

how can I fire a volunteer

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I get asked this question a lot. I've just finished writing a new book called, "YOUR FIRST TWO YEARS IN YOUTH MINISTRY" and I wrote a sidebar for the book that answers this question. The book should be available in August 2002, but here's an early look at a couple of pages that also answer 4 questions that I've been sent in the last two weeks.

Some people may criticize me for including this article, but the topic is one that may be most frequently referred to. During every seminar I teach on volunteers, someone sheepishly asks, "Uh...well...I have this one leader...and...well, she's been there a long time...and...uh...well..." Since I've heard the same scenario a thousand times I say, "And you want to get rid of her but you don't know how...right?" The crowd laughs awkwardly and the person who's asking sighs with relief when he finds out he's not alone.

In my many years of youth ministry I have had to ask people to step away from their leadership positions. A few times, the volunteer was relieved to go. Most of the time I faced a sweaty-palms, intense, conflict-filled, difficult conversation. And every time our ministry was healthier once this person was removed.

Consider these principles

- If God has called you to be the lead youth worker and the church has given you the mantle of leadership, then lead. You don't have to be mean-spirited to lead, you just need to be willing to lead. Leaders have to make decisions and take actions that aren't easy. Letting someone go is one of them. Your youth ministry is too important to lower your standards and overlook someone who is causing problems. Difficult leaders damage morale, hurt students, cause continual grief, and hinder your ministry from growing.
- As the lead youth worker, it's your responsibility to put a team together that's going to pursue health and move in the right direction. Not everyone will go there with you. Remember what Paul and Barnabas fought about in Acts 15? They went their separate ways because Paul didn't think John Mark had what it took to minister with him. You're not the first leader in the history of Christianity to make a tough decision about leaders.
- It's always easier to bring people onto the team than to get them off. Remember that when you're about to say yes to a potential volunteer who gives you an unsettling feeling. Trust your gut and say no.
- Realize the difference between a person who's a chronic problem and a person who needs immediate intervention (moral failure, a nonnegotiable rule broken). Volunteers who just aren't cutting it are going to need more tenderness, grace, and chances than those who knew the consequences of their choice and choose poorly.

Removing a leader is your last resort, a step taken only after you've done everything you can to help this person succeed.

Before you remove a leader

- Have a conversation with your supervisor. Tell him what you're planning to tell the person. Ask for advice, coaching, and prayer. Don't make important decisions in isolation. Get a second opinion. Supervisor support is crucial since backlash is likely.
- Be in prayer.
- Have strong evidence and anecdotal illustrations to support your decision.
- Confront problem youth workers about specific issues before removing them. (See chapter 5 for help on this.) It may be an issue related to attitude, performance, or team fit. Be honest. Tell the person you need to see specific changes (tell them what) or else you may ask them to step away from the ministry. Tell them you'll give them a month to see changes. During this time, check their pulse regarding their

commitment. I've found that some people will confess, "I'm just not into it anymore." Give them the opportunity to step aside gracefully.

- Set a date to meet and review again in a month.

When you remove leaders

- Be tender but strong. Grace and truth are needed when having this difficult conversation. Grace says, "I care about you." Truth says, "You're not working out in this ministry, and here's why..."
- Don't beat around the bush. Be clear. "Sandy, things haven't change since our last meeting, and I would like to ask you to step away from the youth ministry for a season." The season can be six months, a year, two years, the rest of the 21st century. It doesn't need to be decided right away.
- Don't ask the person to stay until you find another leader. Think through that ahead of time. Be ready to accept the responsibilities the person will leave behind.

After you have removed them

- Immediately following the meeting, spend time alone. Review, reflect, and pray. Do some activity in which you can relax and express the emotions you have. I'm always so stressed before the meeting and so relieved after the meeting that my emotions are very tender.
- Follow up with a letter. Tell the person that you're thankful for their period of service and that you're sorry things didn't work out and that you'll be praying for peace and reconciliation.
- Don't avoid the person.
- If it's appropriate, offer the person's name to another ministry in the church.
- Expect some people to be angry. This is natural, and it can take time to heal.
- Talk about the meeting with a trusted friend, your mentor, or another youth worker who can relate to what you've gone through.
- Don't obsess over it. You made the right decision. Move on. Lead your team.
- Hopefully it will be a long time before you do it again. Oh yeah...you'll have to do it again some day.

Two lifesavers

A signed commitment. We establish standards by having leaders sign a commitment each year, myself included. Each leader agrees to attitude, direction, participation, unity, and certain lifestyle standards that go with the commitment.

As we sign these commitments (during our first leader's meeting of the new school year) I say something like, "My prayer is that everyone here will outlast me as a youth worker at this church. I want to be honest though and let you know that I will be candid with you if I feel like you're not living up to your commitment, and I'll ask you to make changes." The clearer your expectations are from the beginning, the easier the removal conversation will be.

[SEE Purpose Driven Youth Ministry PAGE 385]

Periodic reviews. A few times a year, meet with leaders individually to discuss their attitudes, performances, and fit with the team. When reviews are frequent, it's easier to address potential trouble before it gets out of hand. If things are going well, the review is a great opportunity to affirm the leader.