Why Do Boundaries Matter?

Volunteer boundaries refer to a behaviour that is considered acceptable or unacceptable, and unless intentionally defined and named, can be open to interpretation. Boundaries keep volunteers focused on the role and help protect clients, volunteers, and the organization from risk.

It is important to create and continue to clearly communicate boundaries to make sure volunteers are informed at every stage of their engagement. While often uncomfortable or difficult, it is vital to adhere to these rules and address volunteers when boundaries are ignored or violated, especially when health and safety or discrimination is a key consideration.

Informing Volunteers of Change

At the beginning of a volunteer’s engagement, or at a time of transition, clearly communicate policies, procedures, and associated boundaries for your volunteers, explaining why these rules are in place.

Give specific examples of the boundaries and desired behaviour. Focus on how volunteers should act, instead of highlighting what not to do.

Identify the consequences of positive and negative performance. If volunteers break boundaries, they should understand the repercussions both to the organization and the impact on their continued engagement.

Describe action steps for managing broken boundaries and get confirmation of a volunteer’s understanding through written documentation.

Mending Relationships

When boundaries are broken, volunteers may want to fix the boundary to maintain their role and relationships with clients and the organization. This may not always be easy, but there are a few guidelines to help you:

- Helping volunteers improve their performance requires an agreement and commitment from the volunteer and supervisor. Volunteers must be willing to fix and maintain changes in their behaviours and demonstrate they understand.
- This process may also require staff, clients or other volunteers to understand the boundary breach and solution in order to keep volunteers accountable to the organization and themselves.
- Once you’ve embarked on this journey, check-in to provide regular and immediate feedback, and highlight improved behaviour.

Risk Analysis of Boundaries

Whether physical, emotional, mental or ethical, you may need to re-design and deliver specific training to ensure volunteers understand risks and associated boundaries of a new landscape. This will help volunteers execute their roles safely and effectively during the pandemic and beyond. Ask yourself:

- Who are the people involved?
- What activity will volunteers be doing?
- Where does the work take place?
- How often will someone oversee the volunteer activity?
- Can boundaries be maintained with adequate supervision?

Other Boundaries Resources

- Feedback & Evaluation Policy (VT’s Sample)
- Volunteer Dismissal Policy (VT’s Sample)
- Introduction to Providing Support Workbook
- Volunteer Toronto’s Policies & Procedures one page resource