



Engaging Volunteers through ISOTURES: Recognition of Volunteer Success¹

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The longer a volunteer is involved in the 4-H program, the more likely they are to notice when the elements of good volunteer management are not in place."

Overview

Volunteer recognition is not an activity, rather a systematic process with the goal of acknowledging the contributions of all volunteers in the 4-H program. The key words are contributions and all. Recognition is no different than any other initiative. It takes planning, implementation and evaluation.

In the Volunteer Life Cycle, recognition is a key process in the volunteer management and retention strategies that lead to a committed volunteer (Bussell & Forbes, 2003). As a volunteer administrator the 4-H Agent facilitates the recognition strategy for the county 4-H program through communication. McCurly & Lynch (2006) illustrated this role using the Triangle (Figure 1).

This section addresses the following questions:

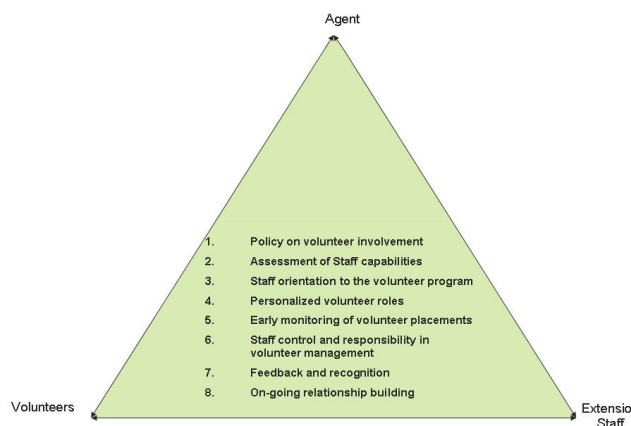


Figure 1. Dynamics of effective volunteer program management

Why is recognition and behavior related?

What is a recognition system?

What is informal recognition?

What is formal recognition?

Do I need both informal and formal recognition for volunteers?

Are there any rules that would guide recognition strategies?

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Human Behavior and Recognition

Not only will understanding the motivations of volunteers provide insight into why volunteers do what they do, motivation provides information for developing a system of volunteer recognition. Keep in mind that one of the goals is to keep volunteers committed to the county 4-H program. Recognition is just one of the strategies used to attain this goal.

Human behavior research would suggest that motivation is the drive that energizes, sustains, and directs a person's behavior (Phillips, Little & Goodine, 2002). Although there are numerous theories related to motivation, it is not the goal of this factsheet to teach motivational theory. What is important to know is that individual motivation drives a volunteer to the 4-H program and recognition is about identifying that motivation and systematically reinforcing that motivator. It sounds easy, but one size does not fit all. For more information on motivation, see the resources section for theories on motivation at the end of this publication.

Volunteer Recognition Systems

A system is defined as a group of independent but interrelated elements comprising a unified whole. A volunteer recognition system then is a group of activities designed to reinforce the motivator that energizes and sustains volunteer involvement. Generally, the group of activities includes informal and formal recognition. In establishing a volunteer recognition system, consider the following objectives:

- Volunteer recognition honors 4-H volunteers for achievement
- Upon receiving recognition, volunteers feel appreciated
- Volunteers don't feel financial resources were wasted on a formal reception rather than spent on youth initiatives
- Recognition is viewed as celebration of 4-H accomplishments

Informal Recognition

Informal recognition is the day-to-day interchange between the volunteer and the 4-H program through the 4-H Agent and other paid staff; expressing sincere appreciation and thanks for the role being performed by volunteers. Informal recognition is the most powerful form of recognition because it occurs more frequently than formal recognition programs. Informal recognition may include:

- Saying "thank you"
- Involving volunteers in decisions that affect them
- Asking about a volunteer's family and showing interest outside the 4-H program
- Making sure volunteers receive equal treatment to that given paid staff
- Sending a note of appreciation
- Paying for a volunteer to increase skills by attending a conference or training
- Recommending a volunteer for promotion to a more responsible role
- Celebrating the volunteer's anniversary with the 4-H program

The intention of day-to-day recognition is to promote a constant sense of appreciation and belonging to the volunteer. This can be better conveyed by thousands of small interactions that occur daily than can be conveyed in an annual event.

