

# Recognizing Volunteers: Considerations for Volunteer Organizations and Coordinators<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Volunteers are instrumental in the success of many community organizations and “represent one of the critical competitive advantages of the nonprofit sector” (Rehnborg & Moore, 2012, p. 103). Volunteers want to feel that their work means something, especially since they are donating their time and efforts to a cause they are passionate about. Volunteer recognition and reward has a significant effect on the willingness of a volunteer to continue volunteering (Kang et al., 2005), and organizations should select methods of recognition that align with their volunteers’ motivational factors (Lynch & McCurley, 1998). Volunteer coordinators and managers can implement appropriate recognition strategies to meet the motivational needs of their organization’s volunteers.

## The Role of Recognition in the Volunteer Organization

Many volunteer organizations utilize the ISOTURE model (i.e., Identification, Selection, Orientation, Training, Utilization, Recognition, and Evaluation) to manage volunteers (Boyce, 1971). This model uses a step-by-step process that begins with identifying new volunteers and ends with evaluating the work they have done. As defined in the

ISOTURE model, recognition is “the process of recognizing and rewarding volunteers for their contribution and performance. This includes ongoing recognition through formal and non-formal methods” (Boyce, 1971, p. 4).

Recognition is a powerful tool to support the motivations of the individuals who are donating their time, talents, and/or money for an organization. There are formal and informal ways of recognition for volunteers, but there is a particularly high value placed on formal recognition (Lynch & McCurley, 1998). Recognition can take many forms, from a simple and sincere “thank you” to a public award ceremony (McKee & McKee, 2012). Specific recognition practices vary widely amongst volunteer organizations. Volunteer coordinators and managers should consider how they can incorporate ongoing and variable forms of recognition to ensure their volunteers are motivated and appreciated (McKee & McKee, 2012).

## Recognition Strategies

Connors (2012) suggests several specific approaches to volunteer recognition which address a range of motivational needs of volunteers and activities that organizations can participate in, but this is not an exhaustive list. Brun and Dugas (2008) suggest the four primary types of volunteer

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recognition are: personal recognition (e.g., ceremonies, personalized letters, involvement in decision-making processes); recognition of results (e.g., gifts for meeting a milestone, merit-based raises, certificates); recognition of work practice (e.g., assignment to special projects, acknowledgment of contributions at team meetings); and recognition of job dedication (e.g., encouragement from peers, recognizing effort and time) (Benge, 2021).

Specific recognition strategies should be tailored for different volunteer motivation needs. Volunteers are motivated by six primary reasons: purpose, esteem, career, power, achievement, and affiliation. Volunteer coordinators and managers can implement recognition strategies that are guided by these motivators.

## Purpose

Values-motivated volunteers have a need to express their values, such as helping others and humanitarianism (Clary & Snyder, 1999). These individuals may be guided by the purpose and mission of the organization (Caligiuri et al., 2013, as cited in Lough, 2017). These individuals would probably prefer to receive recognition for the work that they contributed to the organization's cause. Possible forms of recognition could include volunteer highlights in the organization's newsletters and social media, drawing attention to the impact they made (Dillard, 2024). They may want to be invited to an awards banquet where individuals who received services from the organization are speaking and thanking them for the impact the organization had on their lives (Phillips & Phillips, 2010).

## Esteem

Volunteers with enhancement or protective motivations are seeking to either increase positive feelings or decrease negative feelings about themselves (Clary & Snyder, 1999). A volunteer's self-esteem is increased if they feel needed and important (Cláudia Nave & do Paço, 2013, as cited in Ashfaq et al., 2017). These individuals would benefit from personal recognition for their accomplishments (Dillard, 2024). Possible forms of recognition could include personalized or handwritten thank-you letters, or a thank-you call from a senior leader in the organization, much the same way donor thank-a-thons are conducted (Ensor, 2023). These individuals would most likely appreciate individualized or unique awards, such as being the volunteer of the month and parking in the volunteer of the month parking spot, much the same way employees are rewarded.

## Career

Career- and understanding-oriented individuals are seeking to learn new skills to advance their careers or to "exercise skills that are not often used" (Clary & Snyder, 1999). These individuals would probably prefer recognition by being selected to participate in a training program, or representing the organization at a professional forum (Dillard, 2024). These individuals could be eligible for letters of recommendation from a senior leader in the organization, or they could receive a relevant book, much the same way students may receive a book award for the highest grade in a class. The topic of the book could reflect their achievements such as leadership or management.

## Power

Volunteers who are motivated by power may be best recognized through expanding their opportunities to include leadership positions and soliciting their input in decision making. Volunteer leadership positions may help an organization fulfill its mission by guiding volunteer efforts and assisting volunteer managers or coordinators (Culp, 2013). This may be particularly applicable in larger organizations that need assistance with capacity and logistics. Rather than just anyone filling the position (McKee & McKee, 2012, p. 52), volunteer leaders should be committed and experienced. Selecting volunteers for leadership positions may also carry "motivational benefits for volunteers interested in expanding their personal and leadership skills" (Connors, 2012, p. 72).

## Achievement

Volunteers who are motivated by achievements usually have a high work ethic and a drive to meet organizational goals (Anderson & Cairncross, 2005). Achievers want to perform to the highest standards possible and will take responsibility for organizational successes or failures. They want to complete their tasks as quickly and efficiently as possible (Connors, 2012) and wish to be recognized by receiving awards, certificates, and public acknowledgment. Other examples of achievement recognition include the volunteer of the year award, volunteer of the month social media posts, and recognition of service at annual award banquets.

## Affiliation

Volunteers who are motivated by affiliation usually have a strong desire for social contact (Hill, 1987). Hill (1987) describes affiliation as the tendency to receive gratification from harmonious relationships and from a sense of communion. Volunteers motivated by affiliation have a high

need for belonging; thus, good interpersonal relationships would act as a reward (Connors, 2012). The best recognition for volunteers motivated by affiliation would be social events, such as a group lunch celebration after a completed project, and in-person trainings. These volunteers thrive off group settings and in-person connections.

## Conclusion

Volunteers represent a critical population who contribute to nonprofits' capacity to achieve missions and goals. Volunteers hold various motivations that enable them to pursue their important work. All volunteers need forms of recognition based on their unique motivations. These motivations are not mutually exclusive; therefore, embracing a variety of recognition strategies is appropriate. Conversely, volunteer coordinators may also consider speaking with their volunteers on their preferred recognition styles.

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