

Conflict can arise in any volunteer group, even a small one.

This is why it is a good idea for every organisation to have a plan on how to deal with conflict. It can help people get along and reduce risk for your organisation.

Be organised

Conflict can come from a lack of planning and communication. Conflict can happen when people feel taken for granted or misunderstood.

By following best practice, you can avoid many difficulties in your relationship with volunteers.

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

Be prepared

Plan and think ahead about how to deal with conflict before it happens. Make sure your organisation has policies and procedures on how to deal with conflict. Check the rules, constitution or other policies of your organisation to make sure you meet your obligations.

Think about:

- » Who will deal with the conflict at the beginning?
- » Who will deal with the conflict if it continues?
- » How will the conflict be documented?
- » Where can you go for help, especially if you are a small organisation?
- » How long will each stage of conflict management take?

Handle with care

Conflict can impact everyone, not just the people directly involved. It can also impact volunteers, staff and clients.

How you handle conflict could have a lasting impact on your staff and volunteers. If the conflict becomes public, it could impact your image and future recruitment.

Think about how to deal with the situation. Speak to each team member or raise issues at a team meeting before things get worse.

Rights for volunteers

Volunteering is not regulated by law like paid employment. Standards below are best practice in Australia.

A volunteer has the right to:

- » Information about your organisation.
- » A clearly written job description.
- » Know to whom they report.
- » Be recognised for their work as a valuable member of the team.
- » Be supported and supervised in their role.
- » A safe and healthy workplace.
- » Be covered by insurance.
- » Say NO if they are being used.
- » Be reimbursed for any out-of-pocket expenses.
- » Be advised of all policies relevant to their role.
- » Be informed and consulted about their work.
- » Know of the complaint handling process.
- » Privacy.
- » Have a chance to give feedback.
- » Access to information, induction and training.

Start with a solid foundation

Volunteering is not regulated by law like paid employment. This can sometimes make performance management difficult. These important things can help to get you started:

- » A clear and well-prepared documentation for recruitment of volunteers.
- » A consistent onboarding and training process for all volunteers.
- » A clear position description with a meaningful role that matches their skills.
- » Information to whom they report, where they can get support and how they are supervised.
- » Access to organisational policies.
- » Information about the complaint handling process.

Tips for difficult conversations

- » Identify the issue and get all the facts. Be upfront and direct.
- » Document the process.
- » Give the volunteer a chance to bring a support person.
- » Stick to the facts and use evidence to support your case.
- » Consider privacy of people's information.
- » Focus on the issue not the person.
- » Give the volunteer a chance to respond.
- » Consider all points of view.
- » Be aware of the emotions involved.
- » Focus on solutions.
- » Provide a clear written response.

Dismissing a volunteer

In rare cases, an organisation may need to ask a volunteer to leave. You should write a policy on dismissal so that you know what to do if this ever happens. The policy and procedures should include:

- What behaviours or actions can cause dismissal.
- What you do before a dismissal, for example warnings, counselling, training or reassignment.
- Who will be involved in the process, for example senior staff or board members.
- Options to appeal the decision.
- How dismissal will be done, for example in person or in writing.

What you must do

Some organisations may be under legal obligation to have a clear policy and procedure for managing complaints. If so, you must follow the processes or risk penalties by the regulating body.

Incorporated Associations

The Victorian Associations Incorporation Reform Act 2012 explains how the complaint processes for an associations work. In the past, organisations used to follow its own complaints procedures.

An association's complaints procedure must give all involved in the conflict a chance to be heard. An independent decision maker must help resolve the conflict.

Outside involvement

Generally, volunteers or organisations who want to take a conflict to an external body have three options.

» **Mediation:**

[The Dispute Settlement Centre Victoria](#) and private mediators offer mediation services. Taking part in mediation is voluntary. The mediator is there to guide everyone and cannot make decisions.

» **The Regulator:**

Depending on your organisation's legal structure, you may need to go to a Regulator, for example, Consumer Affairs Victoria.

» **Court:**

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

More information

As Victoria's peak body for volunteering, you can always come to us for information and advice. Below are some helpful links and resources about how to deal with conflict.

- » The [Volunteering Victoria website](#) has timely and reliable support, training, resources and advice.

Can't find what you're looking for?

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



The image shows a grid of resources from the Volunteering Victoria website. At the top center is the red logo of Volunteering Victoria, a stylized 'V' shape. Below the logo is the text 'Volunteering Victoria website'. The grid contains six items, each with an icon and a title:

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

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