Recognition should begin early. Send a welcome card to a new volunteer, or have a small welcoming party. This conveys an immediate appreciation.

Formal Recognition

Formal recognition programs are comprised of the awards, certificates, plaques, pins and recognition dinners or receptions to honor volunteer achievement. Formal recognition programs are helpful mainly in satisfying the needs of the volunteer who has a need

for community approval. Formal recognition generally has little impact on volunteers whose primary focus is helping youth.

Recognition Rules

Here are a few rules provided by McCurley and Lynch (2006) related to recognition.

1. *Give it or else!* The need for recognition is very important to most people. If volunteers in the county 4-H program don't get recognized for their achievement, only bad outcomes can occur. The least of these is that the volunteer will feel unappreciated and abandon the 4-H program. Alternatively, volunteers may start getting recognition from their peers (in the form of attention, laughter, camaraderie) for snide remarks and other more serious disruptive behavior.

2. *Give it frequently.* The most common complaint of volunteers is that they don't get enough recognition from staff. Organizations are surprised to hear this and can often cite examples of when recognition was provided. The reason for this discrepancy is that recognition has a short shelf life. Recognition effects start to wear off after a few days and after several weeks of not hearing anything, volunteers will occasionally start to wonder if they are appreciated. An annual recognition ceremony will not suffice.

3. *Give it in a variety of methods.* One of the implications of the previous rule is that a recognition system needs to provide a variety of methods of showing appreciation for to volunteers. Recognition can be categorized into four major types:

- a) *From 4-H Youth receiving services.* Volunteers want to be recognized by 4-H youth that benefit from 4-H.
- b) *From 4-H and county office staff for being a part of the Extension organization.* This is recognition of being part of Extension and 4-H and not about performance. An example is when a birthday is acknowledged. Happy birthday is not about performance, it is about recognizing a person is valued by the organization.
- c) *From 4-H and the county extension office for services provided.* An example is being recognized as "Volunteer of the Month".

d) *From 4-H for being part of the team.* This is recognition for long-term service for contributing to the 4-H program. It could be a plaque or it could be recognition through the 4-H newsletter telling interesting personal facts about the volunteer, but is not written about a performance.

4. *Give it honestly.* Don't give praise if it is not meant. When substandard performance is praised, the praise given to others for good work will not be valued.

5. *Give it to the person not the work.* This is subtle, but important. For example, when praise is given for an event without recognizing the volunteers that organized the event, resentment may result.

6. *Give it appropriately to the achievement.* Small accomplishments should be praised with low-effort methods; large accomplishments should get something more.

7. *Give it consistently.* If two volunteers are responsible for similar accomplishments, provide similar recognition.

8. *Give it on a timely basis.* Praise for accomplishments should come as soon as possible after the achievement. Don't save recognition for only an annual banquet.

9. *Give it in an individualized fashion.* Different people like different things. One might respond favorably to a restaurant gift certificate, another might find that useless. Some like public recognition and others don't. Get to know the volunteers and apply this rule.

10. *Give it to encourage more participation.* Too frequently, 4-H staff pays the most attention to volunteers who are having difficulty. Unfortunately, this may result in ignoring good performers. This does not suggest that sub-par performance be ignored, just that superior performance be recognized more. Particularly when more volunteers are needed for a particular initiative.

Conclusion

Volunteer recognition is an important function of successful volunteer programs. Recognition is not an activity, rather a systematic process with the goal of acknowledging the contributions of all volunteers

in the 4-H program. Keep volunteers committed by providing frequent recognition. Motivation is the drive that energizes, sustains, and directs a person's behavior; recognition is just one of the strategies used to identify this motivator. To be successful, include informal and formal recognition as part of the county recognition system. Finally, incorporate the ten rules of recognition to ensure a successful strategy.

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Resources

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