

Handling Conflict in Service Programs

In our work assisting volunteers in food banks community meals, and homeless programs, a common request for mentoring or training is how to more effectively address conflict.

First, it is important to know the **procedures and policies** of your program since many conflicts relate to them (e.g. food distribution, atmosphere in the facility, interpersonal conflicts, boundaries in relations among guests and volunteers...).

It is also vital that you **know your program's policies** regarding when it is appropriate to intervene, and when to stay back or get help (e.g. when a weapon is involved). Still, there will be a variety of **situations where you can help**, e.g. when a guest is angry after being jostled in line, is invading another guest's space, doesn't respond to a volunteer's request, is being thoughtless toward a volunteer or another guest, etc.

Our approach is **grounded in respect** for both guests and volunteers (see our 'Companionship' resource for more on this outlook). Empathy, firmness, and respect reflect our ethical perspective, and also seem to work better than other methods.

1. General Approach

- a. Center yourself. Present a **tone** and facial expression that is respectful and kindly. At first observe and **listen rather than speaking**. It may help to simply reflect back what you observe, "It seems that you're feeling pretty frustrated...?"
- b. When you do speak, make your tone of voice **respectful** and **welcoming**, firm if needed but not antagonistic. Instead of blaming or demanding change, **ask for their help** to solve a problem, e.g.: "I'd be grateful if you could lower your voice; many people here are already pretty stressed, that's why we try to keep the volume down. Can you help us out on this?"
- c. It helps to **share the reasoning** behind a rule, and not just criticize a guest's behavior, e.g. "I am not singling you out. We ask everyone to take just one or two muffins so others can get one too. Would you help us make that possible?"

2. More serious or persistent problems

- a. Observe first; try to understand the situation – not to take sides, but to respond in a fair, appropriate manner. It can help to make **eye contact** with other guests or volunteers which can bolster self-confidence and self-control.
- b. We are wise to be ready for the **likelihood** that some people will **resist our efforts**. While it may be tempting to respond in kind, be ready to just **re-connect** with your commitment to respect and kindness. It may take several, even numerous, efforts – and perhaps creativity – before you see progress.

By Glen Gersmehl with input from volunteers, leaders and trainers in LPF's Volunteer Support Project. For more info, contact Glen at 206.349.2501, ggersmehl@hotmail.com LPF, 1710 11th Ave., Seattle, WA 98122.

- c. Often, it can help to briefly state your request, then back off a bit and **give space to a guest**. Be careful to not even make it seem you want to embarrass or corner or "box in" a guest.
- d. If a guest reacts negatively to a reminder of a policy, restate it firmly but kindly, without being aggressive. This is true even for those authorized to say something as strong as "I don't know who is at fault, but please move to another table." or "You need to either stop being threatening, or leave."

3. Teamwork, Supporting One Another

It can make a big difference if volunteers who value positive ways of addressing conflict look out for each other and offer support where possible. Some elements of this approach:

- a. If a volunteer is having trouble with a guest, it can help for a second volunteer to walk up, in sight of the guest, **less to intervene** than to listen, get help if needed, and to project a tone that is serious, but also considerate, kindly, unruffled....
- b. At times a volunteer can get **hooked** into being, or seeming to be blaming, aggressive, or demanding. Another volunteer can **help re-define** the intervention as respectful request. It is also important for a volunteer to be prepared ahead of time to **hand off** involvement to a second volunteer if that makes sense. It takes clear thinking – and some courage – to do so.
- c. A **de-briefing** among volunteers and a skilled leader following a conflict can help strengthen understanding of policies and options, appropriate communication skills and self-confidence.

4. Assuming responsibility

Our difficulties in responding well to conflict are not helped by all the ineffective examples we see on TV, in movies, etc. Most of us need to notice and unlearn bad habits and perspectives as well as to practice new, more effective ones. It is well worth doing (for volunteering, and in many other areas of life).

For many volunteers it can feel awkward or artificial at first to try a different approach, tone, or choice of words. It can help a lot to get in touch with – and ground our response in – our own commitment to **respect** and **companionship** with others. And remember, a good way to learn something new is often to **just try it out**, to experiment – beginning in easier situations.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude, self-seeking or easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs; it protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres. **1 Cor. 13**

Useful and accessible resources:

The Little Book of Conflict Transformation by John Paul Lederach is a thoughtful, clear, and very brief overview of conflict theory and practice.

Nonviolent Communication by Marshall Rosenberg is unusually insightful. For information on workshops, web resources, etc., go to www.cnvc.org

Getting to Yes by Roger Fisher and William Ury is a classic; while it has limitations, it offers a great many useful tips and examples.

"Companionship," "How to be a Bridge in a World of Walls" — workshops, resources, leader guides on bridging conflict/difference: lpf@ecunet.org