

# 10 Ways to *Really* Recognize Volunteers

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We all know that it's important to recognize volunteers, but recognition is much more than saying thank you annually. It has little to do with lunches, gifts, or certificates. It's an ongoing process that we need to practice in every interaction we have with our team members. As this special week gives us an opportunity to celebrate volunteers collectively, here are some ideas to consider year-round:

1. "Recognition" contains the root word "**cognition**" – really seeing and understanding something. One way to see something is to shine a light on it. That's a good way to think about public recognition: you're raising the visibility of what volunteers have done. So be sure you focus on *outcomes* and *impact*, not merely on activities or hours served. How did the volunteer service matter and to whom?
2. There is a world of difference between general, group recognition and a **personalized** thank you to an individual volunteer. In fact, when the applause is directed at everyone together, some people are included who may have done nothing at all! Equal praise expressed to all raises the suspicion that perhaps no one really knows who did what. By all means thank "all supporters" or "everyone who participated." But then go further and make each volunteer feel noticed as well as thanked.
3. Thank people **as soon as possible** after they did something and, whenever possible, as individuals. A blast e-mail with generic "you're all great" platitudes is not as effective as a message that starts with the volunteer's name and mentions *specific* things that person really did. A quick telephone call or a handwritten note that's postal mailed (remember that?) raises the sincerity of the appreciation, too.
4. Notice, remember, and comment on **extra effort**. So, although you may be thanking someone for chairing a committee, think how much greater the effect if you can also add, "and those muffins you baked for the emergency breakfast meeting were scrumptious!" Or, "you were such a fine math tutor this year and you went above-and-beyond when you took your student to the mall to show math in action."
5. It may not be obvious, but **good instructions** as a volunteer begins a task also show that you care. Take the time to do a mental "walking through" of what someone is likely to experience at a special event or on his or her first day of volunteering. Anticipate both the obvious and a few unexpected questions and provide the answers, proving that you want to make the volunteer feel supported and be successful. For example: the best place to park your car or leave personal belongings where they will be safe; whether coffee will be available and its cost (or if it's free); what to do with the checklists when they're completed; a list of key people who can answer different sorts of on-the-spot questions – and where or how to contact them.

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6. **Welcome newcomers**, especially on their *second* day of service. First, remember that they are scheduled to be there (VolunteerSpot will help with that!) and greet them with a smile. Introduce them around and make sure they can get busy quickly. Before they go home, ask them how their shift went and say thank you. Now most leaders do this naturally on a newcomer's first day. And then the attention stops! It's the second day on which the new volunteer feels comfortable enough to ask more questions or focuses on remembering the names of team members. Make sure someone is still there to be helpful.
7. Another very important form of recognition to all volunteers who are doing wonderful work is to **deal with those volunteers who are not doing a good job**. If you permit a few people to break the rules, act undependably, be unpleasant – whatever the negative behavior is – without consequence, you send the message that doing things right doesn't really matter. Or that those trying their hardest are a bit foolish, since top performance is not necessarily expected. Furthermore, by not taking steps to improve the work or behavior of problem volunteers, you are also being unfair to *them*. What shows greater respect: acting as if the person has the ability to do better or assuming their poor performance is the best they can do? So it's recognition to hold high standards.
8. Develop ways for volunteers to give their **input** into the design of the work they do. Not everyone wants to be a planner, but everyone benefits when those who have good ideas can contribute them. Make it clear how decisions are reached and when in the process it's possible for someone to participate. Don't make newcomers feel they have to work their way up from 17<sup>th</sup> Vice President before their opinions will carry any weight!
9. A corollary of welcoming input is seeking **feedback** – and then doing something about what you learn. If you have no intention of changing your procedures if volunteers report problems, then don't ask anyone to evaluate or comment in the first place. Ask intentional questions that will draw out suggestions, not just feelings. "The entertainment was: \_\_great \_\_ok \_\_awful" does not tell you anywhere near as much as "What did you think was the best part of the entertainment and why?" Note that it is recognition to ask volunteers' opinions (again, only if someone pays attention to what they tell you).
10. The most powerful way to show appreciation is to **act on a volunteer's idea** and give her or him credit for it. But not every suggestion can be put into action, nor do people expect that. But you can make it clear that the idea was seriously considered and give an explanation for why the decision was no. The recognition comes from feeling appreciated for trying to strengthen the entire effort.