

Recognition of 4-H Volunteers

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We all want to think we're doing a good job and have a positive effect on the organization which we serve. In this context, recognition means more than being thanked. It means being acknowledged that we are an important part of the work being done, and the organization respects us for who we are and what we contribute. If volunteers are recognized in meaningful, relevant ways, they feel needed and appreciated for the time and effort they are giving to the organization. If they feel needed and appreciated, they will continue to be involved.

Recognition does not have to be a big event with lots of media attention. According to a 1998 survey of 4-H volunteers, and subsequent informal interviews and observations, it's actually the "little things" that mean the most. The number one form of recognition for a 4-H volunteer? A thank you note from a 4-H'er. It's that simple, heartfelt touch from the ones they work with the closest – the reason they give their time to the organization. Plaques, certificates and pins were the lowest ranking form of recognition. A thank you from the parent, recognition at the county and club level, and a thank you from the Agent meant much more than a state recognition banquet.

Recognition is generally associated within three categories of motivation – achievement, affiliation, and power. Achievement oriented individuals are generally said to be task oriented, and will stay with an assignment through its completion. They see problems as challenges and prefer specific parameters to evaluate success. Affiliation motivated people need personal interaction. They seek opportunities to socialize, need to be liked and listened to, and enjoy working on group projects. Power motivated individuals need to influence others. They work alone or in groups, enjoy teaching others, pay attention to organizational goals, respond to authoritative titles, and are persuasive. In the 1998 study, the volunteers were motivated by an affiliation with 4-H youth and volunteers rather than by achievement or power.

There are many suggested lists for appropriately recognizing individuals within the parameters of these categories, but there are simple methods of recognition that reach across all three categories. So, how do we provide meaningful recognition for our volunteers? You may consider reasonable things that would mean a lot based on their primary motivation. For example, if they are power motivated, respond to their need to influence by giving them a job title, jobs that allow them to interact with people in authority, or to teach others. Recognize them in the newspaper or in another community organization meeting/newsletter (e.g. Rotary, Ruritans) of which they are a member. Beyond categorizing each volunteer in your program and tailoring specific recognition for him or her, there are basic forms of recognition that will make all individuals feel appreciated no matter what motivates them.

4-H volunteers want to be recognized and respected as individuals who work alongside youth, fellow adult volunteers and paid staff.

Simple things will go far in making someone feel needed, respected and appreciated, no matter what motivation category they may fall in:

- A thank you note.
- Cards or phone calls for personal events in their lives (birthday, anniversary, promotion, graduation, etc.)
- A smile, a verbal "thank you," regular contact via phone or email.
- Keep them informed of things in their project area, or of things in which you know they have an interest.

- Make them welcome when they call or stop in the office.
- Make it easy to get information they need.
- Have simple treats at meetings; make the meeting atmosphere pleasant and upbeat.
- Ask for their input/ideas/suggestions. Provide time to be with other volunteers and share ideas, problem-solve, and talk about what they're doing in 4-H. Invite other paid staff to get to know the volunteers and vice versa.
- They may be ready for a "promotion" – ask them to serve in a leadership capacity (for a class at camp or county event, make contacts with people in the community, etc.)
- Ask them to help with an event, activity or promotional piece, and invite them to involve the family. Ask them to serve as chaperones, judges, photographers, etc.
- Invite them to lunch.
- Ask them to invite their friends to be involved in 4-H.
- Give them an opportunity to upgrade their skills through volunteer training, community education course, a community college seminar or class. Let them know they are important enough to expend some resources on, and you will get a more highly skilled volunteer as well.
- Be patient. Take time to explain.
- Let them know you've missed them.
- Send a letter to the volunteer's employer, noting the impact and contribution made (may want to check with the volunteer first). Send a letter thanking the employer for sharing the person's time and talents with 4-H (if the employer provides time for the person to volunteer). Recognize the employer with the volunteer publicly (if the employer provides time for the person to volunteer, or allows them to utilize company resources to serve).
- Provide them with calendars (indicating 4-H events, of course...).
- Let them know how their work is directly helping the organization – you might spotlight individual or team contributions via media, newsletter, or informal communication.

Volunteer recognition does not need to cost a lot. It's more of a state of mind, realizing that everyone makes a contribution. Accept individuals for who they are and effectively match their talents and interests with the appropriate position in 4-H. By honoring your volunteers, you will attract new volunteers and keep the current ones coming back. Make them feel an integral part of the organization, because they are.

Resources:

Culp, Ken, and Schwartz, Vicki J., *Journal of Extension*, Volume 35, Number 2, April 1998, "Recognizing Adult Volunteer 4-H Leaders."
 Tedford, James D., *Volunteer Management Review*, June 19, 2002, "Forget the Trinkets or Parties—How to Really Recognize Us."

Additional Resources for Recognition Ideas:

Vineyard, Sue. *Beyond Banquets, Plaques, and Pins*, 1981.
 Adkins, Peggy, et al. *TAXI (Taking Anybody Into Expanded Involvement)*, National 4-H Council.

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