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A Medal for Volunteer Service - How to Measure Success?

By [Rob Jackson](#)

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From Susan:

The latest volunteerism listserv to hit the World Wide Web is [OzVPM](#). Created by Andy Fryar to serve the Australasian sector of our field, OzVPM has so far attracted 74 members since its inception on 9 June 2002. These members have already posted more than 150 messages, many of which have been thoughtful and thought-provoking. Colleague Rob Jackson in England shares his reaction to a recent online discussion and poses questions for us all.

One of the more interesting recent threads on OzVPM has been on formal recognition of volunteers, particularly a discussion on the idea of a national medal to be awarded to all volunteers in Australia after a set number of years' service, regardless of position or type of role filled. (Follow the postings starting with the first one at <https://groups.yahoo.com/group/ozvpm/message/151>).

Recognition is one of those 'no win' debates in our field. There are as many ways of meaningfully recognising volunteers as there are volunteers themselves. Everyone has their own mix of motivational needs and really valuable recognition takes this into account when saying 'thank you' in an appropriate way. And, of course, formal recognition is only of any value when it is underpinned by the far more important informal, day-to-day recognition of both the value of volunteers and the contribution they make.

With this in mind I warily replied to the post from Ian Foster of Wide Bay Volunteers, the organisation in Australia (Queensland) that is pressing forward the idea of the medal. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Medal_\(Australia\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Medal_(Australia)). The concept is based on the fact that governments bestow medals on heroes and heroines, particularly for military victories, athletic prowess, and accomplishments of value to the country as a whole. So why not for volunteering?

Whilst I commend their initiative and drive at lobbying Federal upper and lower-house members, and all State politicians, plus all local government representatives, I'd like to propose a better qualifier

than length of service. My personal belief is that length of service alone has little meaning without parallel qualifiers.

For example, at my organisation (Royal National Institute of the Blind, www.rnib.org.uk), we recognise fundraising volunteers on the length of service they have given [or] the amount of money they have raised. So, if you give two years service you get a bronze fundraising award but if you raise £5,000 in one year you also qualify for the bronze award.

The problem is that length of service criteria are geared towards more traditional models of volunteering where people give an open-ended, often long-term voluntary commitment to an organisation. This is at odds with the more episodic nature of much of the volunteering going on today. The proposed minimum criteria for the Australian medal of two years service values people who are able and/or willing to give this duration of commitment but fails to recognise those who have given less than two years service but may well have made an equally (or more) valuable contribution. What message does this give to these volunteers or to potential volunteers?

Which leads me to the really critical point. One of the challenges facing our field is to develop formal recognition criteria that are impact and outcome based. Whether two months, two years or two decades, the importance of volunteer service is not time in itself, but what impact the volunteer has had in that time. Surely our recognition would be more meaningful if we could say: "Thank you for making X difference in the lives of Y (number of) young people" than "Thank you for sticking with us for five years"!

Olympic athletes don't get a medal just for showing up. They have to win, or at least to place high enough to be noticed. It's a great idea to want to elevate volunteers to public hero status, but shouldn't the medal be earned by accomplishments?

What do others think? Has anyone had experience with a "medal" awarded by a unit of government? What should be the common measure of success in volunteering?

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Submitted on 29Jan2004 by Udeni Salmon, Head of Volunteer Support, Leonard Cheshire, UK

At Leonard Cheshire we are developing an annual volunteer thank you award ceremony, which will hopefully be sponsored by our corporate supporters, and which will contain a number of categories: young volunteer of the year; most innovative volunteering idea; fundraiser of the year; best volunteer group effort; corporate volunteering project of the year etc. We feel this type of award best represents the wide variety of volunteers and activities that add such great value to our organisation.

Submitted on 14Jan03 by James Montgomery, Canberra ACT

A number of years ago I proposed and designed an ACT volunteer medal which I submitted to the government of the time for consideration. Of course I never received a reply so I guess the answer

was a resounding no. However, having said that, I still believe there exists room for a Federal volunteer medal to make up for the gap that exists between organisations eligible for the National Medal (ie SES, Bushfire, etc), and those that are not (Meals on Wheels, community work, etc). As such the National medal would not be replaced but the Volunteer medal would have various clasps denoting service. I also proposed that the medal be awarded after ten years service rather than 15 so as not to become confused with 15 years Armed Forces Service, or Ambulance, etc. As well this would make the National Medal slightly more important than the volunteer medal whilst still recognising those who have volunteered their services for a period of ten years.

Submitted on 19Sept02 by Robert Leigh, United Nations Volunteers

I am all for recognition to individual volunteers for meritorious performance. My comments however are prompted by the notion that volunteering tends to be exclusive in terms of the profile of the people who participate. There are plenty of studies of the benefits that accrue to individuals fortunate enough to have access to volunteer opportunities. Perhaps there is need to consider people who, for whatever reason, are faced with obstacles to volunteering, as in other walks of life. They may include youth, seniors, people with disabilities, HIV/AIDS victims, and certain ethnic groups. And of course there are income and education level considerations. It would be worthwhile considering giving recognition to organizations which have pro-actively and successfully broadened their recruitment base. This would surely contribute to sustaining a healthy volunteer movement.

Submitted on 12Sept02 by Rosanne T. Bennett, PHR, CPC, SCB Technologies, Inc., Ohio, USA

I agree with rewarding impact rather than length of service. My only problem is that if you are giving the same type of 'reward' for writing a check as you are for volunteering. If you are rewarding the volunteer for 'raising' the money, than you have my full support. If you are rewarding the volunteer for writing a check, then I will take issue with your concept.

