

The Giving Of Thanks

A ceremony worth little if everyone isn't engaged

November brings the holiday of Thanksgiving. Rooted in the legend of Native Americans bringing gifts of food to needy European settlers, the holiday commemorates a heritage of community spirit and is a story of gratitude for volunteered generosity, as well as for the abundance of a deity. So it's a good time to think about the volunteers and an opportunity to express thanks to them.

Unfortunately, too much of what organizations ordinarily call volunteer recognition widely misses the mark. The focus is on saying thank you for time donated rather than on showing appreciation for meaningful accomplishments. The word "recognition" contains the core word "cognition"—seeing and understanding that something of value is occurring.

ACTIONS VS. WORDS

There is a big difference between expressions of appreciation and true recognition. Saying thank you is vital — both informally at the time something is done well and more formally at least once a year. But a thank you can be meaningless or even insulting if it does not occur as part of more genuine demonstrations of recognition.

Here are some ways thanks can be counterproductive or seen as mere lip service:

- Praising volunteers individually for their work on a project or report is hollow if their contributions are not publicly acknowledged, such as including their names on the final document or describing their work in a presentation to the board or funders.

- Consider what volunteers think when executives read thank-you speeches clearly written for them by someone else and mispronounce volunteer names when giving out certificates. Further, how sincere does the gratitude feel if the volunteers and the executive have had no contact before the event or never before even laid eyes on each other?

- When all volunteers are thanked simultaneously as a group, or a committee

or team is praised collectively for service, the 60 percent of volunteers who did all the work can be quite resentful that the 40 percent of slackers are getting equal recognition. And, those who did very little might have the good grace to feel embarrassed.

- Saying "you are valued members of our team" is contradicted when, in daily practice, volunteers are not permitted in

the staff washroom, can be bumped from a meeting or work room simply because "the staff needs it now," have no designated place to work or to store uncompleted work between visits, etc. In one hospital, the door to the volunteers' coat closet (where they kept purses and briefcases while on duty) was left unrepaired for several months. Volunteers could be overheard saying things such as: "They

don't even care about us enough to fix that door."

This might have been poor prioritizing by the maintenance department, but the management team needed to understand the negative message the situation sent, overshadowing any flowery sentiments expressed by the board chair at the annual banquet.

- Reflect on the hypocrisy if the public applause or award to a volunteer follows a year of privately stonewalling suggestions and general lack of respect for the talents and commitment of the person.

If an organization can't treat volunteers well while they are trying to work without fanfare, some resent managers putting on a happy face in public and pretending they value the volunteers.

PLAN RECOGNITION EVENTS

It's amazing to watch coordinators of volunteers transform themselves into wedding planners, caterers and impresarios while organizing the annual volunteer recognition event. They obsess about the menu, the décor, the party favors. How did they end up spending so much time and money on giving a party that only a percentage of volunteers attend anyway? Why do these events all look alike? Why are they so often boring, too?

You need to evolve the tradition of treating volunteers as invited guests, rarely asking them to participate in making the recognition event what they might actually enjoy attending. There is no real reason the event can't be planned with or even by volunteers themselves instead of for them. In the same vein, why let volunteers sit through presentations solely as members of the audience?

Forget most of the usual speakers and ask volunteers to talk about what their service means to them. Better yet, invite some clients to share their perspective on volunteer contributions.

Recognition and thanks come from having the opportunity to gather with other volunteers and paid staff, kick back and relax, and celebrate what was accomplished in the past year. The ultimate goal is for everyone to leave re-committed for the coming months.

RECOGNITION GOALS

To repeat: the important part of recognition is celebrating accomplishments. Often after ceremonies people have no clear idea what these fine people have actually done during the year that deserved the praise expressed. If your recognition event doesn't talk about what volunteers did, with accompanying specifics, photos, data, comments from clients, etc., you are wasting a great opportunity.

This is why awards based solely on hours served are so nonsensical. They mean nothing in terms of accomplishments. In fact, consider that hours-based recognition ironically rewards the slowest volunteers. If Jim takes three hours to do what Lateesha can do in one hour, he racks up three times the "points" toward that pin — for less productive work. By all means, honor longevity or even the few volunteers with the highest hour totals, but please connect most of your recognition to how important the work of volunteers has been this year. That's what you're celebrating.

Consider what volunteer recognition time allows you to do in addition to expressing sincere thanks:

- This is a time to educate everyone on exactly what the value of volunteers is to your clients, staff, community, and also to volunteers themselves, since they rarely see the big picture or context of their individual efforts.

- Invite funders to see for themselves how volunteers leverage their money into increased services.

- Provide recognition to employees as well, since service delivery is a team effort and volunteers can't succeed without staff support. Both groups are working towards accomplishing the same mission, so it might do wonders to improve staff/volunteer relations by celebrating mutual accomplishments.

- Run a less expensive event and let volunteers invite family and friends. This thanks the "unsung heroes" who let each person spend time volunteering, elevates the volunteer in the eyes of family and friends who learn about what they're doing when working with you, and educates potential new volunteers and donors.

Rather than sitting the entire time with the people they already know, get volunteers talking to volunteers in other assignments or working other shifts. This cross-fertilizes ideas, helps volunteers speak in a more informed way about your organization, and is more fun.

Use Thanksgiving as a time to reconsider how - and why - we give thanks to volunteers. Remember that International Volunteer Day is December 5, the week after the holiday.

Maybe your organization uses the Christmas/Chanukah/Kwanzaa period for party giving and you can plan now to add some true recognition into the festivities. You can also plan ahead for National Volunteer Week in April. *NPT*

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism. She can be reached via email at susan@energizeinc.com. Her Web site is www.energizeinc.com