



How not to manage volunteers!

TN153 Training Notes series: Management

These notes were first published on the website in April 2024. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

'Line management' is a term that sounds as though it belongs in staff employment for a larger church. And that, of course, is its normal setting.

But many church members 'manage' others, usually volunteers, perhaps on a rota or in a team. Some do it well, others have little idea of this responsibility and muddle along as best they can. But if it is done badly, and it often is, it can be painful for those being managed and fail to develop them into the workers they are capable of becoming.

Article A32 on this website, *Be creative as a line manager*, identifies seven important aspects of line management in a paid staff setting, but these notes that follow focus on different **styles** of **volunteer** management.

Here are eight examples of **poor** management that church members tell me about. These are described from the volunteer worker's point of view but these notes are designed to be read and acted on by those responsible for leading such people.

Applications might include:

- a part-time Church Administrator who manages one or two helpers in the church office;
- a Families and Children Co-ordinator who manages a team of children's group leaders;
- a home group leader who delegates the leading of meetings to members of their group;
- a Deacon or Church Warden who manages the stewards or welcome team at Sunday services;
- a Minister who manages a range of pastoral teams, worship leaders, community workers, and so on.

And, by the way, these points also apply to the management of paid staff too even if that is not my main setting in mind here.

If you are responsible for a group of volunteers (or paid staff too), might any of these numbered points below have some relevance to your style of line management? Put yourself in their shoes. Remember, these are definitely 'How **not** to' examples and 'you' now refers to the worker not the manager.

1 **Little idea of the big picture**

You are given specific tasks to do but provided with little explanation or encouragement as to how these often-routine tasks fulfil the purpose of the church or enable the vision in some way.

So in the church office you are asked to collate sheets for a paper for the Church Council without knowing what the main issue is or how the discussion could impact the church. Or you work as a volunteer on Thursdays but have no contact with other volunteers who appear on other days. The focus is always on the instructions for a routine task with little sense of any vision for how this particular job or the total work of the office might impact the life and vision of the church.

You know what you are supposed to do, you may well be told how to do it, but you are not given much idea of why it needs doing. As a result you gain little satisfaction from your work and fail to recognise its spiritual value.

2 **Instructions that are too vague**

You may be expected to lead a children's group on Sunday on a particular theme but are not told how to find online ideas for helpful resources, how long the session will be, whether you can claim expenses for any visual aids you make, and so on.

Or the instructions you are given may simply be open to more than one interpretation: you were asked to lead a Bible study session in your home group for 'last Sunday's sermon theme'. But does 'last Sunday' refer to when the instruction was given or the last Sunday before the meeting date? There was no check-up to ensure you were clear as to what you were being asked to do. Or when you had questions, your home group leader was nowhere to be found. When you get things wrong the leader rebukes you in front of the group.

On the other hand, and in a different setting, you may be given too little to do and so have to sit at the church welcome desk feeling silly and bored with a manager who seems to take no interest in your needs.

3 **Supervision that is overbearing**

There is an opposite danger. You may be someone with initiative who finds yourself micro-managed by a supervisor (that's the term they use*) who expects you to undertake tasks exactly as they do them. Instead of being told what the final outcome needs to be, perhaps given some ideas for methodology but left to decide on the best way of going about it, you are checked up on in every detail by someone who believes that the way they do the job is 'right' and any other method is 'wrong'. The system cannot be changed.

*The idea of **supervision** is to ensure orders are carried out whereas the concept of **management** should be much more on the development of the person's capability to undertake the role. Some people need supervision of tasks, others need management in their responsibilities.

You would value some measure of control over how you work but when you introduced an innovative new way to lead the sung worship last Sunday, you were firmly told afterwards that that was an inappropriate style. Or perhaps the piece you wrote for the church email distribution was considerably edited without your knowledge by someone who wanted to stamp their mark on the article and felt your approach was wrong when it was simply different.

4 **Goal posts that move**

There is little that is more frustrating than to be given a job to do, then half way through it to be taken off it as something more urgent has come in, then to find that the original job is not really necessary and was just given to you to keep you busy, then to find that instructions are coming from more than one source and they conflict.

