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The Giving of Thanks

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

November

1998

November in the United States brings the holiday of Thanksgiving. Rooted in the tradition of harvest festivals everywhere, the American holiday commemorates a heritage of community spirit, specifically the legend of Native Americans bringing gifts of food to needy European settlers. So the Thanksgiving story is, at its core, a story of gratitude for volunteering as well as for the abundance of a deity.

So it's in November that I tend to think about the way we approach volunteer recognition. First, it's my opinion that most of what we call volunteer recognition widely misses the mark and that the search for good ways to say thank you is still a challenge. As you know, we have an entire area of this Web site dedicated to [volunteer recognition](#) and appreciate how many of you have posted some excellent ideas, quotes, and stories to share with everyone. But it is still true that too many recognition events miss the mark.

Here are some of the thoughts I've been mulling about for some time:

1. 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 without the other elements of recognition, a thank you can be meaningless or even insulting. Some examples: not acknowledging volunteer contributions to a project or report (such as not including volunteer names on the document or leaving out a description of their work); executives reading speeches clearly written for them by someone else and then mispronouncing volunteer names; publicly applauding or awarding a volunteer after a year of privately stonewalling suggestions and general lack of respect for the talents and commitment of the person. This last is of personal interest to me. If an organization can't treat me well while I'm trying to do my work for them without fanfare, I tend to resent them putting on a happy face in public and pretending they value me.

2. It's amazing to watch coordinators of volunteers transform themselves into caterers and impresarios as they plan what is the equivalent of an annual royal wedding! How did we end up spending so much time on giving a party? And why do they all look alike? Why do YOU have to plan

the event? How did we get to the point of treating volunteers as the invited guests, rarely asked to participate in making the event what they might actually enjoy attending? Too often all the energy is focused on preparing a splendid banquet or event and not enough focus is placed on the interaction at the event. 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.

3. The last sentence above is key. The important part of recognition is celebrating accomplishments! Not the meal, the speaker, the certificates, or the mugs. As someone who is often asked to speak at volunteer recognition affairs, I am perplexed at how often I leave the site with no clear idea of what these fine people have actually done during the year that deserves this praise. So, if your recognition event doesn't talk about what volunteers DID--specifically, with photos, with data, with comments from clients, etc.--you are wasting a great opportunity.

This is why awards based solely on hours served are so ridiculous. They mean nothing in terms of accomplishment. In fact, consider that hours-based recognition ironically rewards the slowest workers! If Jim takes three hours to do what Lateesha can do in one hour, he racks up three times the "points" towards that pin--for less work! By all means honor longevity or even the few 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!

Let's 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. Or you can think ahead to National Volunteer Week, whenever your country sponsors it.

What are your gripes about traditional volunteer recognition? What have you done (or received) that you felt truly acknowledged volunteers?

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Submitted by Sarah Oliver, Asst. Regional Director, Women in Community Service, Washington, USA

I have a relatively small group of volunteers (about 150), so I have the luxury of getting to know them a bit...I find that most of our volunteers feel most "recognized" by things that show that they are a truly integral part of our organization. For instance, keeping them updated on new programs and initiatives, asking for their input about possible projects, etc. I also like to pass along articles, interesting website addresses, job announcements and so on to people I think might like them.

Submitted by Mindy Moyer, Director of Development, Indian Creek Foundation, Harleysville, PA

I loved your comments on the overdone pins, T-shirts and trinkets. I am the Director of Development (the volunteer program is just one of my hats) at an agency serving people with mental retardation. We have a formal recognition event during the holiday season completely organized by volunteers and their Friends with disabilities). They thoughtfully choose the decorations, school children make decorations for their Christmas trees to be used as favors, and the program is a few volunteers and their Friends telling stories of their experiences throughout the year. They are so moving. We usually invite a few "extra guests" many of whom sign up to volunteer after the program. We end the evening by singing carols. For thank yous throughout the year we receive donated tickets for events, movies, concerts etc. and pass them to volunteers who are delighted to have the opportunities without the high costs.

Submitted by Diane Leipper, Leipper Management Group, NV

As a long time manager of volunteers and as a volunteer myself, I have experienced recognition on both sides of the fence. I have learned one of the best ways to recognize volunteers is to recognize that they exist. Recognize that they are individuals with their own agendas, their own needs, and their own gifts that they bring to your program. They are an integral part of team not just a resource you use to fill need then give them a pat on the back and put away until next time.

The most effective way to recognize this is to give them your time. This isn't your duty, it is your privilege. You get to work with people that aren't motivated by a paycheck, retirement benefits, or a big promotion, that come because they care about the mission of your program. I know full well all the demands on our time and the fact that many of us work with large numbers of volunteers - but aren't we called volunteer managers because a major focus of our jobs is volunteers? (I mean volunteers as people, not just volunteers as statistics we have to recruit, train, document, record, and report for the bottom line.) I sometimes wonder if subconsciously we are influenced by the thought process, "they are JUST volunteers".

