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and Yourself

Don't Just Recognize Volunteers, INVEST in Them...and Yourself

By [Sheri Wilensky Burke](#)

April
2018

I can't believe it's already April. For those of us in the U.S. and Canada, April means celebrating National Volunteer Week (April 15 – 21). During that week, the focus is on volunteers, particularly how to recognize their contributions to our organizations. But rather than spending time and money on the typical recognition event or gift, consider taking the time to **recognize their talents and invest in your volunteers**. What I mean is helping volunteers to evolve within your organization to explore new challenges or assume leadership responsibilities. In my recent *e-Volunteerism.com* article, "[Creating A Volunteer Career Ladder: Evolving Volunteers](#)," I introduce the concept of *volunteer evolvment* – defined as enabling volunteers to take on greater responsibilities within your organization by offering them the opportunity for growth and new experiences.



Even the most engaged volunteers can get bored with doing the same thing repeatedly. Similarly to paid staff who seek professional development and promotion, many volunteers desire new challenges in their volunteer careers. What better way to recognize your most committed volunteers than by asking them to take on new tasks and/or assume a leadership role?

Of course, the process of volunteer evolvment can't be accomplished in one week. It requires a plan. National Volunteer Week (no matter when it takes place in your part of the world) is a great time to start developing that plan. One key step would be to ask volunteers for their input about potential volunteer roles. Sometimes we don't see the potential for a new volunteer opportunity, but a volunteer who is engaged in a task may see things from a different perspective. Below I've listed some example positions that would be perfect for long-term volunteers who have developed a substantial knowledge base about an organization:

- Invite veteran volunteers to serve as mentors to acclimate, train, or bring new volunteers onboard, including asking current board members to help new board members. (Remember: they're volunteers, too!)
- Ask volunteers to design, lead, or refresh your current orientation or training. Who better to understand what new volunteers need to know about your organization than those who have been volunteering. Additionally, experienced volunteers who have been performing certain duties often can offer better insight into expectations and responsibilities than paid staff can.
- Develop community ambassadors. Recognize how passionate many long-term volunteers are about the organization's mission and give them the chance to attend community outreach events to represent your organization. A dedicated volunteer is the best advocate to recruit new volunteers and event participants!

By committing to volunteer involvement, you are recognizing volunteers by letting them know just how valued they are in your organization.

Investing in Yourself

Another form of volunteer recognition is the benefit of a well-run volunteer program. For volunteers to truly make an impact, leaders who are engaging them need to be equipped to be the best they can be. I discussed investing in volunteers, but during National Volunteer Week, I also challenge you to ***invest in yourself***. That means committing to your own professional development and expanding your professional capacity. By investing in the tools and resources to perform to the best of your ability, you can position yourself as a leader in your organization and gain the support needed to engage volunteers.



Have you taken the time to create a strategy for your own professional development? Do you schedule time during the week to read about volunteer engagement or consider issues facing your industry? When is the last time you attended a networking opportunity? Are you a member of a professional association? Professional development encompasses many approaches including reading print media such as books, journals, and newspapers, as well as a myriad of online resources including webinars, social media networking, and blogs. There are many educational and certificate programs as well as professional associations and opportunities for mentoring and peer career coaching. For a list of ideas, visit Energize, Inc.'s [Directory for the Profession](#).

Is professional development part of your job plan for the year? If it's not, it should be. When forming your job goals for the year, consider adding professional development as a goal or as a strategy to achieve a goal. This is one way to help gain organizational support for participating in professional

development activities. And then make sure to address professional growth during your annual performance review process – if your supervisor does not raise the issue, you should.

Even if your organization is not committed to your professional development, you should be. Only you can empower yourself and take ownership of your career; no one will do it for you. Have you considered what you would like to achieve professionally over the next year? How about the next five? Or the next ten? If not, take the time to develop your own “professional evolution” plan. Choose a goal(s), explore the resources available to help you and then construct the plan to achieve it (them).

As you begin to consider a volunteer evolution plan and your own professional evolution plan, think about your answers to these questions. Then, share your thoughts here.

Do you invest time and resources into helping volunteers evolve in their roles? How so? If not, what prevents you from doing so?

What are some examples of volunteer roles that would be perfect for volunteers needing change or more responsibility?

Do you invest time and resources in evolving your own role as a leader of volunteers? How so?

What professional development resources or strategies do you recommend?

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Comments from Readers

Submitted on April 2nd, 2018

mindy alpert, great neck ny, united states

Terrific article!! Great job :)

Submitted on April 12th, 2018

Sheri Wilensky Burke, Exton, PA, United States

Thanks Mindy! Hope you can use this information in the work you do with the National MS Society.

Submitted on April 4th, 2018

Don Rhodes, Employers' Advocate, Otago. Central Otago, New Zealand

Excellent reminders of how best to engage and retain not just Volunteers but paid Staff as well. I have passed the Hot Topic on to my Employer clients with the rider to revise their management practices around Staff as the topic recommends.

Well done. DonR.

Submitted on April 12th, 2018

Sheri Wilensky Burke, Exton, PA, United States

Thanks Don - so glad you found this information helpful.

Submitted on April 4th, 2018

Amber Benson, Volunteer and Community Relations Coordinator, Alacare Home Health and Hospice, Scottsboro, Alabama, United States

Great article!!

Submitted on April 12th, 2018

Sheri Wilensky Burke, Exton, PA, United States

Thanks Amber! I appreciate the feedback and glad my thoughts spoke to you,

Submitted on April 5th, 2018

Gerald (Jerry) ..., Presenter, Consultant, and Blogger, independent contractor, New York, NY, USA

I like your suggestion to take a less traditional approach regarding volunteer recognition. Your HOT TOPIC reminded me about an outstanding volunteer who agreed to take on an additional responsibility once offered the opportunity.

We had a grant, for new/innovative volunteer programs in a health care setting, that involved training volunteers to be Diabetes Health Coaches. Volunteers would call patients and discuss five key healthy behaviors that had been identified within the grant proposal. Once the first team of volunteers was trained and making the calls, I was asked to present the program to staff members, those who would be encouraged to refer patients to the program.

I thought, I could do that. Then I thought, What if I have a volunteer assist me? The volunteer could:

- Share how they had been trained

- Review the five healthy behaviors that patients were being reminded about and encouraged to practice
- Discuss the non-judgmental, friendly, and yet professional relationship with the patients

The volunteer was a hit! An audience relates differently to a volunteer vs. a paid staff member. The volunteer brought an extra something to the presentation because she was living proof with regard to the level of training she had received and could answer questions about the calls she had made to date. She humanized the role of a volunteer far better than a speech from me.

Submitted on April 12th, 2018

Sheri Wilensky Burke, Exton, PA, United States

Thanks Jerry. And thanks for sharing your story - what a great idea to have a volunteer present the information. As you found, the volunteer perspective is often much more meaningful than receiving the same information from staff.

Submitted on May 11th, 2019

kiowna Brown, Case Manager, Salvation Army , Normal, US

This article was very well written. I absolutely believe the development is needed for any working adult despite of the capacity.

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