In corporate Human Resources management, length of service is, of course, recognized but impact and performance are applauded....why should it be different in the volunteer world.

Submitted on 11Sept02 by Donna Blessing, Front Desk Coordinator, The Senior Center, Inc., Charlottesville, VA-USA

I supervise 25 volunteers at a Senior Center. These 70 year olds and over volunteers are terrific. I agree that the day to day appreciation means more to the committed volunteer than the medal, the luncheon, the parade. I would say to those who propose such an idea; methinks you protest too much. The majority of volunteers do not volunteer for recognition as much as they do for self-fulfillment.

Submitted on 10Sept02 by Nancy Merlock, Mgr. Victory Memorial Hospital Volunteer Resources, Waukegan, Illinois Several years ago a volunteer wrote a letter to the editor column regarding his discomfort for having been singled out for special recognition. He spoke of a young working mother who also volunteered with the same organization. His point? He was retired and could give as many hours as he wanted. Were his volunteer efforts more worthy of recognition than that mother who balanced family, home and career and still found some time to volunteer? He wrote she was the more deserving person. That's what makes formal recognition so challenging. What criteria is appropriate? I believe it needs to be determined by each organization based upon observation and feedback from the volunteers themselves. They will set the tone. From my experience with our volunteers, daily "thank yous" goes a long way!

Submitted on 10Sep02 by Willem Tjebbe Oostenbrink, The Netherlands

Recognition and reward volunteering needs to be definitely appreciated more but this doesn't necessarily mean the focus has to be on formal recognition only. Governments can improve conditions in order to further volunteering. The non-profit sector has to promote the values of volunteering. The phrases however used in the discussion on recognising volunteering formally, arouses ambiguous feelings. Yes, I am in favour of developing criteria to measure the results of volunteer work that are impact and outcome based. And yes, I am afraid that focusing on formal recognition mainly, will lead to bureaucratic approach of volunteering. It will lead towards two types of volunteering, i.e. the formally recognised and the formally non-recognised. And the governments will qualify those volunteers who had a formal volunteering practise higher than those who did not. I was taught that there are two types of organisation, i.e. those run by volunteers, and those run for volunteers. The last type of organisation has a higher role for professionals and paid people. I expect that formally recognised volunteering will mainly lead to benefits for organisations FOR volunteers. I am afraid that the focus on formal recognition as such will lead to exclusion rather than appreciation.

Submitted on 06Sep02 by John Walker, Director of Volunteer Services, Central Baptist Hospital KY, USA

I am a DVS in a US hospital, and I'm also an officer in the US Army Reserves. I find it interesting (and encouraging) that the US Army now has a medal that recognizes the volunteer service of soldiers. One of the key criteria for submitting a soldier for this particular medal is that the soldier must have made a demonstrated commitment to volunteering. The only way to do this is with some measure of longevity. However, in addition to the quantitative measurement, the submitter must include some qualitative measures - people served, dollars raised, etc. I know that soldiers do not serve for either pay or for the recognition, and this system of recommendation has its limitations, but I applaud the US Army for recognizing individuals who consistently put forth the effort to volunteer in their communities and make a difference.

Submitted on 06Sep02 by Ian Foster, WBVRA, Wide Bay Volunteer Resource Association, Queensland, Australia

Whilst agreeing with Rob that length of service is a difficult qualifier, I don't agree that awarding a medal for helping x number of people can be of use either. Possible scenario:

Person A could spend a year, or raise \$X, for the Blind Society, and help 1,000 people, whilst person B could raise the same amount in the same time for the Myasthenic Foundation and help 100 people, simply because MG (Myasthenia Gravis) affects fewer people. Can we say 'Sorry, but because the people you helped are fewer simply because of the rarity of the complaint, you don't qualify?'

Submitted on 06Sep02 with anonymously

Check out the Ontario Service Awards at <http://www.ontario.ca/>

Submitted on 06Sep02 by Arlene Osborn, Outreach Coordinator, Wyoming Congressional Award, Wyoming

The United States Congress awards medals to youth, ages 14 to 24 for setting and accomplishing personal goals in four areas, Public Community Service, Personal Development, Physical Fitness, and Expedition/Exploration. This noncompetitive program encourages young people to learn to give back to their communities, develop positive relationships, gain responsibility, and generally become more well rounded.

The Congressional Award program was started in 1979 by an act of Congress and Bronze, Silver, and Gold Medals are awarded each year. The youth who participate have to work with and advisor to develop their goals, document their activities and hours, and fill out a record book with advisor recommendations. After they have been approved they then receive their awards from their Congressmen and women.

The United Kingdom countries, including Australia, have a similar program, The Duke of Edinburgh Award. The premise behind the program is that we teach our youth to become contributing members of their communities. The Medals are very appreciated, but the real value is in what each person learns about his or herself, the self-esteem that grows, and learning that they are appreciated. Sometimes adults think they deserve a medal for their contributions, but a person who volunteers and enjoys what he or she is doing usually isn't looking for a medal, but they certainly need to feel appreciated and thanked for their contributions!




Submitted on 06Sep02 by Marian Wilkins, Manager, Volunteer Program, Vancouver, Canada

VON Canada (Victorian Order of Nurses) wants to celebrate the Queens Jubilee with a medal award for volunteers throughout Canada. After great deliberations, we decided on a few long term volunteers -- 30 years and over -- who had provided extra care to our clients both within the Meals on Wheels program and for the newer Family Respite Centre. However, not one volunteer wanted to be singled out. They felt like a team providing a large service to so many. We listened! Submitting a recommendation to nominate all 450 volunteers with VON Canada.

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