If a volunteer wants to talk, give them the opportunity, listen to them. It is not a waste of time to hear about the grandchildren or their concerns about the increase in bus fare. Take the time to stop and visit with them while they are working and ask them about the job. Listen to their suggestions and follow through if appropriate, if not discuss why with them. Include them in decisions about the work they do. Say hi and ask them what is new when you see them in the hall or in the grocery store. Be willing to promote their ideas and suggestions to someone up the ladder in the organization if appropriate and necessary. Listen to criticism openly, not defensively, and discuss possible solutions.

Submitted by Debbie Thompson, Volunteer Coordinator, Illinois

As a volunteer coordinator in a church, it is important that we recognize all gifts of service. We try to give recognition in many different ways, but one of the best things we have done recently is to have our clients, predominantly seniors and shut-ins share their view of how important it is to be included

in the life of the church through our lay visitation program. It was truly heart warming to hear these people discuss the importance of our volunteers in their lives during a special sermon planned by our pastor and the lay ministry chairman. No offense Susan, but these are usually the best speakers at recognition events because they not only know about the program they are personally involved with the volunteers.

A quick response from Susan Ellis:

No apology needed to me for two reasons, Debbie. First, because the whole point of this area is to generate many different points of view. In fact, I wish there was more controversy and debate in these pages (even though I'm delighted that more and more site visitors are taking the time to post a response). But the second reason you don't have to apologize is that having clients speak to volunteers at your recognition event is a wonderful example of doing exactly what I was urging! It wasn't the meal or the decorations that I was complaining about; it was the lack of relevance to the work volunteers do all year. Hearing from clients is right on target. And sometimes "mushy" is just the right tone, too.

Submitted by Mary Kay Hood, Director of Volunteer Services, Hendricks Community Hospital, Danville, Indiana USA

I agree with the philosophy of recognizing achievements rather than hours. Interestingly enough, when I took over the volunteer program 1 1/2 years ago, I had the opportunity to change directions with the recognition event and concentrated on what volunteers accomplish as a whole for the hospital. Several weeks after the event, one of the volunteers sort of reprimanded me for not recognizing the hours commitment of one of her fellow volunteers. He's a retired certified EMT and spends well over 40 hours each week helping out in the ER department. Now, he chooses to do this and he's very well thought of by the staff in ER. But that just goes to show you, seems as though you just can't make everyone happy.

Submitted by Carol A. Youngman, Community Volunteer Coordinator - Martinez Refining Company, California

I am the volunteer coordinator for a refining company on the West Coast. So often when there is a special event it is the management team that get invited. Recently I attended an awards presentation and took several members of my focus group to the event. They loved the outing and meeting with other businesses who are developing a habit of the heart for volunteering. You should have heard the ideas generated on the ride home which will surely set the pace for 1999 for our company. It was energizing to say the least.

My company has generously given each employee 18 hours of release time to participate in a volunteer project. Recognition comes in many forms but one that is generic and well received is a lapel pin I had designed which says simply "MRC Volunteer" which I give to those who have

participated in a volunteer event. This has generated much enthusiasm among our employees. Last Thursday I put out a call for over 80 volunteers for an upcoming event - by the end of the following work day I had all the slots filled - quoting several of the new comers that signed up "I want that volunteer button!" For those employees who have completed their 18 hours, they receive a license plate frame that says "Adding Value to the Community - Martinez Refining Company Volunteer" - this has become a noteworthy source of pride not only to our employee volunteers but the company as well. For our employees who work on educational projects, I find out from the school librarians which books they would like to obtain and have the volunteer's name placed on a book plate to honor them for their participation and role. My volunteers love it and needless to say so do the schools.

Submitted by Kirsten Sanford, Volunteer Coordinator, Celebrate Seniority, Good Samaritan Hospital, Puyallup, Washington

I am new in the field as a volunteer director. My volunteers have told me they are tired of t-shirts, mugs etc. I asked them what they thought about restaurant or movie theater gift certificates--they liked that idea. I would love feedback for other ideas. My volunteers are seniors and most are tired of "stuff". Thanks.

Submitted by Kim Johnson, Coordinator of Volunteers & Humane Education, Kansas City, MO USA

I have worked as a volunteer coordinator for over ten years in the social service field. I think we are missing the mark when we give out awards based on the amount of hours someone puts in. I have seen many people who have busy family lives go to great lengths to arrange for day care and juggle work responsibilities in order to make their one four hour shift a month. They keep coming back every month faithfully. It seems we only focus on the volunteer who makes our organization their sole project, giving endless hours because they don't have the responsibilities others do. I would like to see more focus on individual traits that volunteers bring to the cause. We have one volunteer who takes the time during each shift to thank the paid workers for what they do for the shelter because she knows its a hard job. Another volunteer has a gift for helping clients see different sides of a problem. I'm glad professionals in the volunteer field are talking about different options.

