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