



# Yellowfire Press

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## Exploding the Big Banquet Theory of Volunteer Recognition: An Incendiary Analysis@

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### PROLOGUE

Actually, you've been to some volunteer recognition banquets that weren't bad at all. The cold sweat this time is maybe because you've been to four of them in the last three days, never with time enough to digest the dessert before they began introducing the banquet speaker.

They're doing it again, and that's where the nightmare begins.

IT'S YOU. They haven't mispronounced your name quite badly enough to let you deny it. You smile sickly and stumble towards the podium.

### NIGHTMARE SCENE ONE

You risk a cringing look at the audience. There sit 526 volunteers with a total of one billion, four hundred and seventy-three million, nine hundred twenty-eight and six-tenths hours last year.

They seem expectant. At least some of them do. It's then you realize you haven't a thing prepared to say!

### NIGHTMARE SCENE TWO

You open your mouth anyhow, only to gulp, and the following words pour out, seemingly of their own volition.

**[NIGHTMARE CONTINUES HUSHED THROG SPEAKER'S MOUTH MOVES]**

**"ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR .... WHO'S THIS BANQUET REALLY FOR?"**

**FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, EIGHT .... HOW SHOULD WE APPRECIATE .... VOLUNTEERS?"**

I hardly cheer at all for one species of volunteer recognition: the annual formal banquet or similar affair. Typically, the fete focuses on just a few volunteers (great though they may be) with generous spotlight shares also awarded their praisers. Said praisers may have done little or nothing concrete for the volunteer program last year, with similar intentions for next year.

The atmosphere is stiff. The menu is almost as predictable as the speeches. The date: usually sometime in spring just before the volunteer coordinator's annual nervous breakdown--or just after.

In suggesting there's often something wrong with such rites of spring, I have no absolute proof, only some experience-based hunches. The intent is merely to screen this sacred cow a little more closely, not necessarily to slaughter it. The hope is to stimulate dialogue and data-gathering.

I certainly am not challenging everything anyone ever called "volunteer recognition" or "recognition event." Some other varieties of volunteer recognition are quite wonderful and seem to be gaining popularity. Include here:

.....Some of our most motivated volunteers often will say something like: "It feels like a family around here," in speaking of the organization they work with. Well, what we are talking about here is a lot like a happy outing for a big family. Maybe a whole bunch of volunteers, staff, board members, clients, families, friends, go on a picnic, or maybe go to the zoo together, or play a little softball, or put on a skit, or sing some songs, or plant some trees, or have a hike, or whatever. Having fun together becomes an unpretentious yet powerful way of celebrating the good in all of us. The gathering is more celebration than competition for the title of best volunteer of all, or longest-lasting one.\* There's more fun than fussiness, more party than pompousness. The whole thing is inclusive rather than exclusive, largely unspeechified, unglamorous, and unforgettable.

....."Involvement Day" recognizes the volunteer in all of us by encouraging everyone in town to get involved doing something they enjoy, producing together a visible positive difference in neighborhood and community, in just one day, or week. The theme is: "What a difference a day makes, when all of us get involved." Celebration through doing and seeing the difference, replaces rhetoric. Several communities have had Involvement Days and there's a description in the final chapter of EXPLORING VOLUNTEER SPACE (1).

..... call a news conference at which you provide dramatic yet accurate highlights on the history, significance and impact of volunteers in your own community, and nationally. Have some political and community leaders there, too.

..... at the very top of my "should list" is a kind of happening which is ongoing rather than annual. I mean daily informal, unforced appreciation for volunteers, expressed in manifold ways: a smile, a "thank you," a challenging assignment, a respectful consultation, etc. NO SINGLE ANNUAL EVENT, HOWEVER ELABORATE, EXTENSIVE OR EXHAUSTING CAN EVER SUBSTITUTE FOR SUCH REGULAR, ROUTINE, UNSTAGED APPRECIATION.

Meanwhile, back to the banquet or, more ominously, the banquet series. On the road one recent spring, I encountered a community in which formal recognition affairs had been going on for two weeks. Not to be outdone, the next town visited had more or less endured three weeks of the same. No one in either community could provide convincing evidence that volunteers had benefited more--or at all--from such national volunteer weeks-- and weeks and weeks and weeks.....

So, who is it all for? And don't say caterers and hotel proprietors. They can take care of themselves. Besides, often enough they contribute their services at low or no fee.

## **WHO IS IT ALL FOR? WHO BENEFITS?**

### **Do our Present Volunteers Require Annual Banqueting?**

Maybe some do, but not as many as some seem to think. Among myriad motivation studies I have seen, none gives as a reason people volunteer in the first place or continue to do so, "the prospect of formal recognition." Correct me if I'm wrong, but I've heard of just about every incentive except this.