Submitted by Jerry Heinold, Peer Volunteer Coordinator - DePelchin Children's Center, Texas USA

Since every volunteer has a unique personality, not all feel appreciated by the same method. Therefore, why not ask the volunteers what would make them feel most appreciated. There are subtle ways to ask so that you know what to do to insure that they feel appreciated and that they get the most out of it too.

Submitted by Kathy Gattinger, Volunteer Center Director, Arkansas

It takes extra time to get to know your volunteers, especially if they volunteer "in the field". It is worth taking the time, or at least asking some appropriate questions on an application form. As a volunteer, I'm not big on receiving an annual certificate, but ask me to give a presentation about the program, or help with training, and I feel good! I know that I'm appreciated for my talents and abilities. I also like tangible things like coffee mugs and pens. I use them in the office, which is constant advertising for the program.

Submitted by Betty Anton, Director Volunteer Services, Lehigh Valley Hospital, Allentown, Pennsylvania

I agree with your assessment of most volunteer recognition programs and special events. We still have many volunteers who really enjoy coming to a special dinner in their honor during National Volunteer Week. We have approximately 600 volunteers in our organization and over 425 attend this recognition event. The problem that I have today is that of recognizing our teen volunteers in a meaningful way. We have seen decreasing numbers of teens and their families attending these programs. There is just too much going on in the lives of these busy teens and their working parents. One of the best ideas I have seen is from one of my colleagues in Pennsylvania and that is to recognize teens before their peers at their schools. You can present them with a gift and certificate at an awards assembly. It takes a lot of work, but is much more meaningful. I am thinking of trying it next year!

Submitted by Cheryl Morehouse, Manager, Vol. Svs., St. Joseph Hospital, Omaha, Nebraska, USA

I agree about making volunteer "recognition" meaningful. I'm a fairly new greenhorn yet in the field (been in volunteer management for four years). Being a person who does a tremendous amount of community service on my own, I always try to keep in mind what the volunteer would like as far as recognition. Yes, we have a splashy, traditional volunteer recognition "banquet" every April; but I find what means the most to our long-term, senior volunteers especially is the impromptu, on-the-spot recognition. Our volunteer love a surprise lunch, card, personal hand-written letter, small thoughtful gifts, hugs..... etc. I have a high turnover rate with a great percentage of my volunteers (mostly college students), and what they appreciate most are practical gifts. I always try to find something unique, practical workable for either gender. I detest "hours pins" for the same reasons as our host asking for our input about this question. I have tried to put a personal touch on everything I do concerning recognizing volunteers, from creating all the decorations for special events myself, to providing the musical entertainment. The most enjoyable part of my job is just simply the personal connection with each volunteer, really listening to and caring about them, and demonstrating my love and appreciation for them on a daily basis.

Comments from Readers

Submitted on August 5th, 2016

Marty ODell, CVA, Volunteer Program Manager, Goodwill Easter Seals Miami Valley, Dayton, OH, USA

I usually shy away from banquets and dinners too much work for too few people. But last year I allowed myself to be talked into another one. We decided to mix things up, tables were small 4 people to a table, volunteers could bring a significant other or prospective volunteer to the dinner and we asked the supervisors to think of some wild and wacky awards. Here is a sample:

Vicki - Thanks for the commit-mint - bag of spearmint life savers

Matt - Thanks for being a BIG help - beach ball

Cassandra - We are lucky to have you - box of lucky charms cereal

Karen - Thanks for the helping hand - a stuffed glove

Ubonwan - Your talents sparkle! Thanks for sharing them with us. - a bottle of glittery nail polish

The volunteers loved it! This year we are including a Super Supervisor Award, the supervisors have been nominated by the volunteers and judges outside the agency doing the judging. 3 winners will receive recognition and a gift card. All supervisors and their significant others are invited as well.

The CEO of the agency participates in the event. I believe because we are making it fun and not stuffy it is gathering a following, and allowing the volunteers to meet and know each other.

Submitted on December 18th, 2016

Barbara Storch, Technical Services Manager, Mandel Public Library of West Palm Beach, West Palm Beach, United States

For the last few years we have been holding a volunteer recognition luncheon. We recognize each volunteer personally by having the volunteer's supervisor do a short presentation in which they talk about what they do to volunteer at the library. It is friendly and informal. Each volunteer also receives a token gift. We used to present certificates but came to the conclusion that the volunteers don't really want these. Every year I receive positive feedback from attendees about how much they enjoy the luncheon. It is very casual, although we do have the Mayor, representatives from the City Commission and representatives from City Administration attend. I, as the volunteer manager, present a speech. The Mayor also looks forward to speaking each year. It is very meaningful as she was once a member of the Library Advisory Board and is totally committed to supporting the Library and having a vital volunteer program citywide. From what I have been reading on your website and others, we will probably continue the annual volunteer recognition luncheon.

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