

ON VOLUNTEERS

Transforming volunteer recognition

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Column by
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This is the time of year when many agencies hold volunteer recognition events. If you are planning such a program to say "thank you" to volunteers who have contributed their time in the past year, make the most of this opportunity. You have a great chance to transform this annual ritual into a dynamic event with lasting impact.

Think about the word "recognition." Its roots is in the word "cognition"—identifying, understanding, seeing something. So true recognition involves much more than an expression of appreciation. Does your special event leave participants more informed than when they first arrived at the event?

Most volunteer recognition programs involve inviting all people who gave time during the year to come together for some sort of party or celebration. This in and of itself is special, since volunteers rarely get to see one another en masse—and agency administrators who attend the event are shown the reality of those monthly report statistics on volunteer involvement. In most cases, this annual program is the only time when the executive director and perhaps board officers (who are volunteers too) spend some time focusing on the corps of volunteers who provide so much direct service to the organization. Other than seeing faces, what do these decision-makers learn that day?

Consider using the event to make an annual report—a state-of-the-volunteer-effort address. This can be done in a number of informative and enjoyable ways.

- Distribute booklets that do much more than list names of volunteers. Cluster names under job description headings and include a brief paragraph listing two or three major accomplishments of each group in the past year. Share goals for the coming year. This document can include a summary of statistics, but make these meaningful. Add some demographic data: age range of volunteers, parts of the county from which they come, or level of education. Attack stereotypes about who volunteers by demonstrating the diversity of who has become involved here.

- During the event, ask each cluster of volunteers to stand and receive applause for their accomplishments, not for the number of hours they gave. The tradition of announcing hours of service is generally meaningless because it is information in a vacuum. What does it tell anyone about the volunteer other than she gave 100 hours? Have representative volunteers deliver short reports highlighting areas of pride.

- Involve the recipients of volunteer service in some way whenever feasible. People do not give their time to an institution; they are trying to help other people. A thank-you from several clients or from paid staff who were supported throughout the year is much more memorable. This can be done with speakers or with tape recordings accompa-

nying slides.

- Slide shows are useful for several reasons. They are easy and inexpensive to produce and have many applications. The slide show you develop for this year's volunteer recognition event becomes a tool for recruitment and new volunteer orientation. Take pictures all year long. Folks love to see themselves on a big screen in front of their peers. Try to capture as many volunteers as you can in your slide show and then sit back and watch everyone get excited to see "the year in review" at the annual event. Those shots also demonstrate how much activity occurred—exactly the point.

- Ask different units or departments to prepare table-top exhibits of volunteer accomplishments throughout the past year. Volunteers can do these themselves—it is quite motivating to be asked to present your perceptions of the past year to your colleagues.

- Feel comfortable in identifying concerns or challenges ahead. Again, treating volunteers as insiders is a true form of recognition for them. Everyone wants to work for success. If you have a problem in recruitment or in lack of resources, be honest at the event. Enlist those present (including the administrators) to tackle the problems together.

This type of information sharing prepares volunteers to recommit to the coming year. The recognition event is not an ending, it is a beginning. By learning more about the work of all volunteers, each individual volunteer can feel pride in having added to the cumulative impact. Also, volunteers can help to recruit new people because they will understand anticipated goals.

Do not forget to thank those employees who did their best to support volunteers. And consider adding a note of appreciation to the families of volunteers. Behind many successful volunteers are spouses and children who did not complain about time spent in philanthropic work.

Never feel constrained by a lack of funds to offer an elegant party. Volunteers deserve convocation, the information sharing, and the thank-yous. Give them a chance to get together and they will even be glad to organize their own pot luck meal. Volunteers do things like that!

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