Understanding Inmate Manipulation

By Greg Von Tobel

When in doubt over an inmate’s question, what is the best standard answer a volunteer can give?

Why can it be very dangerous for volunteers to allow inmates to manipulate them into breaking a rule?

Although the fear of being manipulated should never keep volunteers from having a positive approach to their ministry, it is important to realize that inmate manipulation is a real and ongoing challenge for even the seasoned volunteer. This paper begins by showing how it can be especially dangerous for those who are new or somewhat naïve because it can keep them from being the most effective volunteers that they can be. Learn the 9 early warning signs of how an offender might be setting the stage for manipulation. Finally, it offers a list of 21 practical suggestions for recognizing and avoiding inmate manipulation.
Introduction

Let’s face it. Prison ministry is a very unique ministry in a very exceptional kind of setting. If you have been in prison ministry as a volunteer for any length of time, you have had to deal with individuals who might be on edge, extremely antagonistic towards you or your message, or just downright rude. How you handle these encounters will oftentimes set the stage for the rest of your service at that facility and could even impact all the future church services or Bible studies at that institution.

Inmate manipulation presents a real and ongoing challenge to those in prison ministry. Even the most seasoned volunteers find themselves caught up in this behavior at times. However, experienced volunteers understand that this kind of behavior is inevitable and simply goes with the territory. These experienced volunteers realize that there are many degrees of inmate manipulation and have learned to recognize it, brush it off and move on quickly.

Many inmates are masters of manipulation. Again, it essential for the volunteer to understand and enforce healthy boundaries. This is the Key……. “Setting healthy boundaries.” If you are secure in your Christian faith, you will feel comfortable with saying a firm “no.” When in doubt, the standard answer should be: “Let me check with the Chaplain.” Many inmates who are confronted by that simple statement will become noticeably upset because they know that they have overstepped and crossed the boundaries and that their name will be associated with that request. If the request is egregious enough, there may be some severe consequences for the inmate.

Manipulation can be quite dangerous for volunteers who are new to prison ministry or particularly naïve. I once had a very wise Chaplain tell me that if I ever allowed an inmate to manipulate me into breaking a rule, I have just eliminated the possibility of ever winning him to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.
Why? There are three reasons:

1. The inmate is still in control, so he does not have to give control of his life to Jesus Christ. If he remains in control of his circumstances, then he does not have to give up control of his life to God and will therefore never let go enough to trust in the Lord.

2. He will lack respect for the volunteer he has manipulated.

3. He will most likely share his most recent trophy with other inmates, and as the story spreads, this could compromise the future effectiveness of that volunteer and even the ministry as a whole.

Now having said all that, not all inmates will attempt to manipulate volunteers. For the most part inmates are sincere and have a healthy respect for the men and women of God who come into their institutions. If you are aware of this issue of inmate manipulation and follow the following guidelines, you will have a truly rewarding and effective prison ministry experience.

The Code of Conduct of our organization is quite comprehensive in nature. If volunteers adhere strictly to the code of conduct, they should minimize the risk of being manipulated. For the seasoned as well as the new prison volunteer remember it is not a question of “if” you are ever manipulated; it is “when.” To learn more about our Code of Conduct please tune into the Online Code of Conduct training session or download the White Paper.

Although volunteers should not allow the fear of being manipulated to keep them from having a positive approach to their ministry, they should always be on guard for the signs of manipulative behavior. It is important to remember that manipulation is a process that takes place over time. This occurs bit by bit, when one person is “backed into a corner” by another.
Early Warning Signs of Manipulation

Remember three things to avoid from being manipulated,

1. Remember to stick to the purpose of your ministry;
2. Take any matters of confusion or uncertainty to your designated Group Leader;
3. Know and follow the Code of Conduct of this ministry or another organization.

It is with great pleasure that we thank the Washington State Department of Corrections for allowing us to use all or in part the following guidelines on Inmate Manipulation.

Any of the following behavior, either by itself or in combination, constitutes an early warning sign of manipulation:

1. Inmate engages in long conversations about volunteer likes, dislikes or other personal matters
2. Inmate suddenly offers favors, does extra work, is excessively nice and/or overly complimentary
3. Inmate asks for materials in excess of what is allowed by policy or offered to others in the program
4. Inmate will not take “no” for an answer
5. Inmate defies directions or orders
6. Inmate consistently violates minor rules
7. Inmate attempts to turn volunteers against other staff or volunteers
8. Inmate instills fear with volunteers
9. Inmate pushes volunteers to the limits of their patience

Notes:
Volunteers understandably want to approach their jobs in a positive, optimistic manner. But you must be aware that some offenders will attempt to manipulate you for their own benefit. The following list may help you to recognize such behavior and avoid it.

1. Realize that some offenders will take advantage of you if you let them. The simple response to this is, don’t let them! Simply but firmly say no to anything that is requested of you that violates institutional policy. Remember set healthy boundaries.

2. Do not do anything you would be ashamed to share with your peers or supervisor. Always be transparent with your peers and associates.

