

How to Fire a Volunteer

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Churches rely on volunteers as never before. Those churches that cling to top-down organizations face the daunting reality that they simply cannot afford paid staff to do all the ministries. Those churches that are developing bottom-up organizations face the exciting challenge of equipping unpaid leaders for excellence. Everyone is asking for help to identify and train volunteers.

The most important lesson in church growth, however, is that it is even more important to learn how to *fire* a volunteer. Appointing, electing, or empowering a volunteer leader is always a risk. Who really knows what strengths and weaknesses, personality quirks, and hidden addictions might emerge? The question is, can you fire them if necessary?

Fire a volunteer? The very idea shocks the clergy and angers the laity. Of course, it would not have been that shocking or upsetting to our ancestors. Our great-grandparents in church leadership were quite willing to remove a volunteer from office if the mission of the church were in jeopardy. Today, however, the pervading ethos of “membership privilege” makes such an action unthinkable. Volunteers *deserve* to be kept in office. Competency, calling, and mission alignment aside, we have come to believe that the mere fact that a volunteer is willing *to volunteer* carries implicit job security. Too many church leaders believe there is no choice but to let the volunteer remain in leadership until they deign to resign or die. Here is their rationale:

- It would not be *nice* to fire the volunteer, because their self-esteem is tied up in the office. It is better to let the mission fail than to hurt their feelings. After all, they are *members* of the church.
- It would not be *efficient* to fire the volunteer, because at least they are willing to do the job. If they leave, there will be a vacancy that cannot be filled. Better to accept mediocrity than have no program at all. After all, members should not bear too big a burden.
- It would not be *comfortable* to fire the volunteer, because they are related by friendship and kinship to half the congregation. If they were fired, there would be a huge outcry and people might leave the church. Better to allow an ineffective or eccentric volunteer drive away any number of newcomers than disrupt the harmony of the church.

As a result, some volunteers remain in office exercising their fragile egos, bemoaning their heavy burdens, or venting their outrageous behaviors unchecked. Healthy people hesitate to offer their services, competent people are driven to frustration, and newcomers exit out that back door. One big reason churches decline is not that a church is poor or without parking, but that the pastor and the board cannot bring themselves to fire a volunteer who is unwilling to grow or who is off-target in mission.

Firing a volunteer is a difficult task for essentially merciful people to do. The problem is that church leaders so easily confuse mercy and generosity with being nice, accepting mediocrity, and conflict avoidance. Some Christian duties are unpleasant, and this is one. Why would you do it? Because you are *urgent about God's mission*. Just one selfish, misbehaving, or incompetent volunteer can literally keep hundreds of seekers from experiencing grace and participating in church, and thousands of others who are the “least of Christ's brothers and sisters” from receiving the food for body and soul they need. The readiness to fire a volunteer reveals whether the real heart of the church is membership or mission.

How, then, do you fire a volunteer?

First, you have to establish a standard of trust. Clarity about core values and beliefs must be applied to leadership of any kind, so that there are trust can be measured and deserved. It is not automatic. It is earned. Any volunteer, from the greeter to the Sunday school teacher, will be expected to behave within certain boundaries of positive behavior and core faith.

Second, you have to articulate a clear vision and mission. Every leader must be able to align themselves to the vision and mission of the church, and be held accountable for the alignment of their work with that vision and mission. The more rigorously a pastor or board measures that alignment, the more effectively that volunteer can function. Every word and deed of any leader (paid or unpaid) should deliver the vision of the church ... and nothing else.

If this standard of trust and alignment is not generally clear to the congregation (and it often isn't), then the staff and board must be clear. Firing a volunteer in the absence of congregational consensus about their identity and purpose will cause more conflict ... but firing a volunteer in the absence of *leadership* consensus about identity and purpose will cause an outright split and the loss of staff.

Third, the pastor, staff person, or volunteer ministry leader must do the firing. They should follow the Biblical guideline and take a couple credible spiritual leaders along for the confrontation, *but the last thing you do is refer it to a personnel committee*. Do not make some other committee or staff person the "hit man" for the firing. Leaders take responsibility to hire, train, and fire the people who work in their sphere of influence. You cannot pass the buck. That is disrespectful and dishonorable. The least you can do is look the person in the eyes when you deliver the news.

Fourth, always give the volunteer a chance to redeem themselves. This principle is the same for paid staff as well as for volunteers. Once confronted with their failure, they should be offered clear opportunities for continuing education or counseling. It may be that better training will solve the problem. It may be that therapeutic support will solve the problem. In the event that they are fired, everyone in the congregation must be confident that the opportunities were presented.

Fifth, always provide a reasonable, but short, timeline. The opportunities for education or counseling should be ready *immediately*. The timeline for change should never be longer than 4-6 weeks. Resist any attempt to delay, including excuses about workloads, illnesses, and waiting for the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does not dither. If a person is that ill they should resign anyway. Most workloads can be reprioritized in a month. Ask any effective organizational leader in any public sector. If the mission really matters, nothing should get in the way.

Sixth, monitor the continuing education or counseling process and keep confidential written records. Evaluate progress, and provide prompt and clear feedback to the volunteer letting them know if their redemptive efforts are acceptable. In this way, if a final decision is made to fire them it will be justifiable and predictable. If the volunteer wishes to take the initiative to withdraw, they can make an informed decision. If the volunteer redeems themselves they will know why and feel all the better for their achievement.

Seventh, there should be no appeal. The decision to fire should not be reviewed by a pastor or board once the staff person or ministry leader has made the decision. At most, they should make sure that the above process has been followed. In extreme cases where a violation of human rights (as defined by the state or specific non-profit agency) is suspected, a pastor or board may review the confidential written records of evaluation. Otherwise, the decision to fire should never be appealed. That in itself indicates non-confidence in the staff person or ministry leader who did the firing ... and that person should be fired.

Many churches think that the grounds for termination of a volunteer are vague and difficult to define. In fact, the grounds for dismissal are not difficult to define at all. Grounds for firing parallel the grounds for hiring. These also parallel the basic pieces of training that should be offered to every leader, which are also the basic categories for ongoing coaching and support:

a) Mission Attitude:

Every leader should be selected because they are eager to align themselves with the vision and mission of the church. They are trained to discern it, and coached to measure their work against the greater purpose. If they don't align with the vision and mission of the church, they should be fired.

b) Standards of Trust:

Every leader should be selected because they are willing to live within, support, and advocate the core values and beliefs of the church. They are trained and coached to behave in specific positive ways, and to articulate faith in specific positive ways. If they don't, they should be fired.

c) Competence:

Every leader should be selected because they have spiritual gifts and readiness to learn. They are equipped with basic skills, and demonstrate a willingness to improve those skills, in whatever area of ministry they are called. If they are unskilled, and refuse to learn, they should be fired.

d) Teamwork:

Every leader should be selected because they are prepared to surrender ego and cooperate with a team. They are apprenticed in how to function in a team, and coached to work cooperatively and respectfully with others. If they cannot or will not do this, they should be fired.

These are the criteria with which any leader (staff or volunteer) should be hired, equipped, and fired. In the end, God's mission is more important than any staff person or volunteer. The Bible is clear. Those who surrender to faith, aim to be in mission, and do all in their power to perfect their ministries are praised and they are entrusted with even more responsibility. Those who are unwilling to do so should be removed from leading God's church.

Now here is the final challenge. If a pastor or board cannot fire a volunteer who should be fired ... whether it is to protect their pride, avoid excellence, or escape conflict ... then that pastor or board should be fired. And God will do it.