

117 Ways to Recognize Volunteers

By Bob Nelson, Ph.D.

“Thank once, thank twice, thank them once again.”

—Glenda Berry, Sr. Director, National Chapters
Alzheimer’s Association

In my experience, volunteers represent the most unappreciated category of workers in America—and the #1 reported reason why volunteers STOP volunteering is “they don’t feel appreciated or needed.” We already know volunteers aren’t working for financial consideration—one of the main differences from other employees in the rest of the workforce—yet it often seems the more they volunteer, the more their commitment, time and efforts are taken for granted by those they most intended to serve and support.

My research indicates that the best, most meaningful forms of recognition, appreciation and thanks are those that are done in response to desired behavior and performance, results and successes that are linked to the mission, vision and values of the organization. The most valued forms of recognition also don’t cost much, if anything, but instead are the thoughtful, personal gestures implemented in a timely, specific and sincere manner—behaviors anyone can do and get better at doing with little time, effort and commitment. Below is a list of such actions you can do, the practice of which will help make the appreciation of others an ongoing habit for you, and in the process help create more positive working relationships with others. Use it as a starting point to experiment with, discuss and expand upon.

1. Thank others often: in person, in writing, electronically or in public.
2. Ask how they’d like to be recognized.
3. Have each staff member complete a “recognition preferences” form.
4. Greet staff members by name.
5. Take time to listen and to explain.
6. Ask for their opinions and ideas.
7. Provide feedback on assignments, tasks and projects.
8. Ask how you can better support them.
9. Involve them in a decision.
10. Run an errand for them.
11. Give a “shout out” on social media.
12. Celebrate successes.
13. Share a positive story.
14. Smile.
15. Give a standing ovation.
16. Create a “thank you” bulletin board or “story” section of your website.
17. Have senior management meet and acknowledge their efforts.
18. Share thanks with the person’s significant other(s).
19. Support them when they’ve made a mistake.
20. Let them do it their way.
21. Provide on-the-spot tokens for demonstrating core values.
22. Ring a bell when there’s been a success in the office.
23. Fill a glass vase or fish bowl with marbles for each positive success story.
24. Share and amplify good news.
25. Send a thank you email, copying their manager and others.

26. Communicate the “big picture.”
27. Start meetings with recognition.
28. Create milestones to celebrate progress toward objectives.
29. Give the gift of time: a coupon to leave early or have a half day off.
30. Give them a choice of assignment.
31. Create fun awards, e.g., The Golden Banana or Sparkplug Award.
32. Host an “open house” to meet and thank their families.
33. Introduce them to top donors.
34. Provide a learning opportunity.
35. Let them attend a seminar or workshop and report learnings.
36. Conduct a “praise barrage,” i.e., all team members exchange written or verbal praise.
37. Host a potluck for staff to share their favorite dishes.
38. Create achievement certificates, e.g. “Most Helpful,” “Always in a Good Mood,” “Lights up Any Room,” etc.
39. Offer coupons for movie passes, car washes, restaurant discounts, etc.
40. Meet with a senior manager to discuss their career.
41. Distribute freezer pops or Fudgsicles as a break or on hot days.
42. Take and display photos of staff with donors and at activities.
43. Create a success scrapbook of team projects, successes.
44. Have upper management make and serve breakfast for staff.
45. Create a spontaneous celebration, e.g., a Popcorn Blast or Pizza Party.
46. Do a drawing for fun or donated prizes.
47. Create a day in someone’s honor.
48. Have a special chair or throne.
49. Create a “pass around” award that an individual or group recipient can forward to others, e.g., a bowling trophy or stuffed animal.
50. Grant a prime parking spot.
51. Clean someone’s house.
52. Chauffer them to work.
53. Have a team picnic.
54. Create a “fun” committee to generate and plan new activities.
55. Send a valentine.
56. Plan a singing or solo music performance at their desk.
57. Create a creative bumper sticker.
58. Host a project kickoff party.
59. Make memento coffee cups.
60. Continuing education opportunity.
61. Group-sponsored sports team.
62. Memento key chain.
63. Special pins or name tags for special achievements or participation.
64. Plan a fun staff field trip.
65. Gas fare for a week.
66. Allow someone to present their idea to management.
67. Host an Elvis Day, Crazy Shirt day or Jeans Day.
68. Give a donation in their honor.
69. Give flowers, vegetables or fruits from one’s garden.
70. Create a balloon bouquet.
71. Create a fresh fruit basket.
72. Thank you poster message with candy bars, e.g., “You made things KRACKLE with GOOD & PLENTY so that we felt like a 100 GRAND.”
73. Temporary admin help for a day.
74. Create a daily motivational message, joke or success story.
75. Plan a field trip to a research facility, meeting with researchers, doctors.

76. Feature the person in a local newspaper interview or ad.
77. Host a "town hall" meeting with senior management.
78. Offer refreshments and snacks favored by the group.
79. Allow them to bring a pet to work.
80. Have the director send the person a letter of appreciation.
81. Offer attendance for a professional association, conference/trade show.
82. Frame a group or family photo.
83. Create a poem or song in the person's honor.
84. Gold star stickers on postcards to track successes.
85. Create a Wall of Fame with photos of staff and volunteers.
86. Cover dry cleaning expenses for a month.
87. Ice cream social celebration.
88. Banner over one's work station.
89. Lunch "on me" (or with me).
90. Initiate a peer-to-peer recognition program and tools.
91. Deliver a singing telegram.
92. Chef-prepared meal at one's home.
93. Make-your-own-taco party.
94. Accomplishment collage.
95. Car wash or oil change.
96. Chair massage.
97. "Give a Hand" gloves.
98. Assign staff members to "host" families, donors or researchers.
99. Inscribe a book.
100. Read a letter of thanks or praise at the start of staff meetings.
101. Represent manager at a meeting or community function.
102. Distinguished achievement medal.
103. Exchange jobs with another staff member for a day.
104. "Dump a Dog": Do a dreaded work task for the person.
105. Share "what went well today" with one's manager at day's end.
106. Host a "bragging session" for staff to share progress on goals.
107. Give public credit where due.
108. Give additional responsibility.
109. Allow person to pursue an idea or suggestion they made.
110. Congrats message on an electronic Billboard (a la Baskin Robbins).
111. Scheduling preference for hours to be worked.
112. Create a fun contest around metrics of key objectives.
113. Provide a babysitter for a night out.
114. Wrap presents for staff during the holidays.
115. Bring in homemade cookies.
116. Gift for one's hobby.
117. Create a kazoo band.

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