

Dealing with Conflict

Guide

Even in informal, small-scale volunteer groups, conflict can arise. A planned approach to handling disputes will lead to better resolutions. This can reduce the fallout for your organisation.

Be on the front foot

In many cases, problems between volunteers and the organisations they work for come from a lack of planning and communication.

As with any human interaction, the potential for conflict increases when people feel taken for granted or misunderstood. By following 'best practice' in volunteer involvement, you can avoid many potential difficulties in your relationship with volunteers.

The [National Standards for Volunteer Involvement](#) provide guidance on recruitment, training, and performance management.

Be prepared

Prevention is the best medicine. You will be best placed to deal with disputes that arise if you take a planned approach to conflict management. This means thinking ahead to how you might deal with a problem and documenting your policy and procedures.

You should begin by referring to the rules, constitution, or other policies of your organisation to ensure you meet your stated obligations.

You should then consider:

- » Who will deal with the dispute at its initial stages and if the issue escalates?
- » How, and at what point the issue will be formally documented
- » What resources you can call on for guidance, particularly in a small organisation
- » Timelines for each stage of the conflict management process

Handle with care

Serious disputes can have a broad impact. As well as those involved, you should consider the effect of conflict on others around them. Other people it may affect are other volunteers, paid staff, and even clients.

How you handle a dispute could have long-term repercussions on morale among staff and volunteers. If the details of the conflict become public, it could impact your public image and future recruitment.

Put some thought into appropriate ways to deal with the fallout from the conflict. Speaking individually to team members or raising issues at a team meeting before they escalate can be helpful.

Rights for volunteers

Volunteering practice is not regulated by law in the same way as paid employment, however, the standards set out below are accepted as best practice in Australia.

A volunteer has the right to:

- » information about the organisation they are volunteering with;
- » a clearly written job description in a meaningful role;
- » know to whom they are accountable and to whom they should report;
- » be recognised for their contribution and as a valuable member of the team they are part of;
- » be supported and supervised in their role;
- » a safe and healthy workplace;
- » be covered by insurance;
- » say 'no' if they are being exploited;
- » be reimbursed for any out-of-pocket expenses they incur;
- » be advised of all relevant organisational policies that affect them in their role as a volunteer;
- » be informed and consulted on all matters affecting their work;
- » be made aware of the organisation's grievance procedure;
- » a right to privacy;
- » an opportunity to provide feedback; and
- » access to relevant information, induction and training.

Start with a solid foundation

Volunteering practice is not regulated by law in the same way as paid employment. This can sometimes make performance management difficult.

Some key items below can help establish information to refer to during discussions.

- » Recruit volunteers in a well-documented manner that provides them with clear expectations
- » Establish a consistent onboarding and training process for all volunteers
- » Provide a clearly written position description
- » Place them in a meaningful role that matches their skills and abilities
- » Outline to whom they are accountable and to whom they should report
- » Ensure they are supported and supervised
- » Provide access to all relevant organisational policies that affect them in their role as a volunteer
- » Provide information about the organisations complaint handling process

Following a fair process in recruiting and induction will support managing volunteer performance if required.

Tips for difficult conversations

- » Identify the issue
- » Start with clear documentation of the process
- » Don't make assumptions. It's important to gather all the facts
- » Provide the opportunity for a support person to be included
- » Be upfront and direct about the issue
- » Stick to the facts and use evidence to support your case. Consider privacy when disclosing this information
- » Focus on the issue not the person
- » Provide the opportunity for the volunteer to respond
- » Consider all points of view
- » Be aware of the emotions involved
- » Be solutions focused
- » Provide a written outcome with clear expectations

Dismissing a volunteer

In rare cases, an organisation may need to ask a volunteer to leave. You should develop a policy on 'dismissal' to guide your actions in this event before the need arises. As well as any regulatory requirements that might apply, the policy and procedures should detail:

- What behaviours or actions can result in dismissal
- Processes that will precede the decision to dismiss, e.g. warnings, counselling, further training or reassignment
- Who will be involved in the process, e.g. senior staff, board members
- Options to appeal the decision
- How dismissal will be conducted, e.g. in person, in writing

What you must do

Depending on the way your organisation is structured, you may be under legal obligation to have a declared policy and procedure for managing grievances. If so, you must follow the processes outlined, or risk penalties imposed by the regulating body.

Incorporated Associations

The Victorian Associations Incorporation Reform Act 2012 outlines specific requirements for an association's grievance procedures. In the past, the organisation used to follow its own designed grievance procedure to govern this process.

An association's grievance procedure must provide an opportunity for all involved in the dispute to be heard, with an unbiased decision maker appointed to resolve the dispute.

Outside involvement

There is no single body responsible for intervening in volunteering conflicts. Volunteers or organisations who decide to take a dispute to an external body generally have three options.

» **Mediation:**

[The Dispute Settlement Centre Victoria](#) and private mediators offer voluntary mediation services. Note that participation in mediation is voluntary; the mediator is there to guide negotiations and cannot rule on the matter.

» **The Regulator:**

Depending on an organisation's legal structure, there may be the need to involve a relevant regulator – for example, Consumer Affairs Victoria, which regulates incorporated associations.

» **Court:**

Another option is civil action through the courts, but this can be stressful, time consuming and expensive. Volunteering Victoria recommends you think it over and get legal advice before proceeding down this path.

Further information


As Victoria's peak body for volunteering, you can always come to us for reliable resources and advice.

Below are some helpful links and resources to continue your understanding of *Dealing with Conflict*.







- » The [Volunteering Victoria website](#) is your go-to resource for all things volunteering, with timely and reliable support, training, resources, and expert advice.

Can't find what you're looking for?

Contact the Volunteering Victoria team at info@volunteeringvictoria.org.au anytime with your questions.



Volunteering Victoria website

 <p>Guides for Leading Volunteers</p>	 <p>National Standards for Volunteer Involvement</p>	 <p>Training & Workshops <i>(Some offered free of charge)</i></p>
 <p>National Knowledge Base for Volunteer Managers</p>	 <p>The Dispute Settlement Centre Victoria</p>	 <p>Consumer Affairs Victoria</p>