So your role is to lead the intercessions at next Sunday's service. The Pastoral Care lead has told you of specific needs of people in the congregation and asked you to pray for them,. But when you arrive at church you are told that the intercessions will now be in a different time from normal, and the Minister tells you of two new needs you should include. Oh and could you link in with the sermon theme in some way because she is talking about praying for needs.

Then the service is over-running in time and the leader decides simply to omit the intercessions it took you two hours to prepare. No one apologises to you afterwards.

5 **Panic deadlines**

Administrators tend to flap but church office life is often bounded by deadlines. The Sunday service leaflets have to be ready on time, the arrangements for the funeral have to mesh in with the requirements of undertakers and family, the rooms have to be rearranged in time for the next group arriving after lunch, and so on.

But much of church office life is unpredictable: the printer plays up at the most awkward moment, the phone rings incessantly all morning, the Youth Worker drops in and sits on your volunteer desk drumming his feet and just wanting to chill out with you.

So if you are an office volunteer, with fixed hours so you have to leave at 2.45 pm to pick up children from school (or whatever), it is highly stressful to be presented with a series of deadlines throughout the day that become ever more frenetic, especially if your supervisors are clearly stressed themselves. Or, after a day of inactivity, to be presented with an urgent task five minutes before you are due to go home.

6 **Lack of support**

You are the voluntary Families Worker and have spent the weekend pondering why two key families have just left the church to join another one down the street. You want to talk this over with your Minister, your line manager, but he is always busy and often cancels what is supposed to be your weekly session with him. You ask for a session but after agreeing a day and a time he cancels yet again because he has too much else on. You ask if a regular meeting, if only for ten minutes might be possible, but after a couple of those your Minister lets them slip and clearly sees no reason for them.

The Minister takes little personal interest in you. He never asked about your hospital appointment last week, or remembered it was your birthday. He is a task-centred person with no time for chit-chat or concerns outside his own circles of interest.

If only there was a regular time to share your concerns, ask for advice and check you were both understanding things the same way. You had also asked if you could have a simple annual review, but there hasn't been time.

7 **No praise or thanks**

One of the hardest things of all is that when you organise the special Mission Sunday with its exhibition and printed summary of all your church's mission contacts, no one says 'thank you'. It had taken you several days.

When you lead the Sunday service Music Group or the Tech Team, read the Scripture passage, lead the intercessions or arrange the flowers, you are never told if what you have done is appreciated or not, though the leader of the church service does make clear his or her displeasure when you get things wrong.

It would only need the occasional 'thank you' and 'well done' and then you would not mind some gentle rebukes if these could also help you put things right. But no one takes the responsibility to take a lead in that respect and you feel demotivated as a result. You assume that Christians should not need to be thanked and it is wrong to look for praise when you are serving the Lord.

8 **Little motivation to develop**

If lack of encouragement is a fault, so is a matching lack of helpful correction designed to help you develop in your role and improve your output. If poor work is simply accepted (with the manager then displaying their frustrations with you to others behind your back), if there is no sense of standards to be kept, if there is no effort to raise proper pride in a job done well, if no training is offered paid for by the church, there will be little satisfaction for the worker and no improvement in output.

So if you are on the Welcome Team it might be helpful to know you should not really be chatting to your friends after the service but seeking to open a conversation with newcomers and visitors. It needs to be done carefully of course and must not fall into the area of overbearing control.

Some Christians find this aspect of good management so hard but it is vital. Seeking to improve needs to become part of the church culture.

Final word to managers. Put yourself in the shoes of the people you lead and manage in some form and check out if any one of the above list might be an issue for your style or the management culture in your church. Why not have the courage to ask your volunteer workers or team members which one of these eight you might need to improve in. Then put it all into action and be a better manager of your volunteers (and paid staff too)!

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN153. See also Articles A32, *Be creative as a line manager*, A45, *How to lead a team at church*, and A47, *15 principles of volunteering*, plus Training Notes TN31, *Affirming volunteers*, TN139, *Church workers in teams*, and TN148, *Serving in a post-Covid church*, among others.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN153 under Management.

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>