

Why Be Boring When You Can Celebrate in So Many Ways?

Susan J. Ellis

It has been five years since I outlined my concerns about traditional volunteer recognition events and, having just completed a new round of National Volunteer Week meals, I'm afraid it's time to do so again. I just re-read my earlier rant on this subject and am dismayed that I still agree with everything I said in June 2000. I invite you to read it now, too:

[Enough Formal Banquets! Let's Transform Recognition Events](#)

Does anyone actually *like* sit-down banquets? To me they are stultifying – dull speeches (even if I'm the speaker!), poor food, boring table talk. Ever wonder why attendance at these things is comparatively low? To add insult to injury, these meals are also expensive. More important, they miss the point.

One event I participated in last month distributed certificates by unit or assignment held. The problem was that the emcee used abbreviations for each unit – without explaining what the initials stood for nor what the work was. I was puzzled, but assumed that it I was the only outsider, until a brave volunteer raised her hand in the middle of the ceremony and asked: "Could someone please tell us what these other volunteers *do*?" Of course the leaders were embarrassed and quickly added some sentences to each presentation thereafter.

This is prime time programming, folks! It's your chance to enlighten, amaze, surprise, and educate everyone. Remember that only the volunteer program manager sees the full cumulative effect of volunteer involvement for the past year. Paid staff, volunteers, and administrators only see their small part of the larger picture. They ought to leave the recognition event with new understanding and pride.

So here are some more ideas to revolutionize recognition. Please add your own!

Money doesn't matter!

It is a red herring to complain that your organization has no money for recognition. Why? Because the cost of the event is never the point. You can (and many do) hold a pot luck meal in which volunteers happily contribute the food themselves. What's important is what happens when you get together. You want to allow volunteers to meet each other, recommit them for another year, but mainly *celebrate!* Create buzz, laughter, and passion.

Plan the event *with* volunteers, not just *for* them!

Ask volunteers to evaluate past recognition events honestly. Even more important, contact volunteers who did not attend the event and find out why. Then ask what they might like to do as a

celebration. (Note: Most volunteers will tell you they don't "need" recognition and don't want the organization to spend a lot of money on this. Well, the organization should say thank you once in a while. But try referring to this event as a "celebration of our efforts" and then ask volunteers of what they are most proud to have contributed.)

Allow volunteers to speak!

Where is it written that the way to thank people is to call out their names and hand them a certificate while they meekly and silently come forward to shake the hand of some dignitary they have not met before (while posing for a photo they never see)?

Why not let each unit prepare a presentation of their own about their work in the past year? You can ask them a month in advance to prepare a 5-minute report, skit, song and dance, whatever. Alternatively, use the first 30 minutes of the recognition event to allow volunteers, who do the same work but may not know each other, to share ideas on the spot and come up with "The 6 Best Things that Happened This Year" to present to everyone assembled.

Make volunteers feel *individually* appreciated, not just thanked as a corps!

Certificates of recognition that have nothing more than the organization's logo and volunteer's name may just as well be birdcage liners. If you must hand out certificates, at a minimum include the assignment the volunteer filled that year or the location of the work. Even better, add a sentence or two about what the person actually *did*: "Our thanks for how you always go above and beyond the call of duty to make sure our residents have a good time at the bingo game." "For scanning all our 2002 paper files into digital storage." "For your role in making sure your assigned child passed grade 4." (Sound like too much work? Ask staff who supervise the volunteers to give you these sentences and/or ask volunteers to recommend sentences about each other.)

Photographs clearly state "we saw you" (i.e., recognition). If you can't project slides showing as many volunteers as possible while giving out certificates, at least go to the trouble of providing shots of key award winners *doing their volunteer work*.

Don't worry about capturing every single volunteer's name if you have a large group. In fact, the real danger is that you'll leave someone out – the true opposite of recognition! Instead, act as if everyone there is worthy of thanks and ask them questions about themselves which they can answer by standing up. Some ideas are:

- Who fills more than one assignment here as a volunteer?
- Who has applied something they learned at orientation?
- Who has hunted more than 15 minutes for a parking spot?
- Who has met the Executive Director before tonight?
- Who is also working at a paying job?

- Who recruited a friend or relative to become a volunteer here?
- Who speaks more than one language?

This is like an instant “poll” and, once people rise several times, they feel quite included.

Use the time you have!

- Create a mix and mingle opening. Don’t rely on social graces to assume that volunteers will meet each other without your help. First, take a little extra time with nametags. Write first names large and boldly so they can be read. Include the assignment the volunteer holds, maybe the day of the week s/he works, the number of years (or months) s/he has been with the agency, and other identifying information. Do this for any paid staff or board volunteers who attend the event, too. You can get creative and ask everyone to answer one or two funny or unusual questions onto their nametags as discussion starters. (For a terrific resource about nametags, go to www.hellomynameisscott.com.)
- Have something interactive for early arrivals to *do*. Post newsprint sheets and have them write down their best memory of the year as a volunteer, or the funniest thing that happened during volunteering, or anything that makes them think back. Not only will more and more people arrive to add things to the sheets, but they’ll all enjoy reading everyone else’s comments. The next day, you can transfer these sheets to the hall outside your office and keep them up for about a week for others to enjoy. Be sure to transcribe them for future use.
- Project a self-running slide show with photos of the “year in review.” People love these and you’ll also have pictures to use later in recruitment and orientation.
- Designate a leader for each table in advance. These can be staff members, board members, or representative direct service volunteers. Prepare this group to make the event memorable for their table by paying attention to make sure everyone meets everyone else, by seeding the conversation with fun questions, etc. You can also run friendly competitions between courses by giving prizes to the table that comes up with the most things that start with the letter V that can be seen at your agency, the most organizational acronyms in daily use, etc.

Remember who the special guests are!

Don’t allow “dignitaries” to sit together at an honored front table, whether they are administrators, board members, or politicians. This is a *volunteer* recognition event – the most important people in the room are the *volunteers*. Either scatter these folks around the room to force them to interact with the volunteers casually, or place their table in the back, and explain why to everybody.

So...please rant with me about terrible recognition practices you’ve witnessed but also please share great ideas you’ve put into practice to truly celebrate volunteer accomplishments.

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