

HandsOn Network: Volunteer Recognition

The Nine Basic Rules for Volunteer Recognition

Consider these 9 rules for volunteer recognition when planning a recognition effort:

- 1. Recognize . . . or else** — The need for recognition is very important to most people. If volunteers do not get recognition for productive participation, it is likely that they will feel unappreciated and may stop volunteering with your program.
- 2. Give it frequently** — Recognition has a short shelf life. Its effects start to wear off after a few days, and after several weeks of not hearing anything positive, volunteers start to wonder if they are appreciated. Giving recognition once a year at a recognition banquet is not enough.
- 3. Give it via a variety of methods** — One of the implications of the previous rule is that you need a variety of methods of showing appreciation to volunteers.
- 4. Give it honestly** — Don't give praise unless you mean it. If you praise substandard performance, the praise you give to others for good work will not be valued. If a volunteer is performing poorly, you might be able to give him honest recognition for his effort or for some personality trait.
- 5. Recognize the person, not just the work** — This is a subtle but important distinction. If volunteers organize a fund-raising event, for example, and you praise the event without mentioning who organized it, the volunteers may feel some resentment. Make sure you connect the volunteer's name to it.
- 6. Give it appropriately to the achievement** — Small accomplishments should be praised with low-effort methods, large accomplishments should get something more. For example, if a volunteer tutor teaches a child to spell "cat" today we could say "Well done!" If she writes a grant that doubles our funding, a banner lauding her accomplishment might be more appropriate.
- 7. Give it consistently** — If two volunteers are responsible for similar achievements, they ought to get similar recognition. If one gets her picture in the lobby and another gets an approving nod, the latter may feel resentment. This does not mean that the recognition has to be exactly the same but that it should be the result of similar effort on your part.
- 8. Give it on a timely basis** — Praise for work should come as soon as possible after the achievement. Don't save up your recognition for the annual banquet. If a volunteer has to wait months before hearing any word of praise, she may develop resentment for lack of praise in the meantime.
- 9. Give it in an individualized fashion** — Different people like different things. One might respond favorably to football tickets, while another might find them useless. Some like public recognition; others find it embarrassing. In order to provide effective recognition, you need to get to know your volunteers and what they will respond to positively.