

On Tackling Resistance To Screening *

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* I received a request by email this week from an old and experienced colleague who has a problem she knows how to handle, but needed a bit of backup to proceed. I took a bit of time to respond to her specific comments and when I'd done, I thought perhaps some of the musings might be of interest to others. So with my colleague's permission, I am posting her questions (in black) and my responses (in red). As ever, comments invited. -Linda

I am the President of a very active theatre group in [location]. We have an active and involved membership, who are very involved with the community. Two years ago, having realized that we were all getting older and there seemed to be a dearth of young members, we started up a youth company. this has been a huge success. We have about 60 young company members - ages 10 - 17 - and have put on a major production (A Midsummer Night's Dream) a 1-Act Festival, and hosted around 30 workshops in the 2 years. One of our adult members is a retired school principal, who is very aware of the need for security checks as part of the screening process for teachers and other education staff. He has brought it to our attention that we need to be doing something similar for those folk who are working with the kids in the young company.

I agree with him completely, as do all the executive.

Good. I don't have a lot of experience in the theatre setting, but my guess is that adults working with young people in the theatre environment have a great deal of access, opportunity to cultivate less-than-healthy if not out-and-out abusive relationships, and the dramatic nature of the enterprise increases the risks of emotionally-laden exchanges and physical proximity. Normal boundaries to appropriate relationships may have an increased likelihood of being broken. ... In short, a risky environment that warrants thorough screening ... and equally thorough ongoing monitoring of relationships, by the way.

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However, two of the people who work most directly and most effectively with the young ones are very against the idea. It is 'an invasion of my privacy' is the most common statement.

It IS an invasion of privacy of sorts. The point is that it is fully justified by the risks created in what you are doing. Give them their point. Screening does have the potential to "dig up" stuff from one's past. That is the whole point and shouldn't be argued. The real point, which they miss, is that the first duty of the organization is to protect the well-being of those involved, and there can be no argument that the first duty is owed to the most vulnerable.

One cannot live in this world without recognizing a) that we cannot always place trust in those we place in positions of trust and b) that organizations have an increasing duty of care, both in the eyes of the courts and in the eyes of the public. The duty is highest in regard to young (and other vulnerable) people.

"It can't happen here" are famous last words that trade off safety for ignorance, laziness, or ego. It's simply indefensible in 2005.

Volunteers sometimes think they have an entitlement to volunteer which supercedes the purpose of the organization and/or the legal and ethical obligations of the organization. No one has an entitlement to involvement. No single individual should put his or her own ego, identity, or public presence ahead of what is best for the organization, those it serves, and others involved in the enterprise. Those volunteers who cannot put the mission ahead of their own "stuff" need to be helped to find another place to play. (No pun intended)

We are stating that we need to be seen to be doing everything possible to protect the kids, and that this is simply a measure of due diligence.

You are 100% correct.

They are also saying that they are checking with other groups with young members and no-one is doing this - which is no argument as far as I am concerned, as we would be the leaders in the field and that is not a problem.

You are 100% correct. The fact that others are willing to play Russian Roulette with the well-being of young people does not justify your following their lead.

What does worry me though, is that if I cannot come up with an argument that will convince them to get their screening done, we will lose them. They are probably the 2 most hard-working, creative, knowledgeable and talented members we have.

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Stack their loss (granted, not insubstantial as you point out) against someone (not necessarily them, but others who, because of the current protest, enter the scene un-screened) behaving inappropriately or abusively towards one or more of your young people. I am a bit biased on these matters, of course, but to me this is an easy decision. Particularly in light of my comments earlier about entitlements.

It's not that you don't value their opinion, or grant the invasiveness of the exercise, but that you place children's safety at the top of the organization's values. That is nothing to apologize for.

If you have the potential to engage members in positions from which they have no, or less access to young people - less potential to be inappropriate or "groom" - then those who choose not to go through the more intensive screening process can be offered such positions. But I would see that as a red flag warranting more careful attention on an ongoing basis.

They are both in their 40's, a husband & wife, and I truly think this is a philosophical viewpoint for them, rather than people who think we might discover something about their past. (they have both been involved in theatre for most of their lives, and it would not surprise me in the least to discover that they have some drug or alcohol related charge back when they were in their silly days) In any case, we are only really interested in the past 5 years, other than in the case of major crime.

Right. So include that point in the policy and make note of the kinds of offenses that would be deemed as disqualifiers (violence, child abuse, pornography, etc.). Be clear that previous, unrelated offenses are irrelevant to the current exercise.

Also, note in the policy who does the screening, what information is gathered and kept, who has access to it for what purposes, how it is stored, for how long and how it is destroyed. Attend carefully to data storage and guarantee confidentiality. If there is a previous bust in their past, they need to know that it will be considered only if relevant to the position in question, that the info will be safely guarded, and that no one else need know if an irrelevant offense surfaces.

I don't believe there is any actual case law that says you must have a police check done if working with kids, although some ministry supported programs require it.

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These things vary by the nature of the work of the organization and jurisdiction, but as far as I know, there is no relevant legislation in your area that would cover the theatre. However a growing number of civil precedents establish organizations' responsibilities to attend to the safety and well-being of vulnerable people.

What can I say to these 2 wonderful people that will convince them that this is something for their protection as well as for the kids, and that we must, as a responsible community organization, insist that all those who work with youth have a current check?

Are they parents? Would they feel comfortable with their own children being exposed to the attentions of other adults in similar circumstances (boundary breaches, high emotionality, unsupervised time together, physical contact, adoration of talented and charismatic adults, potential for grooming, etc. etc.)? Do they think that hockey coaches, for example, should not be screened, even though we know the horrible history of offenses in that field? How is your work with children any different? Why should children be more exposed to risk in your activities than elsewhere? Why would these volunteers' right of privacy be any greater than that of coaches, teachers, mentors, etc. in other organizations, pretty much all of whom are being screened to a higher standard (and are accepting of the new protocol because they value children's safety and understand the need for higher standards)?

Bottom line, the protestors in question are dispensable and the troop will survive their loss. Children's safety is not dispensable and the troop would be much less likely to survive a public scandal should it decide to trade off safety for volunteers' overblown and misplaced sense of dignity.