Recognizing Volunteers

Recognizing your volunteers helps convey the important role they play in your agency and is a key to their retention. While many volunteers are not motivated by recognition, the time, effort, and talents provided by your volunteers should not be taken for granted. Recognition can be done in private or in public, but should always be appropriate for the volunteer and his or her contribution.

Recognizing volunteers' accomplishments has a powerful impact because the volunteers then view their time, energy, and talents as contributing to an organization's success. Volunteers must know that something meaningful happened because they were involved. When a leader can arrange for both project accomplishment and individual growth, human development goals are achieved. Accomplishments include developing plans, implementing programs, completing evaluations, conducting meetings, involving people, fundraising, designing or completing projects, and improving lives. Volunteers sometimes don't give themselves credit for many of their accomplishments, so a leader should bring attention to specific achievements, especially those that highlight major goals of the organization.

Recognition does not need to be time-consuming or expensive in order to be meaningful. A volunteer program and the agency as a whole should acknowledge volunteers regularly through sincere expressions of gratitude.

Rules of Recognition

Give it Or Else - It is important to most people, if you don't give it, you will have negative results and unsatisfied volunteers. Never assume that volunteers know they are appreciated. Recognition of their contributions should be part of the formal and informal operations of the program. Volunteers who do not receive frequent feedback and recognition begin to wonder if they are doing a good job and if anyone cares about the work they do. This often creates an un-motivating climate, and can result in high volunteer attrition.

Give it Frequently - A frequent complaint of volunteers is not getting enough recognition from staff.

Give it Via a Variety of Methods - From a person for the work the volunteer did; From a person for being part of the organization (who they are); From the organization for work the volunteer did; From the organization for being a part of the team.
Give it Honestly - Deliver recognition in a personal and honest manner. Don't give praise unless you mean it. Avoid producing recognition that is too slick or overproduced. Small, personal indications of appreciation, such as hand written notes, tend to be perceived as more sincere than formal pronouncements.

Give it to the Person, not the Work - Make sure you connect the volunteer's name to the success of a project or event. Strive for a clear, unambiguous and well-communicated connection between accomplishments and rewards. Be sure people understand why they receive awards and the criteria used to determine awards. People must think that awards are fair and deserved.

Give it Appropriately to the Achievement - Small accomplishments should be praised with low-effort methods, large accomplishments should get something more. Deliver recognition and reward in an open and publicized way. If not made public, recognition loses much of its impact and defeats much of the purpose for which it provided. Do not however, think that public recognition will substitute for private, everyday, personal thank you's and respect. What happens in 365 days a year has much more impact than what happens at an annual recognition function.

Give it Consistently - Do for one what you would do for others of similar achievement.

Give it on a Timely Basis - Timing is crucial. Praise for work should come as soon as possible after the achievement. Recognize contribution throughout a project. Reward contribution close to the time an achievement is realized. Time delays weaken the impact of most awards. An immediate "thank you" or "great job" is much more important than a proclamation six months later.

Give it in an Individualized Fashion - All volunteers need recognition, both on an individual and organizational level. Different people like different things. The trick is to find the mode of recognition which most satisfies the volunteer. Tailor your recognition to the unique needs of the people involved. Have several recognition and reward options to enable managers to acknowledge accomplishment in ways appropriate to the particulars of a given situation. Some will prefer to be thanked by their supervisor or co-worker. Some will prefer to be recognized within the corporate structure, through a letter to their boss. Some will prefer to be recognized among their peers, or family, or church group. One size and shape of recognition does not fill all.

Give it for What You Want More of - Don't give attention mostly to those volunteers having difficulty. Make sure you praise all who are doing a good job.
Recognize recognition. That is, recognize people who recognize others for doing what is best for the organization. It is the job of everyone on the team to recognize and support excellence.

**Ways to Recognize Volunteers**

**Formal Recognition Systems**
This category includes awards, certificates, plaques, pins, dinners, or receptions to honor volunteer achievement. These are helpful mainly in satisfying the needs of volunteers who have a need for community approval but have little impact on volunteers whose primary focus is helping the clientele.

**Informal Recognition Practices**
The most effective recognition is the day-to-day interchange between volunteers and the organization through the staff's efforts to express appreciation and thanks for the work they are doing. It is more powerful because it is more frequent. Includes:

- Saying "Thank You"
- Involving the volunteer in decisions that affect them
- Asking about the volunteer's family and showing an interest in their outside life.
- Making sure that volunteers receive equal treatment to staff
- Sending a note of appreciation to the volunteer's family
- Allowing the volunteer to increase their skills by attending training
- Recommending the volunteer for promotion to a more responsible job
- Celebrating the volunteer's anniversary with the organization
- Start early - send a card of welcome to a new volunteer, or throw a small welcome party

See “101 Ways to Give Recognition to Volunteers”
http://w3.hwdsb.on.ca/tailslap/other/volunter/101ways.htm

Recognizing volunteers can be simple…it can be done in a matter of seconds and it can be free! Small gestures that require very little time and effort can stand out to volunteers and make a difference to them. Be conscious of ways you can recognize volunteers to make them feel needed and appreciated.

**Matching Recognition to Types of Volunteers**
By Motivational Orientation - recognition that is more appropriate for different basic motivational needs.

**Achievement-oriented Volunteers**
- Ideal result of recognition is additional training or more challenging tasks
- Subject for recognition is best linked to a very specific accomplishment
- Phrasing of recognition through "Best" "Most" awards
- Recognition decision should include "Checkpoints" or "Records"
- Awardee should be selected by co-workers

**Affiliation-oriented Volunteers**
- Recognition should be given at group event
- Recognition should be given in presence of peers, family, other groupings
- Recognition item or award should have a "personal touch"
- Recognition should be organizational in nature, given by the organization
- Recognition should be voted by peers
- If primary affiliation bonding is with client, not others in the organization, then the client should take part in the recognition, through a personal note of thanks or as presenter of the award.

**Power-oriented Volunteers**
- Key aspect of recognition is "Promotion" conveying greater access to authority or information
- Recognition should be commendation from "Names"
- Recognition should be announced to community at large, put in newspaper
- Recognition decision should be made by the organization's leadership

By Style of Volunteering - between long-term and short-term volunteers

**Long-term Volunteer**
- Recognition with and by the group
- Recognition items make use of group symbols
- Recognition entails greater power, involvement, information about the organization
- Presenter of recognition is a person in authority

**Short-term Volunteer**
- Recognition is given in immediate work unit or social group
- Recognition is "portable"; something the volunteers can take with them when they leave--a present, photograph or other memorabilia of experience, training, etc.
- Recognition is provided via home or work - letter to employer, church or
Recognizing volunteers plays a key role in the way volunteers view their experience and contributions. If their actions go unnoticed, they are likely to believe that their job is not important, or they are not doing their job correctly. A simple smile or a thank you can go a long way, and you may never know the impact that had on a volunteer. Volunteers are very unique and different, so you must make an effort to determine which recognition methods are appropriate for which volunteers. By doing so, the recognition will be more effective and make the volunteer feel needed and appreciated.

Sources: www.casanet.org/program-management/volunteer-manage/retenrec.htm