

You Make the Difference

Participant Handout – Tackling Toxic People in Volunteer Environments

Why This Session Matters

Toxic behavior and poor performance don't just hurt feelings—they drain energy, stall the mission, and drive away good volunteers. Protecting your volunteer culture ensures your fair, ag society, or nonprofit remains a place where people want to serve, grow, and belong.

The Three Reasons Volunteers Don't Perform

1. They Don't Know the Expectations
2. They Don't Have the Training or Tools
3. They Think They Have a Choice

Warning Signs of Toxic Behavior

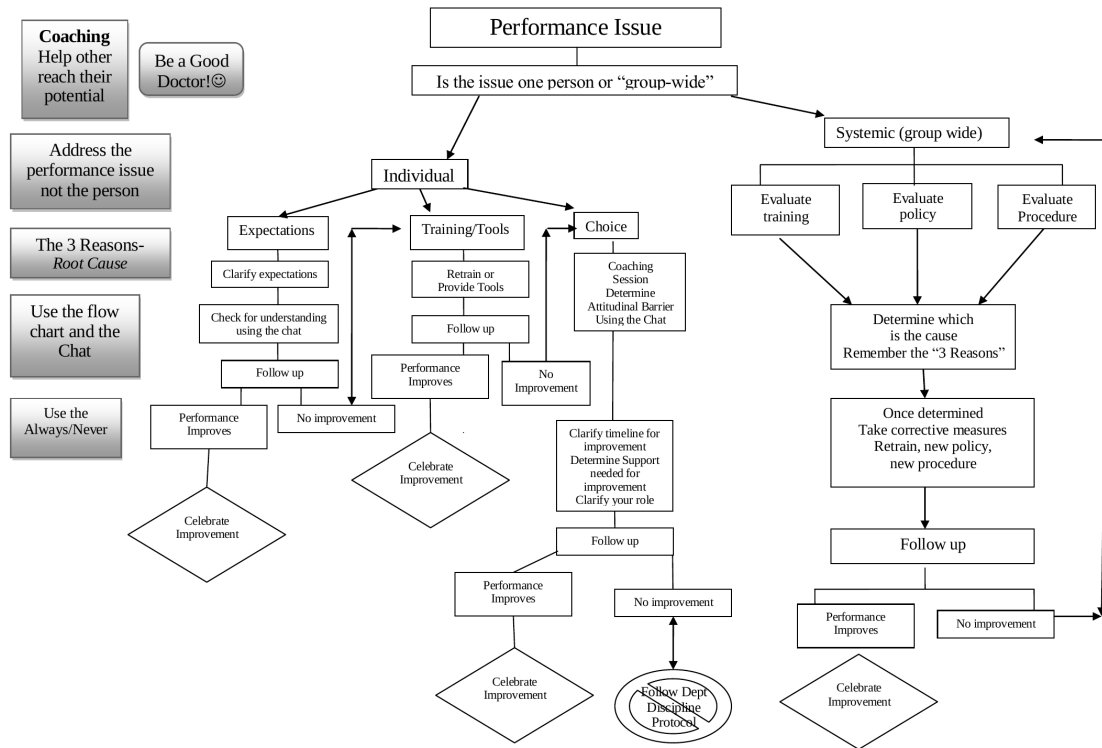
- Gossiping or undermining leadership
- Repeated negativity or criticism
- Consistently unreliable or absent
- Dominating conversations or dismissing ideas
- Resistance to accountability or change
- Passive resistance or subtle sabotage

Leadership's Responsibility

- Set clear expectations and revisit them regularly.
- Equip volunteers with training, tools, and mentorship.
- Enforce accountability fairly and consistently.
- Protect culture above individual comfort.

The Process (Flowchart Centerpiece)

The diagram below provides a structured process for addressing toxic behavior and poor performance. Use it as your step-by-step guide to clarify expectations, provide training, follow up, and—if necessary—apply accountability measures.



Leader's Mindset

- Be a good doctor — diagnose before prescribing.
- Address the behavior, not the person.
- Stay calm, consistent, and mission-focused.
- Protect culture above individual comfort.
- Stay anchored in your integrity — don't let their behavior drag you down to their level.

Key Reminders

- Celebrate improvement quickly and sincerely.
- Retrain and equip before you discipline.
- Use 'Always/Never' principles to guide consistency.
- Always check if the problem is one person or a broken system.

Practical Tools & Scripts

The 5-Step Difficult Conversation Framework

- Start with Mission: “Our fair/society depends on everyone pulling in the same direction.”
- Name the Behavior: “When meetings get derailed with negativity...”
- State the Impact: “...it discourages others and slows our progress.”
- Set Clear Expectation: “We need constructive input so decisions can move forward.”
- Outline Next Step: “If it continues, we’ll need to reevaluate your role.”

What to Say When...

They’re negative or intimidating: “I hear your concerns, but the way it’s being delivered is shutting others down. Let’s reframe this so all voices are heard.”

They dominate discussions: “Thanks for sharing. Now I’d like to hear from others before we move forward.”

They’re unreliable: “We counted on you to have this done by Friday. That didn’t happen, and it hurt the team. How can we make sure this doesn’t repeat?”

They’re gossiping: “If there’s a problem, let’s address it directly in this room — not in the hallway.”

Addressing the Fear of Confrontation

- You’re not being mean — you’re protecting the mission.
- Confronting toxic behavior is an act of service to the rest of your volunteers.
- Courage is contagious — when you model it, others step up too.

Restoring Trust After Conflict

- Acknowledge positive change quickly: “I’ve noticed you’ve stepped up—thank you.”
- Reinforce the right behavior consistently.
- Reintegrate by entrusting responsibility again—with expectations clear.

If All Else Fails

- Escalate: Bring in board leadership or chairperson.
- Document: Keep records of conversations.
- Decide: Sometimes the healthiest decision is asking someone to step aside.

Reflection Questions

- Where in my organization have I seen toxic behaviors?
- Which of the '3 reasons' explains the underperformance I've seen?
- What conversations have I been avoiding?
- What one step can I take this week to strengthen our culture?

Notes

*Your fair, ag society, or nonprofit deserves a team that lifts it up—
not tears it down.*