3. Keep everything out in the open with other volunteers or the Chaplain. Discuss your experiences after each service with your designated group leader.

4. If an offender’s actions are questionable, ask your supervisor or co-worker for advice and assistance. Never hold anything as a secret.

5. Know the policies and procedures of your institutions. PFC’s cornerstone rule of thumb is “Know Your Institution!” What might be correct for one institution may not be correct for another.

6. Learn to be assertive and use the word “NO” appropriately. Of course there is no reason to be rude or harsh. You can certainly be firm without being rude. If need be state your reason. Again set healthy boundaries.

7. Always document any attempt at manipulation or game-playing. Take any concerns you might have to the institutions Chaplain or Volunteer Program director.

8. Confront manipulative behavior and take action as the issues arise. Never shy away or look the other way.

9. Know your personal and professional goals. This is so very important!

10. Understand your value system. Why are you there? Why do you do what you do?
11. Know when you are stressed or “burned out” and take necessary action. If you become tired, burned out, or stressed out from your work or lifestyle you may be more vulnerable to acquiescing to a request from an inmate as compared to when you are well rested and not stressed out. It is oftentimes beneficial to the volunteer to have seasons of rest or to take a sabbatical from ministry.

12. Be firm, fair, and consistent with all inmates. Being consistent is so vitally important.

13. Understand your strengths and weaknesses.

14. Avoid money, business, and personal relationships with offenders. This is a very slippery slope that could find you quickly in an uncomfortable situation with staff or the inmate. Never become involved in the personal lives of inmates at this level.

15. Do not give out your home phone number or address.

16. The Offender may use religion to support his way of thinking and criminality. This is unacceptable. A mature prison ministry volunteer will steer the inmate through proper scriptures for the inmate to attempt to gain right thinking.

17. Offenders often view themselves as the victim.

18. When an offender is told “maybe,” he often regards it as a promise. When dealing with an offender, it is best to say “no” rather than to say “maybe.”

19. Whenever uncomfortable in a given situation, consult the staff.

We have just completed this teaching paper called Understanding Inmate Manipulation. We trust this has been of value to you. Remember not all inmates will try to manipulate a volunteer. It is our hearts desire for you to have a rewarding and fulfilling ministry.

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In Closing

Let me take just a few more minutes of your time and tell you a little more about Prisoners for Christ. PFC is a ministry dedicated to taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the institutions of the World. As of the close of 2011, we currently have over 1,200 volunteers world wide and growing everyday. Last year our volunteers conducted an average of 267 church services per month, almost 9 per day. PFC had over 611,507 inmates attend our services last year with over 179,621 men, women and children accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The Lord has seen fit to expand our territories by allowing us to go to the four corners of the world with field offices in 8 different foreign countries, including Russia, Kenya, Burundi, Congo, Uganda, Ghana, Rwanda, India with more countries soon to come on line in the next 18 months.

Our major objective is to win souls to Christ. Our secondary objective is to equip the saints. Whether you are a single volunteer going into an institution, or whether you are a part of a group of a larger team, or even perhaps a volunteer in your church’s prison outreach, we are interested in you!

We are interested in your development as a minister of the Gospel. So please avail yourself of our training and printed resources!

If the Lord should ever tug on your heart to be a part of the PFC Team worldwide, we have a number of opportunities of involvement for you.

First, if the Lord should tug on your heart to jump on board with us as a financial partner, please do so. We would be very excited for you to share in the rewards of this ministry. Our faithful committed monthly partners are the lifeblood of this ministry. We do not charge for any of our training material. Our hearts desire is to equip the saints to do good works. All that we have, and ll that we are, are gifts from God to be used for His glory. Our resources are to be released back to the church body for His use through you.
If you were blessed by this course, you can donate either through mailing a check to our PFC offices or on line through our web page.

The second way you can become involved is to become a volunteer:

1. **You can be a PFC Volunteer anywhere in the world. You can join the PFC team whether you are here in the United States or elsewhere in the world.**
2. You might consider becoming a PFC Area representative or church leader in your geographic metropolitan area. This is for those who have been in prison ministry for three or more years and have the hearts desire to take their leadership to the next level.
3. Or perhaps you have been doing prison ministry for some time and now the Lord is tugging on your heart to become a **Full Time Prison Missionary.** By all means, please get in contact with us as we have a training course for those who are interested in going into full time ministry.

Regardless of whether you are here in the United States or a person in another part of the world, please consider joining the family of PFC.

**However,** if you are a part of another prison ministry, stay where you are at and be the best prison ministry volunteer for that organization, in other words “Bloom where you are planted!”

Feel free to connect with us in one of 4 ways:

1. **Mailing address:** Prisoners for Christ (PFC)  
   PO Box 1530  
   Woodinville, Wa. 98072
2. **Web Page:** [www.pfcom.org](http://www.pfcom.org)
3. **Phone:** 425 483-4151
4. **Fax:** 425 487-1680

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT PRISONERS FOR CHRIST OUTREACH MINISTRIES, CALL 425 483-4151 OR VISIT WWW.PFCOM.ORG**