

The Opposite of Thank You

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We naturally spend a lot of time trying to thank volunteers - organizing formal recognition events and providing daily signs of appreciation. The problem is that our best intentions can be sabotaged when things happen that send the totally opposite message.

What do I mean? Consider a few, real-life examples:

- A new executive director announces a policy that volunteers will no longer be permitted to attend team meetings about clients with whom they work, ostensibly out of a concern for confidentiality - despite years of such meetings helping to focus client services.
- Volunteers (in assignments of authority) are not permitted access to an organization's intranet or are not given an official e-mail address under which to do assigned work.
- Volunteers are not included on the emergency contact list for key communication, whether notifying everyone of something important or even about closing the office due to a blizzard.
- When a new employee is hired to do something that volunteers have been doing without any notice or comment to the displaced volunteers.

These are examples of policies and organizational actions that make it clear volunteers are not integrated into the workforce. No matter how many times senior management praises volunteers as the "heart" of the organization, it's these sorts of exclusionary practices that tell the real story. And volunteers notice.

Insincere Thanks

The most important aspect of expressing appreciation to volunteers is *sincerity*. The minute something seems rote, impersonal, or even untrue, the effect is to undermine any intended recognition.

Again, a few real examples:

- I once was leaving a volunteer shift when the supervisor ran out to intercept me at the elevator. She pressed an unwrapped can of mixed nuts into my hand, saying breathlessly, "I forgot - we're supposed to give this to every volunteer this week to say thanks."
- The door to the closet where volunteers were supposed to leave their coats, purses, and briefcases ran off its rails and was not fixed for 4 whole months (producing snide remarks from frustrated volunteers about where they fit on the list of priorities).

- When every member of a committee or group receives exactly the same note of appreciation, even though they all know that at least 4 of them did almost nothing. (Try convincing those who burned out picking up the slack that they are really appreciated.)
- When someone who is both a money and a time donor receives all sorts of flowery testimonials about how the cash was used without even mentioning the value of the volunteering they contributed.
- When there is a formal (and separate) award system for those who *raise* money that is higher in status and cost than what is done to acknowledge the donation of time and skills in direct service.
- When the executive director mispronounces the names of volunteers when giving out certificates and/or is clearly reading a prepared speech of gratitude written by the volunteer resources manager.

As colleague John Lipp puts it in his book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Recruiting and Managing Volunteers* (Penguin, 2009), the goal should be "...a culture of appreciation in which everyone feels respected and valued for their contributions, with a deeper sense of connection to the organization and its mission." A ***culture of appreciation*** is not about *saying* thanks, but rather about *acting* appreciatively.

It's back to basics. For example, urge everyone to say hello (and goodbye) and ***smile***. Yes, that really matters! Get into the habit of finishing a complete sentence after the words "thank you," such as: "Thank you *for XYZ that you did today*." This conveys that you noticed what was done, not just repeating a polite but empty phrase.

Pay attention to whether volunteers feel appreciated daily in genuine ways. If you don't, you may be wasting a lot of money on recognition banquets that backfire in the long run.

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. (www.energizeinc.com), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the Tip of the Month for August 2014.