

What's Wrong with "Thank You" ? PLENTY

Thanking your volunteers may do more harm than good.

BY NICK LEVINSON

It seems so obvious. Volunteers are important to your organization, and you don't pay them a salary, so you should lavish them with thank-you's, right?

Maybe not.

When volunteers are congratulated for doing what an eight-year-old can do easily, they often feel insulted. If the thank-you is vacuous, they get the message that the work was pointless, a waste of effort, and they won't bother to return.

Superfluous, commonplace, trite mouthings are costing us our volunteers.

We need to change that.

To do so, let's look to the paid model for solutions. Here, 13 new ways to think about and treat your volunteers.

1 Realize the value of service.

Don't think of them as "just volunteers." Volunteer service has dollar value. That value is huge.¹

The usual mistake is to value work by how much you pay for it. Wrong: The value is in the replacement cost.

Think of your total productivity, not just what you do with your two hands. The Amish build a barn in one day by using a thousand hands. It's a very solid barn.

2 Reward in proportion to value.

If diligent volunteers are given the same thanks as lazy ones, then hard work is equal to no work at all. If everyone's going to receive the same reward no

matter what, one may as well snooze in the corner.

You rank monetary donors and thank them accordingly. You'll do well to do the same with service givers.

Intelligent response is the key. Instead of a blanket thank-you, give each volunteer a personalized message. Provide specific invitations to lead a project, organize a team, or create a new system. Ask for a level of performance that fits the volunteer's capabilities and the organization's urgency.

Avoid empty praise. After all, you don't thank your paid workers just for showing up or completing a small task.

3 Bring out the best.

Don't limit workers just because they're volunteers. Spend time getting to know them so that you understand what motivates them, what they love to do, and what kinds of rewards will bring them back. Treat them as individuals, and look for each person's special qualities. Help them put their talents to full use, and then respond in a way that's comparable to the job they do. The acknowledgment volunteers want is the kind that shows how unique their particular gifts have been to your efforts.

4 Recognize that paid workers oppose volunteers on principle.

Your paid staff members feel personally responsible for meeting your needs and, in return, don't want their paychecks

threatened. If you ask them to use volunteers, they'll try to talk you out of the idea. If they can't convince you en masse, they'll do it one by one, ultimately against all volunteers.

You must override their resistance. There are many strategies to that end.

One is to assign the staff so much work that they can't do it unless they use volunteers. Don't just give them busy-work, such as packing a mailing. Assign the full range of what needs to be done.

Give your staff some slack to absorb volunteers. They'll need to spend time supervising and learning how. But it's a worthy investment for you, and it may enhance their careers, too.

5 Communicate with volunteers as you do with monetary donors.

Nonprofit leaders are always happy to listen to a \$500 donor. But they may not pay the same attention to a five-hour-a-week volunteer.

That's a big mistake. At just minimum wage, that volunteer is giving you a gift of \$1,339 a year. A chat with a donor may induce a repeat gift of \$500. Talking with a volunteer may uncover a skill that increases that person's value to \$10 an hour. That's a gift of another \$1,261.

6 Provide support as you would with paid staff.

Nonprofit managers show an appalling shortsightedness when it comes to giving volunteers the support they

need. Giving less support and expecting less work won't accomplish your mission.

When you consider the value of their work, you would do well to indulge your volunteers with the best support possible. Give them what you want for yourself to do the same work. Don't treat them like second-class workers.

Psychiatrists sometimes diagnose "self-defeating personality disorder." Cure yourself and save the fee.

7 Don't glorify one volunteer above the rest.

Say you spotlight the Volunteer of the Decamillennium, award a gold hat, and rave to everyone about this superb specimen of volunteerism. You expect your other volunteers to be inspired by this wonderful example.

Don't hold your breath. It's more likely that the other volunteers will cut down the star. Instead of being motivated, they will tend to be demoralized. Why? Because they're working hard, too, and feel they deserve recognition for what they do.

8 Narrow the status gap.

It's typical for paid folks to want superior status over the unpaid. It's up to you to curtail that tendency. Stop thinking of volunteers as different from the rest of your staff. Ask volunteers as well as paid workers to attend staff meetings, brainstorming sessions, retreats, and all other employee events. Treat your volunteers as you do your paid workers, and minimize any status differential between the two groups.

9 Create leadership positions for volunteers who earn them.

Select titles and jobs that fit your organization's needs. Be explicit, and work out an honest agreement that serves you both. Live up to your side of the deal. Then hold your volunteers to their commitments.

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10 As paying positions open up, invite volunteers.

When a salaried position becomes available, don't forget to consider volunteers. Look at their qualifications the same way you look at nonvolunteers' qualifications. Be a model to staff; then expect staff to find volunteers who'll fulfill more commitments.

11 Don't reserve real sweat for paid positions.

Don't hold work back from volunteers because you're not paying them. The right volunteers can do anything paid staff can do. They can manage other volunteers. They can even manage paid staff. What matters is what you need and what abilities volunteers bring to the table.

You can hold volunteers to performance standards, and you should. You can even reassign or fire them when you need to, at your discretion.

12 Don't limit yourself to paid professionals.

Sooner or later, all nonprofit organizations need the services of professionals—photographers, carpenters, lawyers, accountants, technologists, graphic artists, writers, and so on. Don't assume that paid professionals are the only ones who count. You may be able to find a volunteer who can perform the same services just as well, or better. That person may even be someone who already volunteers for you in another capacity.

13 Forget the thank-you.

The best way to show volunteers how much you value them isn't with meaningless words or plaques or certificates. The best reward is to take full advantage of what they have to offer. Encourage them to develop their talents, knowledge, and judgment. Help them learn and grow. Give them real, purposeful, important jobs to do, and acknowledge that work appropriately.

A survey in 1998 made the point: "[W]hile recognition is very important to retain volunteers, expectations of 'thank you's' are not what motivate people to serve as volunteers."²

Volunteers are already motivated. They want to work and to deliver. That's why they showed up. ■

Footnotes

¹ See Dalsimer in "Editor's Resources."

² "Managing Volunteers," a national telephone survey conducted by United Parcel Service.

Editor's Resources

Dalsimer, John Paul, "Financial Records and the Value of Volunteers," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 4, No. 3.

Ellis, Susan, "How to Create a Staff-Volunteer Team," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 4.

Ellis, Susan, *Volunteer Management Videotape*.

Levinson, Nick, "The Withering Volunteers: Bring Them Back Alive," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 5.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Volunteer Management, Leadership Series*.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, 734-451-3582, www.snpo.org.

Nick Levinson (P.O. Box 8386, New York, N.Y. 10150), a recent long-term volunteer, is now doing independent service toward similar larger goals. His invitation to you: If you think volunteers are worth what they're paid, e-mail him and make your case (c/o muehrcke@core.com). Be anonymous, if you like.