

Recognizing volunteers  
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by Mary V. Merrill

Volunteers should be recognized for their contributions to the organization, the clients and the paid staff. This serves not only to satisfy basic human needs but also to motivate volunteers to continue their involvement. Recognition lets volunteers know that others acknowledge and appreciate what they do. It tells them they are doing something well and that they have something meaningful to contribute. Recognition and approval give volunteers a feeling of warmth, pleasure and accomplishment.

Managers of volunteers and programme managers should consider recognition as a process rather than a product. When effective volunteer recognition is integrated into the total volunteer management process, volunteers feel rewarded, valued and positive about the volunteer programme as a whole. Recognition by and in front of peers, professional associates, friends and/or community neighbours is the most meaningful kind of recognition (Bruny, 1981). Meaningful recognition leads to increased satisfaction, which leads to increased volunteer retention.

Each volunteer is unique. The success of any volunteer programme is based on an understanding that individuals come in all shapes, sizes, colours and ages, have a wide range of skills and abilities to contribute, and want to do so for a variety of reasons. This realization helps administrators and managers become more sensitive to the uniqueness of each individual so they can provide the most meaningful opportunity possible to help each volunteer maximize his or her potential (Vineyard, 1988). It also allows managers to develop appropriate, effective and sensitive recognition responses based on individual preferences.

A volunteer recognition programme should consider two basic types of recognition: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic recognition includes tangible, outward forms of recognition such as pins, certificates, trophies, etc. Intrinsic recognition involves less tangible, inward forms of recognition including the pride of accomplishment, self satisfaction and the volunteer's personal belief that s/he accomplished, contributed and did better today than last week. A manager of volunteers must design, develop and refine recognition opportunities that encourage a volunteer to take pride in her accomplishment and feel self-satisfaction. With the diverse types of volunteers, there must be a balance of intrinsic and extrinsic forms of recognition in volunteer programmes.

Recognition is closely associated with motivation. If people are rewarded with things that are significant or relevant to them then the recognition process is most effective. Managers of volunteers should make every effort to use personalized recognition to build an ongoing relationship with each volunteer. There can be no "one size fits all" approach to volunteer recognition. The kinds of recognition may be as varied and wide ranging as the individuals. Recognition that is well received and appreciated by volunteers in one situation may not be the most appropriate or effective for volunteers in another situation. Both formal and informal methods of recognizing volunteers can be effective (Bruny,

1981; Holtham, et al, 1989) and managers should experiment to determine which combinations are most effective in a specific situation.

Recognition is an ongoing, integrated component of any effective volunteer programme. A once-a-year event to recognize all volunteers should not be seen as a substitute for the day-to-day recognition of contributions. Volunteer recognition is not solely the responsibility of the manager of volunteers. All paid staff should be engaged in the ongoing recognition of volunteers.

### **Informal volunteer recognition**

Informal methods of recognizing volunteers and their contributions are frequently overlooked in place of more formal methods, yet are often the most effective (Vineyard; Holtham, et al. 1988). A simple yet personally delivered “Thank you for your help” is always well received and conveys personal attention and appreciation. Thank you letters on organizational letterhead are always appreciated. Providing material resources to a volunteer and involving her in staff meetings related to her responsibilities suggests that the organization values the individual’s contributions as much as those of paid staff. Finally, ongoing opportunities for a volunteer’s development both as an individual and a volunteer, recognize them as a valued member of the organization.

Informal recognition should be an on-going part of any volunteer programme. All paid staff plays an important role in informal recognition. The ways they greet and interact with volunteers on a day-to-day basis are important elements of informal recognition. Paid staff should make every effort to know volunteers’ names, acknowledge their presence, and appreciate their contributions. Managers of volunteers may develop ongoing recognition by sending cards for birthdays or special events, posting photo of volunteers at work, planning International Volunteer Day activities, and sharing volunteer information through newspapers or agency newsletters. Research shows that a hand written note to a volunteer from a client, manager, volunteer manager or organizational leader is one of the best-accepted forms of recognition.

### **Effective forms of formal volunteer recognition**

Formal recognition of volunteers involves more traditional and structured methods. Certificates of appreciation and special pins or other tokens may be presented to volunteers as enduring mementos of the organization’s appreciation. Presentations of such items occur at public gatherings that involve a pre-planned programme, such as a meeting of all volunteers or special reception or meal. Formal recognition for volunteer contributions may also involve widespread public recognition using newspaper, radio or television media.

One of the most widespread forms of formal volunteer recognition is the volunteer recognition party or luncheon. A well-planned recognition meal can be an inspirational and motivational experience.

Bruny (1981) offers several suggestions for volunteer managers to consider in planning volunteer recognition parties or luncheons.

1. The primary purpose of the function is to recognize and pay tribute to volunteers. Give VIP treatment to the volunteers.
2. The presentation of pins, certificates, awards, etc. needs to be organized well in advance.
3. In recognizing volunteers, make sure that you accurately pronounce their names and have a checking system to be sure that the people being recognized are in the audience.
4. Arrange for extra copies of photographs and see that the appropriate person receives their own personal copy.
5. Be certain your system for tracking hours, etc. as criteria for recognition is consistent and accurate. You don't want someone coming up after the event to ask why they were overlooked.
6. The party or luncheon invitation should be delivered far enough in advance so volunteers may arrange to attend.
7. Vary the programme from year to year to add interest and avoid the "same old thing" criticism.
8. Location is very important. Parking and ease of access should be considered.
9. This is also an opportunity to spotlight the mission and vision of the organization and help volunteers see their contributions to the overall mission.
10. A printed programme should include appropriate current statistics and history of the organization. Volunteers like to be associated with something that is progressive and dynamic.
11. Nametags help the guests become better acquainted.
12. Paid staff and board members should attend and have a meaningful part on the programme and be introduced in front of the group.

Success breeds success. A satisfied, happy volunteer tells three others; a dissatisfied, unhappy volunteer tells 13 others. Quality recognition programmes help to assure continued and increased volunteer participation.

### **Important consideration affecting volunteer recognition**

Whatever combination of informal or formal means is used to recognize volunteers and their contribution, three important considerations should be noted (Holtham, et al, 1989).

First, the individual who is recognizing the volunteer should know and be familiar with the volunteers and their contributions. The volunteer administrator or direct manager who provides day-to-day support to the volunteer being recognized is the obvious choice. Such familiarity increases the volunteer's personal satisfaction and self esteem regarding her recognition and contributions to the organization.

Second, the emphasis at any formal recognition with a planned programme should be on the volunteers and their contributions, not on other special guests, visiting dignitaries or

organizational administrators.

And, third, an opportunity should be provided for the volunteer being recognized to offer a testimonial regarding her volunteer experience. Such testimonials not only serve to strengthen the individual's motivation to continue as a volunteer, but also function to recruit and motivate other individuals to volunteer.

### **References**

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