



[Resources](#) » [A-Z Volunteer Management](#) » [A-Z Volunteer Management](#) » [When Recognition Isn't Enough](#)

When Recognition Isn't Enough

by Susan J. Ellis

From *Appeared as an "On Volunteers" column in The NonProfit Times*

I recently had two experiences that made me reflect on what's broadly known as "volunteer recognition." In the first incident I was the volunteer, arriving for an early morning meeting only to discover that I was the only committee member to show up. The reason for the low attendance was that a new, inexperienced staff member had simply left a series of voice mail messages with the other volunteers without confirming everyone's availability.

Chagrined at this waste of my time, the employee and I discussed a few matters pertinent only to my assignment, then I headed out. As I waited for the elevator, the employee dashed out with an unwrapped cardboard box. Pressing it into my hand, she said: "We want you to know how much we appreciate your volunteer work. Here is some candy for you."

The second incident occurred when I was a paid speaker at a conference. Immediately following my keynote presentation, the program chairwoman stepped up to the podium, flipped through a small pile of envelopes in her folder, and handed me the one with my name on it. Later I read the contents: a lovely, handwritten note from a volunteer telling me that my speech "was a highlight of the conference."

What do these two experiences have in common? Adherence to the letter of the rules of appreciation, without any understanding of the spirit. Did I feel "thanked" in either circumstance? No. And my reaction was not affected by whether or not I or the other person was the volunteer or the employee.

Recognition That Backfires

Consider the ways in which your organization says "thank you" to volunteers. Does the process take place year-round, or is it confined to the annual obligatory banquet? Expensive meals, little gifts, and flowery speeches can actually backfire if volunteers are made to feel invisible the rest of the year. I have witnessed quite a number of formal recognition events that cost a lot of money and staff time, but made one feel appreciated.

Take the case of a major metropolitan hospital that benefits from the services of more than 600 volunteers every month. At the cookies and punch reception (they couldn't afford more, which was OK), the director of volunteers paced the floor waiting for the CEO, who was late. We finally began the program without him. When he arrived, I was in the middle of a speech. He came to the microphone and said: "I'm sorry to be late, but I'm sure you'll understand. I was doing something very important."

Should we assume that this man had been rushing down the hall thinking to himself: "Now, what's the lamest excuse I can make?" Hardly. But once again, he confused the situation with the content. Although trying to convey thanks, he instead communicated exactly where volunteers stood on his list of priorities.

A similar attitude is conveyed when the chairperson of the board of directors (also a volunteer, though rarely publicly acknowledged as such in front of direct service volunteers) or the executive director only meet volunteers once a year, at the banquet. I have heard volunteers make remarks to one another like: "So that's what the director looks like," or "How does s/he know what we've been doing? S/he never takes the time to say hello."

The organization leader's thank you speech has potential dangers, too. One is reading someone else's words, and insincerity often trickles out. Another is making inaccurate references to events during the year, demonstrating only a passing familiarity with what volunteers have been doing. Better not to speak at all than to say thank-you with a forked tongue!

Volunteers notice if the CEO and other organization leaders are present for the whole recognition event or come late and leave early. They are aware if these administrators talk to one another or mingle comfortably with volunteers. Are all the "top" paid folks at the head table? Why?

The giving of awards can also have a negative effect. Is everyone rewarded equally even though it is general knowledge that three people did the work while six others sat around doing nothing? In our desire not to offend volunteers by singling out only a few people, we end up insulting those volunteers who know full well they did more. And when volunteers are called to get their awards, be sure the giver pronounces their names correctly.

Genuine Recognition

We sometimes confuse "recognition" with "appreciation." These are not the same things and do not always go together. Their common denominator is "acknowledgment." In my opinion, the sincerest form of recognition is to see one's ideas put to use. For volunteers, recognition means feeling that their efforts make a real contribution. You can say thank you a million times, but if people sense that their efforts are wasted, they will never feel good about their volunteer work.

The best volunteer recognition occurs on a daily basis, in small ways and with practically no expense. Common courtesy (greetings, smiles) is one way to acknowledge volunteers as valued partners. Arranging for a secure place to leave coats and purses shows a desire to be welcoming. Making sure that all volunteers receive in-house memos and other updates implies that volunteers are, indeed, members of staff.

In the first incident I described, I would have felt more thanked had my time been valued. Or, since I like candy, I might have enjoyed receiving the gift had it been waiting for me when I arrived or sent to me the next day. The lack of effort (and premeditation) involved in taking the candy out of a closet filled with similar boxes undercut the gesture of appreciation. In the second incident, of course, I saw immediately that the kind words about my speech had nothing whatsoever to do with what I actually said! To be real recognition, someone has to feel that the thank-you is personalized and based on a tangible accomplishment.

Expressions of appreciation, whether informal or at an annual event, should complement the ongoing feeling of making a difference and being part of a team. If we treat volunteers like outsiders (or intruders) most of the time, why should we expect our National Volunteer Week observance to mean much? The good news is that showing

appreciation can be done on a shoestring budget. It is even possible to have a potluck supper-to which volunteers bring their own food-and still create exactly the right tone of thanks.

Related Topics:

[Recognition](#)

Permission is granted to download and reprint this material. Reprints must include all citations and the statement: "Found in the Energize online library at <http://www.energizeinc.com/a-z>"

**Get free tips and updates
directly to your inbox!**

Sign up for your choice
of our monthly
e-newsletters.

Enter E-mail Address

Next



Energize's Self-Paced Training



Organized around 8 best practices, our self-paced training guides learners through every step of partnering with volunteers—from designing volunteer roles and recruiting volunteers to training and celebrating volunteers and evaluating impact. [Learn more](#)

Sign up for our Newsletter

[PRIVACY STATEMENT](#)

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://www.adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2021

