

Volunteer Motivation, Recognition and Retention

In order for a volunteer to have a positive experience or feel fulfilled, it is important for a volunteer manager to understand the needs that individuals attempt to satisfy through work.

Some of the top reasons identified by volunteers are a personal belief in a cause and a desire to help others. In order to get volunteers to say “yes”, you need to know what motivates them to volunteer.

Studies have found that people volunteer because:

- they believe in the organization,
- they want to help others,
- they want to achieve personal satisfaction, and
- they are willing to share expertise and skills with others, seek prestige and status or want new experiences.

Providing an environment of positive motivation and appropriate, ongoing recognition of UNHCE volunteers, is key to recruiting and retaining dedicated and skilled volunteers.

Types of Volunteer Motivation

Harvard professors David McClelland, John Atkinson et al in their landmark research¹ classified volunteer motivators into three main types: achievement, affiliation and power-oriented. Every individual demonstrates aspects of all three motivators but only one dominates in each person. Generally, individuals try to satisfy the need that is strongest in a particular situation. For example, someone may have a passion for a cause and feel a need to belong and affiliate with others who share the same beliefs. However, when involved in a political campaign, they may have a stronger need to make something happen or bring about change.

It is important for volunteer managers to understand these three types of motivation and their association to recognition. In their book Essential Volunteer Management, Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch say “when we talk about motivating volunteers... we are talking about ...creating a volunteer experience which allows an individual to meet his or her motivational needs in ways that are productive for the organization and satisfying for the individual.”²

It is important to realize that a volunteer’s needs may change over time and their motivators may be a combination of types and change over time as well.

The art of motivating volunteers lies not only in knowing how to tap a given motivator, but in being able to figure out what combination of needs a particular volunteer has.

The following are the three types of motivators according to McClelland & Atkinson:

¹ David C. McClelland, John W. Atkinson, Russell A. Clark, Edgar L. Lowell, The Achievement Motive, Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York, 1953.

² Steve McCurley and Rick Lynch, Essential Volunteer Management, The Volunteer Management Series, VMSystems and Heritage Arts Publishing, Downers Grove, IL, 1989, p. 108.

Achievement – Volunteers motivated by achievement welcome challenges and are result-oriented, risk takers and innovative. They often prefer working alone, like well-delegated tasks, concrete feedback and a hands-off management style.

Affiliation – Volunteers motivated by affiliation measure success based on relationships, such as working with a wide variety of people. They support others in achieving goals, and are sensitive to the feelings and needs of others. In contrast to achievement motivated individuals, they may not focus on the goals, but rather sacrifice goals/timelines to the relationships they are developing, trying to keep everyone happy. Affiliators tend to seek/need approval and often take criticism poorly.

Power – Volunteers motivated by power thrive on the opportunity to make a difference in others' lives. They like to use their influence and skills to bring about change. They are opinion shapers, and articulate and charismatic leaders. Sometimes power is viewed negatively, but in this case of power motivation, it is the use of personal power for the benefit of all.³

Recognition is the acknowledgement and affirmation of the personal growth of an individual or a group.

Each motivation style requires a different recognition plan. If people are rewarded in a way that is significant or relevant to them then the recognition process is most effective. Volunteer managers need to make every effort to use personalized recognition to build an ongoing relationship with each volunteer. Here is a no-one-size-fits-all approach to recognition.

A volunteer recognition program should consider two basic types of recognition: intrinsic (within the individual) and extrinsic (provided by others). Intrinsic recognition is less tangible and may include such things as pride of accomplishment, self satisfaction and personal belief in one's accomplishments. Extrinsic recognition includes tangible outward forms of recognition such as pins, certificates, and trophies, etc. Both formal and informal methods of recognizing volunteers can be effective. Recognition may be public or private.

Rules of Recognition

Recognition should:

- Be timely (immediate, periodic and accumulative)
- Be meaningful
- Be both public and private
- Be consistent and sincere
- Recognize the work and praise the person
- Have a clear purpose and criteria that are reachable by all participants

Also it:

- May include leadership development opportunities (trips, workshops etc.)
- Can be both formal and informal.

³ See also work published by Steve McCurley and Sue Vineyard such as 101 More Ideas for Volunteer Programs, VMSystems and Heritage Arts Publishing, Downers Grove, IL, 1995.

Recognition is closely associated with motivation. If people are rewarded in ways that are significant to them, then the recognition process is most effective. Volunteer recognition practices should be based on the personal motivation needs of each volunteer. Volunteer managers may need to experiment to see which combinations are most effective on a case by case basis. The important thing is that recognition be given on an ongoing basis and be integrated into the overall experience of each volunteer. Recognition should take into consideration the three motivation styles:

Achievement – Goal attainment and measurable results motivate achievers. They like tangible awards that detail their involvement with a project. They value documented recognition like letters that can be used in personnel files.

Affiliation – Individuals motivated by affiliation measure success based on relationships. They like thank-you notes, small gifts, social get-togethers, name badges, team projects, special event T-shirts, etc.

Power – These individuals are motivated by the opportunity to make a difference in others' lives. They like public recognition, praise for their work in front of others, reference letters, leadership roles, the opportunity to be listened to and see their ideas put into action.

A comprehensive recognition program model is based on participation, progress toward goals, achieving standards of excellence, and peer competition and cooperation.

For some volunteers, participation may be a first step in encouraging them to continue to set new and higher goals.

Integrating recognition as part of the volunteer development and management process helps volunteers feel rewarded, valued and positive about the entire volunteer experience. Meaningful recognition leads to greater volunteer satisfaction which in turn leads to increased volunteer retention and tenure.

For more suggestions on how to recognize volunteers, see the following excerpt from Michigan State's Achieving Success through Volunteers":

http://extension.unh.edu/resources/files/Resource001202_Rep1539.pdf. Also there are some ideas in the following 4-H Youth Development document:
<http://extension.unh.edu/4H/Docs/4HAfSchl/VolRecKJ.pdf>.