Then, consider Dr. Gil Clary's recent study distinguishing between extrinsically motivated and intrinsically motivated volunteers (2). Extrinsically motivated volunteers do need rewards beyond the work itself-- pins, buttons, badges, public praise, etc. But this certainly includes a lot of daily things; you can hardly expect such folks to survive an entire year between annual bashes, without such extrinsic rewards. Even at the annual banquet, if praise, certificates, etc. are bestowed on relatively few volunteers, it only makes the unsung extrinsic volunteer feel more deprived.

By contrast, Clary's intrinsically motivated volunteers derive their motivation mainly from the inside: the work itself and the cause it contributes to. Moreover, as I understand Dr. Clary's work, there is at least an implication that intrinsically motivated people are likely to be exceptionally dedicated, outstanding volunteers, who do not need regular infusions of "outside" rewards, and may actually be turned off by them. At its worst, then, the big banquet tends to give formal recognition precisely to those who don't need or want it, while withholding it from many who do. Worse than withholding, it may perhaps force extrinsically motivated volunteers to watch others getting the certificates.

I'd like to see more research on this, but meanwhile, my strong impression is that a whole lot of (presumably, intrinsically motivated) good volunteers don't show up at formal recognition affairs. Not voluntarily, anyhow: only after significant arm-twisting, as one more good deed, the need for which must mystify many of them. Among the reluctant participants we must certainly include many of the honorees themselves. One city recently scheduled a formal banquet to honor the eleven outstanding volunteers of the year in that city. Four of them didn't even show up. Another example: the night before receiving the volunteer of the year award from his state at a large formal banquet, the honoree, empty wine glass in hand, confided: "I'd rather be working with the kids tomorrow"--not the first time I've heard that sort of thing before, either. The burden of gentle complaint from volunteers usually is: "Why lay this additional obligation on me?"

I worry that over-concentration on formal banquet recognition will gradually concentrate a volunteer workforce on people who enjoy same, while tending to turn off more intrinsically task-oriented people. There are some good folks in the former group, to be sure; it's just that we can hardly afford to lose anyone in the latter group.

Finally, I worry about the competitive tone implied in many formal banquets--and some other formal recognition events, too. Whenever a relatively few "outstanding" volunteers "win" recognition, many more other volunteers "lose," by implication. Do we really want to come across as even seeming to say that volunteerism is a kind of contest in which only a limited number can excel? Isn't the real point, instead, that the good in everyone's giving is precious? So, shouldn't we be emphasizing the extent to which volunteering is a valuable contribution from all the people, for all the people, by all the people--not just another exclusive club?

Recently (but never again!), I was a part of a panel supposed to pick the volunteer of the year from among the usual vast array of richly deserving candidates. Finally, one frustrated panelist said it for all of us: "I feel like I'm being asked to decide who's the best Christian of all." He wasn't clergy, by the way, but might have said the same thing, anyhow.

### **Is the Formal Recognition Event (Banquet, etc.) for Recruiting New Volunteers?**

Conceivably, heretofore apathetic persons, inspired by honors given super-volunteers, will hie themselves to the nearest volunteer recruiting booth. Maybe, but I doubt it as a rule. Again, "expectation of formal recognition" doesn't seem to be a significant reason people volunteer. But shouldn't the example of truly spectacular volunteers inspire the laggards? Perhaps, sometimes, but I suspect reverse effects are at least equally likely. Among these might be the monkey-off-my-back syndrome: "With people like Martha Jones as nearly full-time helpers, I can relax and do other things with my time." Then, there's the pedestal cop-out: "If that awesome Ray Smith is typical of what volunteers are like, an ordinary person like me could hardly qualify."

Finally, we have the "society" dress-up atmosphere of formal banquets. For some, that's comfortable, even attractive. But for many others, it practically shouts a negative recruiting message: volunteering is for high society folks. An affluent atmosphere is even more problematic in a volunteer program which works with impoverished clients. Charitable fundraising organizations have been criticized before for a similar reason: fancy victory banquets which spend money clients need far more urgently. My respects go more to people who, for whatever reasons, have banquets but make them visibly economical. Otherwise, volunteerism is only polishing a patronizing image it ought to be eradicating.

### **Is it for Volunteer Coordinators?**

"Only if they're masochists," is my first reaction. We should survey banquet-organizing coordinators to see how they really feel. Anonymously. My own spot poll turned up a surprising number of "Why am I doing this" responses. In any case, many coordinators look just plain exhausted to me every year around that time of year. And it hurts to see them working so hard to give all glory to everyone else, often getting little or none for themselves.

