

A Volunteer's Manual from the Insider's Perspective

Mark Colston
formerly #230362

The Do's and Don't's when Working with Inmates

1. When you first meet with the inmates always express to them what inspired you to do the workshop. Also give them a history of your experience with inmates. If you don't have a history then let them know. Inmates are always wondering what inspired a volunteer to come in and help them.
2. Tell them exactly what you expected of them and the class. Let them know in the beginning what you can and cannot do. The inmates will then know how to approach you or how to respect you as a person.
3. Always express how you honestly feel. Never come into a workshop and present a fictitious character. Inmates are able to detect a person who is being fictitious in their character. If the inmates detect that a person is fictitious they will drop out of the class and possibly encourage others to do the same.
4. NEVER, NEVER tell any inmate or inmates anything that you are unable to do or cannot positively do. If you do either of the above, inmates will lose trust in you and will drop out of the class and possibly encourage others to drop out of the workshop. If you are unsure about something, then tell them you don't know for sure or you will try. Keep in mind inmates are at the mercy of other people. So what a person says they will accept at face value. The inmate's way of viewing is, YOUR WORD IS YOUR LIFE LINE. If your word is fictitious then your character is fictitious. Please remember your credibility is everything with inmates and that could make or break the class.
5. Always encourage inmates. Always give them a kind word and ask them how their day has been. It shows them that you have an interest in their well being as well as the successes of the class.
6. Never make a commitment to something and begin to do it then in the middle of the commitment change your mind. Inmates are familiar to that type of behavior. Once you display that type of behavior, in a majority of cases the inmate(s) will never trust that person again. And possibly encourage others not to participate in the workshop. Think of the pros and cons before you make any commitment.
7. Always show confidence and motivation. You control the mood of the class because you are the teacher. If you are unable to show confidence and motivation at a particular workshop, then express to the class why you feel the way you do. Inmates are very understanding and will attempt to help you gain confidence and motivation throughout that session.
8. Always keep them informed of any changes in your schedule if it will change the day the class was previously held. Inmates have a set schedule. If you change the class from the original day without informing the inmates, they could possibly think the class has been canceled or you do not have a genuine interest in the workshop.

9. At the end of the class always discuss the progress of the workshop and where you would like to improve certain areas and give suggestions. Always treat the opinion of the inmates as important and allow them to express themselves without interrupting, unless you are pressed for time. Then express why you cut their opinion short.

10. At the end of the class always give thanks to each inmate on an individual basis for coming to the workshop. That allows them to feel they are important to the class. If any inmate feels they are unimportant to the class, they will lose interest and not put forth their best effort.

How Inmates View Honesty

Inmates view honesty as a very important part of a person's character. The term inmates often use to refer to honesty is "KEEPING IT REAL" or "YOUR WORD IS YOUR BOND." To inmates honesty is everything and it determines how inmates will respect a person in general. If a person displays a fictitious character this will then lead the inmates to think a person's credibility is questionable and thus untrustworthy. When that happens, inmates will then lose interest in the person and will not be sympathetic to them in no way.

In prison inmates' credibility or their word is in full control of the inmate and there is no reason for a person to be dishonest or not real with others. Inmates are very understanding and understand when a person makes an attempt to do a particular task for an inmate but fails to successfully complete it. As a volunteer you must understand you are entering an environment that is foreign to you and the survival of your workshop depends on you and your credibility. Inmates will place their value system on you and you must be aware of that. Undersigned, the prison environment is their temporary or permanent home and unlike you they do not have the privilege to unrestricted liberties. So their view of the world and everyday functions of the world will be different from your view.

Please understand your credibility or your word is the primary factor concerning the success of your class and inmates will judge your workshop by that.

What Confidence Means to Inmates

Confidence means a lot to inmates who participate in programs. Inmates feel if the person instructing a class or running a workshop illustrates confidence, that allows the inmates to feel that person knows what they are doing, thus, motivating their willingness to want to learn from that person. Inmates must feel the instructor, in other words, understand him/her and believe that he/she is well equipped to teach them what they need to know. And confidence gives them an invisible scent that the instructor is well grounded in their teachings. Many inmates have met instructors who were not confident in their ability to teach inmates and that was a turn off to the inmates, because they felt that person does not know what they are doing, thus educating them to be a failure. Inmates will not follow anyone who they feel will teach them to be worse off than they already were before participating in the workshop.

If you lack a lot of confidence in your ability to teach inmates, then let them know that you lack confidence. But also state to them that as the workshop proceeds, your confidence will get stronger and you will do everything in your power to have a successful workshop.

How Inmates Get Their Motivation

Inmates get their motivation through positive encouragement and praise. When an inmate completes a task, you should always recognize them for it, whether it is small or big. When an inmate attempts to do a task or seems somewhat shy about participating in the workshop, then encourage him/her to participate more. For example you can say, Johnny I know you can play the part because you have the smarts and motivation to make the character look good. That above statement is simple but it holds a lot of power because inmates in the majority of the cases suffer from low self-esteem and low self-esteem leads to a lack of belief in oneself that they can achieve anything. So your words of kindness can do wonders and motivate inmates to want to participate in your workshop.

However, if you have put forth every positive reinforcement and praise method and the inmates do not want to participate in your workshop, then in all probability the inmates do not find the workshops interesting or are dealing with deeper emotional issues beyond your control. If an inmate is not motivated to participate in your workshop, don't beat yourself up over it. Because it is common for inmates to lose interest in workshops or programs they feel do not appeal to them.

How Inmates View Those Who Fail to Keep Their Commitment

Many inmates view a person who fails to keep their commitment as a fake. When that happens they lose immediate respect for that person and everything they saw will be looked at with suspicion. When suspicion becomes their controlling thought then they want nothing to do with that person and will encourage others to do the same, and in the majority of the times inmates will follow their comrade. Inmates feel their comrade will promote their best interest. This is why they follow their advice not to participate in a volunteer's workshop who has been placed under the cloud of suspicion. It is much easier than one may presume for inmates to abandon the workshop, because they feel the volunteer is playing with their emotions and the volunteer looks at them as nothing more than an emotional experiment. Further, they have no emotional bond or comradeship with the volunteer. In their mind they feel they will never see the volunteer again.

If you volunteer for a prison workshop, always keep your commitment and never say anything you can't do or you have not carefully evaluated. **YOU MEAN WHAT YOU SAY AND SAY WHAT YOU MEAN**, it could make or break your workshop.

Why Discussing the Progress of the Workshop is Important at the End of Each Session

Inmates want to feel they have achieved something at the end of a workshop session. If a successful workshop session did happen that will encourage and motivate them to attend another one because they see the fruit of the labor coming into fruition. Inmates who participate in workshops are seeking some type of progress in their life and they feel your workshop has the answers to their growth and development toward rehabilitation. Inmates view progress as important because it allows them to feel that they are becoming a better person and it is a self-esteem builder. Also, discuss what you would like to do in the future workshops or next workshop. That will allow the inmates to build some thoughts toward contributing to the next workshop.

Rules

A lot of inmates are not knowledgeable concerning the restrictions and guidelines where the volunteers are to abide under, so your insight will be helpful...

For the record, inmates are used to rules and they will not view you as a dictator or someone attempting to impede upon their quest for a successful workshop. By stipulating rules and regulations inmates will understand that certain restrictions have been put in place by the Department of Corrections to assure the volunteer's workshop will not conflict with the rules and regulations they have in place and to protect what they consider the best interest of the volunteer.