



Southern Volunteering (SA) Inc

Creating welcoming volunteer teams through appropriate conversations



Why is this important?

New volunteers are stepping into an unfamiliar environment to complete tasks they may have never done before, with people they have never met before.

For some, volunteering will be an activity they have chosen to grow their feelings of self worth and self esteem, or a stepping stone to overcoming other issues. For example, someone may have been unemployed or unable to work for a long time and they are using volunteering to build confidence and skills. For many volunteers the motivation to volunteer is to build social connections. We are all vulnerable as we enter new environments.

People being made to feel safe and welcome is critical as to whether they keep coming back to volunteer.

All staff and existing volunteers have a part to play in ensuring this happens, by having positive, non-judgemental attitudes and making sure conversations are appropriate.



Core behaviours

People feel welcomed when the people they are volunteering with;

- Engage warmly through smiling, friendly body language, or eye contact, as appropriate (be aware of cultural differences)
- Use manners
- Are patient, especially when they are learning
- Don't judge them
- Remind them where amenities are
- Don't make any assumptions about them
- Make them feel part of the team
- Show an appropriate, non-intrusive interest in them as a person
- Thank them for their contribution, or if they have done something well

Conversation starters and conversation stoppers

Starters

- The weather
- What they have been up to outside of volunteering
- Pets
- Food
- Local events e.g. The Fringe

Stoppers

- Your own personal views that you know are hot, divisive topics e.g. political affiliation
- Talking about illnesses or medical issues
- Talking about other volunteers, staff or service users in a negative way

Appropriate conversation

Volunteering introduces you to a range of people with different experience and insights. Getting to know other volunteers and staff is a great way to build cohesive, supportive teams.

Comments and conversations can assist with this, but can also derail this process.

Some examples of unwelcoming or inappropriate conversations

- Asking direct questions or making assumptions about a person's personal life. For example 'Are you married?' 'Why don't you have children?'. These questions are intrusive. People may not want to disclose their sexuality, or may have traumatic experiences linked to these questions, like infertility or child loss for example.
- Asking direct questions or making assumptions about a person's or other people's health or disability. Many disabilities are invisible so generalised comments about people who are on the autism spectrum or have mental health issues, for example,



should not be made. Similarly if the person you are speaking to has made you aware they have a disability, you should not tell others without the person's permission, or assume you know what tasks they are able to complete. Always ask the person with the disability if they can do the task first, or what support they might need to be able to complete the task. Derogatory comments about a person's disability are never acceptable.

- Making any remarks about a person's physical appearance. For example skin colour, height, weight etc. Even when you are trying to be complimentary this is not appropriate e.g. 'Oh I get to work with a pretty, young girl like you today'. Do not use any characteristics a person has NOT chosen for themselves to describe them. For example 'The Asian lady', 'The large man' or 'The old man that's in the wheelchair'. Always try and use a person's name first and foremost. If you need to use extra descriptors use something the person has chosen for themselves - clothing is a good option, 'Go and speak to the lady in the green dress'
- Respect a person's chosen name and pronouns and use them accordingly

- When describing health conditions do not use slang terms that minimise the condition and are offensive. For example; use terms such as cognitive decline or memory loss e.g. 'I visit someone with memory loss' instead of 'I visit someone lovely who can't remember anything as she's lost her marbles'

These examples are not designed to leave people feeling like they are treading on eggshells and cannot discuss anything with a fellow volunteer.

The individual may open up voluntarily about their life and it can be extremely beneficial to have an open non-judgemental conversation that is led by the individual. However, if someone shares details about themselves that would potentially make them vulnerable do not treat this as gossip to share with others.

55% of our communication is non-verbal so look for signs that the person is uncomfortable as to where the conversation is going, and adjust your interaction appropriately.

We are all human and we all make mistakes. If you are told you have, or you feel like you may have, offended someone, always offer an apology. Be prepared to learn and grow in your own social interactions.

Being an upstander

Existing volunteers, Volunteer Managers and other staff, all have a responsibility to make new volunteers feel welcome. It is not acceptable to reject a potential volunteer on the basis that other volunteers may not welcome them.

Becoming an upstander is about moving from silence to action. An upstander is “someone who actively chooses to support or intervene on behalf of someone who is being mistreated or harmed, recognising injustice and using their strengths to create positive change”. This would include speaking up when there are inappropriate conversations or remarks made about someone.

Legal implications

Certain comments and questions can be not just inappropriate, but also legally problematic, particularly those related to race, religion, gender, disability, or sexual orientation. **Discrimination and harassment have serious consequences.**

It is never okay to make jokes or comments about someone’s ethnicity, background, or abilities. Even if meant as a joke, these comments can be harmful and make people feel unwelcome.

Volunteers are offered protection under:

- [Work, Health and Safety Act 2012](#)
 - [Equal Opportunity Act 1984](#)
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Southern Volunteering (SA) Inc

Christies Beach Office

P: 8326 0020

E: admin@svsa.org.au

Fleurieu Office

P: 8552 7858

E: regionalesvsa.org.au

www.svsa.org.au