Some coordinators, like all the rest of us, are deeply grateful to volunteers and see the banquet as a visible way of saying so (though there are other equally visible ways, as we have seen). Publicity potential may be an incentive for some. Still, a number of other tested ways of gaining publicity require less effort and expense. Perhaps, it's the old "well, we've always done it this way" syndrome, an unwillingness to look at the kinds of alternatives indicated earlier in this article. Some coordinators are probably not encouraged or allowed to explore these alternatives by their supervisors. As we shall see later, there might be more for bosses than for anyone else, in the banquet.

Speaking of bosses and other powerful people, somewhere underlying the big banquet theory of volunteer recognition lurks the belief that volunteering can prosper only through the endorsement of the rich and powerful, the kind of people for whom banquets and elite awards are a more familiar ritual.

### **Does the Formal Banquet Serve the Needs of Line Staff?**

I doubt it, as a general rule. Staff tends to stay away in droves, unless driven to such banquets (And I don't mean in a car). How could it be otherwise, especially for the kind of program which, in its understandable eagerness to glorify volunteers, often downplays or ignores the crucial importance of staff. Even worse, sometimes, are associated insinuations such as: you know volunteers care because they're not paid. Does this mean staff who are paid, don't care? However unintended, it seems to say this. Or, we present volunteers as sparetime miracle workers solving problems all staff's training and experience cannot budge. Would that we could value volunteers more in ways that don't seem to devalue staff so much?

Some staff do show up at the banquet, of course, out of the deepest desire to honor volunteers--sometimes in spite of the setting.

### **Is it for Executives or Other Top Management of Volunteer-Involving Organizations?**

I believe these are the most plausible gainers, thus far. Among the benefits for a certain kind of executive, is the visible opportunity to put your arm around volunteers and thereby feel you've discharged your program support responsibility until next year at the same time. I don't say this is always conscious or deliberate; I expect it usually is not.

I do say that annual rhetoric can be too tempting as a substitute for the daily support executives should be giving the volunteer program all year round. Of course, the banquet might indeed inspire more such support in the following days and weeks. Let's hope it does. But we must still beware making it too easy for occasional symbols of executive support to replace the ongoing reality of it. Two recent publications lay out the kind of everyday nourishment needed from the top (3,4).

A related worry is that some executives and others who benefit from the labors of volunteers, might unconsciously use the annual banquet as a kind of guilt discharge mechanism, to excuse or expiate last year's lack of consistent concern for the well-being of volunteers, the volunteer coordinator and volunteer program. Such one-stop atonement has one serious potential drawback: it clears the decks for another full year of similar sinning. Speaking of expiation, I honestly believe some executives and community leaders in part come (unconsciously) to the banquet to tell volunteers they're sorry--sorry for not having paid them in a society which powerfully assumes people are supposed to be paid for their

work. How much healthier it would be the "pay the bill" every day of the year through ongoing appreciation of volunteers. No guilt feelings needed there--only celebration.

Likely, I think, in many cases. Include here Mayors, City Managers, County Commissioners, Governors, Premiers, Directors of Human Services Departments, Corporate Leaders and the like. For many, the main agenda is a genuine desire to show appreciation for volunteers. For many others, there is probably another agenda, too, though not necessarily a fully aware one. Thus, in making award presentations, or an accompanying speech, or simply by being introduced at the head table, the politician gets a good share of the limelight surrounding an upbeat, non-controversial event. It's much like an American politician's prominence at the annual Fourth of July gala: lots of reflected glory but not too close to the fireworks. So much may be innocent enough or at least not actively harmful as a forum for politicians who lean towards simplistic solutions for complex social problems. Such as these can point to apparent miracles made in volunteer heaven, as if they occurred everyday here on earth--or could do so. The implication--and sometimes more than that--is that social problems would disappear if we just rubbed on a few more volunteers (while rubbing out a few more staff, it seems to be assumed). This snake medicine approach to volunteerism manages to be unfair to just about everyone: agency executives, line staff, and above all, volunteers themselves. It's a bitter irony that volunteers who want only to strengthen human services can be used in this way to weaken these services, at an occasion which is supposed to honor and support them. In such cases, better a fast for clients than a feed for human service budget-busters. As a small start, the next time you hear a politician touting volunteers mainly because they justify leaner human service budgets, HISS. At the banquet or anywhere else.

If all this seems a bit over-seasoned--too much horseradish perhaps--let me freely admit: I realize that the formal recognition banquet is seen as having some value, in some cases, for some programs. I only wanted to confront here the danger of banquets as rigid rituals, far less functional than some suppose, and blurring our awareness of the value of ongoing informal recognition. Second of all, I wanted to have this article to show to whomever next invites me to speak at such a function."

**NIGHTMARE ENDS** on an upbeat note. I'll probably get my wish.

\* Recalls the famous old volunteer recognition banquet dirge: "Count those hours; tell that tale; even in July it's almost sure to hail."

#### **READINGS**

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