

1998 International Conference on Volunteer Administration

Earning Staff Commitment through Recognition: A Workshop Summary

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ABSTRACT

After years of running a large volunteer program that involves thousands of volunteers, I became aware that I would not be successful without the commitment of both staff and executives. Success came with a plan to enhance buy-in from the top down through staff recognition and appreciation. This article focuses on several methods of staff recognition we found to be successful. It summarizes a workshop I presented at the 1998 ICVA.

CREATING A WIN/WIN SITUATION

Obtaining commitment from staff to support volunteers may be one of the biggest challenges in running a successful volunteer program. This commitment and support is however, essential.

Ideally, staff commitment should flow, and flow freely, from observation of the many benefits volunteers offer. Individual staff members will find volunteers provide energetic, intelligent, enthusiastic assistance with any and all tasks assigned.

Yes, volunteers do perform valuable services and offer invaluable assistance, and if they don't, your volunteer program will not succeed—no matter what. However, when you realize that your agency's staff is most likely overworked and underappreciated, you will see the importance and value of giving staff appreciation and recognition for their support of volunteers. You will create a win/win situation and will focus everyone's attention on the value and importance of your volunteer program.

STAFF PERSON OF THE YEAR

Several years ago, our Volunteer Services Department decided to move beyond the typical "volunteer of the year" award to also begin presenting the "staff person of the year" award. In 1996, I thought that it would be wonderful to recognize staff for their part in running a successful volunteer program, and to highlight their positive involvement with volunteers. I remembered having heard Betty Stallings remind Volunteer Directors that volunteers are not "theirs," but are partners with the staff.

I wanted staff to understand the importance of their partnership with the volunteers who work in their programs and to praise staff members by naming both a Volunteer Of The Year and a Staff Member Of The Year. I discussed the idea with a volunteer who then developed a flyer to mail out to all our active volunteers, asking each one to cast a ballot for one special staff person who best provides supervision, training and support. I felt that these

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three skills epitomized what is needed for a good volunteer-staff partnership. We asked the volunteers to vote for someone who has made their volunteer experience both fulfilling to them and beneficial to the program. (See Appendix) We asked the volunteers to list their reasons and return the ballot to the Volunteer Services office about six weeks prior to the "Thank You Celebration." The name of the staff person chosen from each organization would be announced at that event.

I decided to have ballot boxes placed in the various agencies and departments, not just to give volunteers the opportunity to drop ballots off instead of mailing them back, but also to have the ballot boxes seen by volunteers, board leaders, executives and staff for at least a month, providing visibility and attention.

I then selected a committee of board volunteer leaders who would review the nominations and, based on the number of nominations and quality of reasons given, make the selection of "staff person of the year." The number of nominations a staff person received was not the deciding factor because many staff work with a small number of volunteers and other work with large teams, so the quality of supervision and partnership was very important.

VOLUNTEER/STAFF THANK YOU

We later sent thank-you notes to all the volunteers who nominated staff. Before the event, printed certificates were personalized for all executives to hand out to their staff who were nominated. With the certificates, a list of all nominees of all agencies was given to the Executive Director of each agency or department, so that they could see not only their own, but staff who were nominated in other agencies and departments. The executives personally giving out the certificates emphasized the importance of the honor. The executive also highlighted the staff person's accomplishments in his/her own department newsletter and board committee meetings. A glass trophy, engraved

with name and year, was given by the top executive or president of each agency.

Overall, choosing a staff member of the year provided a wonderful and cost-effective way to recognize staff, to have all levels buy in, to empower the volunteers and to publicly promote the efforts of the Volunteer Services Department.

ONGOING RECOGNITION

Equally important is an ongoing recognition program. Executives and supervisors should:

- Be kept informed of how well staff works with volunteers
- Consider, as part of written annual evaluation, the ability of staff to work with volunteers
- Honor, on a monthly basis, an individual staff person who best works with volunteers.
- Present a staff person with a gift, a certificate and an article about the staff person in the agency or company newsletter.

To highlight continuing recognition, "Quarterly Updates" should be sent to all executives and board committee members, keeping them informed of the success of the program and the role staff plays in that success.

Immediate and ongoing appreciation can come from a thank-you note to those staff members who best work with the Volunteer Services Department and with their volunteers. Copies of the notes should be sent to supervisors.

IN SUMMARY

When staff is recognized and rewarded for doing a good job and Volunteer Services has the commitment of executives and staff members, positive results are achieved and Volunteer Services receives well deserved respect and trust.