

Speaking of Appreciation: Ways to Incorporate Informal Recognition into Your Program

When volunteers are essential to an organization or program such as Extension, a primary component of volunteer engagement should be recognition. Recognition is the “R” in the ISOTURE Model of Volunteer Administration and defined as “the process of recognizing and rewarding volunteers for their contribution and performance. This includes ongoing recognition through formal and non-formal methods” (Pleskac, 2010).

Volunteer recognition is often seen in the formal variety in Extension programs, meaning it is typically planned by the organization or institution and happens annually. Individuals are often “honored” at an achievement event or statewide program designed to recognize contributions such as years of service with certificates or high-level accomplishments with an award. While these events are well intentioned and designed as a consistent way to honor volunteers, they may unintentionally miss the mark of truly appreciating volunteers. It may even be like the organization and volunteer are *speaking* different languages which may lead to miscommunication and feelings of ingratitude.

Kentucky and Nebraska studies show that formal recognition efforts (certificates, awards, and banquets) are ranked lower in preference by 4-H volunteers than some informal recognition methods such as thank you notes and a pat on the back (Culp & Schwartz, 1998) (Fritz et al, 2000). Informal recognition is an action

rather than an event. It can be initiated by anyone and is more personal and spontaneous in nature. There are simple gestures which can be used by anyone in an organization to show gratitude for someone else. These gestures demonstrate appreciation and can help *speak* volumes with very little effort.

Speaking of appreciation, an excellent tool to create a culture of appreciation in your organization and empower others to show gratitude regularly is *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace* by Dr. Gary Chapman and Dr. Paul White. Based on *The 5 Love Languages* by Dr. Gary Chapman and research conducted by Dr. Paul White into the relationships of co-workers and company environment, suggestions for appreciation focus on speaking in an individual’s preferred language of appreciation.

The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace include:

Words of Affirmation - communicating praise of an individual, delivered in person or in writing individually, to a group, or publicly.

Quality Time - intentionally spending time with an individual either in a work or leisure related activity.

Acts of Service - assisting someone in completing a task that is not a part of your job requirement. *Basically, volunteering for someone else.*

Tangible Gifts - giving an individual an item or object that is meaningful and may have monetary value.

Physical Touch - giving an individual a high five, handshake, or the proverbial “pat on the back.”

It is beneficial to know which appreciate language best *speaks* to an individual, which is why there is an inventory associated with the book. The Motivation by Appreciation (MBA) Inventory is designed to identify an individual’s primary and secondary languages of appreciation, as well as their least preferred language which is best to avoid using to prevent miscommunication and ingratitude. Although it would be great to have all Extension volunteers complete the MBA Inventory, it may be a better use of time, energy, and effort to educate and empower peers, program participants, and others to use appreciation in order to improve volunteer engagement and involvement.

Tips for Extension Professionals to Speak the Languages of Appreciation

Words of Appreciation may include:

- Thank you notes
- Thank you email
- Thank you phone call
- Facebook post
- Email blast
- Office or portable display board with pictures and quotes from an event
- Personally sharing comments heard from participants at an event
- Highlighting contributions of an individual at a recognition event
- Appreciation-focused communication/publication
- Appreciation or recognition in the newsletter

Quality Time may include:

- Offering a position on a committee or at an event.

- Asking a volunteer to lunch/dinner to talk about 4-H or other topics.
- Asking a volunteer out to coffee to talk about all things except 4-H.
- Having an open-door policy at your office or communicating your office hours.
- Taking a free moment during an event to check in/catch up with an individual.
- Calling a volunteer up to chat or for the younger generation, face time or text with them.
- Setting up a standing open webinar/Zoom time to allow people to call in, catch up, ask questions, etc.

Acts of Service may include:

- Showing up to a volunteer workday/session and assisting with the task at hand.
- Arriving early to a club meeting or event run by volunteers to help set up or clean up.
- Making sure volunteers have access to resources they need or equipment/materials in the office which might make their jobs easier, such as a computer or copy machine.
- Hosting a virtual connection for a volunteer new to distance learning.
- Connecting volunteers with community resources or people with virtual learning experience to support on-going activities in a virtual or blended learning environment.

Tangible Gifts may include:

- Gift cards
- Food at meetings
- Pinterest trinkets
- 4-H SWAG
- Homemade crafts and gifts from the heart
- Scholarships for online trainings
- Volunteer “thinking of you” kits sent to help or thank a volunteer

Tips to Helping Others Speak the Languages of Appreciation

Words of Appreciation can be supported by:

- Bringing thank you notes to an event or program and encourage participants to complete at least one for a presenter.
- Creating a graffiti wall for presenters and giving participants time to add comments.
- Conducting a positive gossip circle at the end of an event/program. Participants pair up and pairs walk around the room and reflect out loud on the other participants, presenter, and activities.
- Conducting an orchids and onions de-briefing after a program. For every onion (area of improvement), require that two orchids (positive comment) be shared.
- Organizing a connection tree or circle to identify individuals to call, text, or email to check in on a regular or orderly basis.

Quality Time can be facilitated by:

- Allotting social time at club meetings and before committee meetings to allow for networking.
- Creating a social or virtual connection for group members to join in for office hours or volunteer “check-ins” with mentors or fellow volunteers.
- Holding “hang out” sessions to get to know volunteers and allow them to get to know each other.
- Conducting virtual “happy hours” or game nights for volunteers to have fun with each other.

Acts of Service can be encouraged through:

- Modeling behavior you hope to see in others to encourage them to follow suit.
- Reminding or suggesting youth and others to pitch in at events and to offer help even when they are not asked.
- Communicating volunteer opportunities for others to help share the chance to serve.

- Highlighting acts of service in your newsletter or appreciation communication.
- Posting pictures of acts of service on social media.

Tangible Gifts can be supported by:

- Offering simple gift craft ideas that clubs could make for special occasions like volunteer month, volunteer’s birthdays, or anniversaries.
- Providing giveaways of donated items to use/share as gifts to others.
- Initiating a friendship bread activity with your volunteers and see how it spreads.
- Organizing a Secret Clover, like Secret Santa, but incorporate it into a club setting.

A Special Note about Physical Touch

Physical touch is a “touchy” topic in the world of Extension, youth development, and especially in current times. Professional and volunteer policies and guidelines encourage limiting physical touch with others, especially youth. Before Covid-19, high fives, handshakes, and pats on the back were safe practices, but during these times of social and physical distancing even those should be avoided for obvious reasons. Until we can get back to “normal,” it may be endearing to find ways to send long distance physical touches including:

- a virtual applause using a reaction in Zoom
- a text GIF to send a long distance hug
- an email emoticon to send a virtual thumbs up

Since appreciation is the expression of gratitude for someone’s time, energy, effort, or specific participation in a particular program, appreciation should be a staple in Extension volunteer programs. Volunteers give countless hours, share their skills and abilities, and expand the reach and impact of Extension for no compensation. Such an invaluable asset to the program should be noted regularly through a variety of means. To start using

informal recognition in your program, start simply and build upon successes. Since appreciation can come from anyone and from any direction (top down, bottom up, or laterally), educate and empower others to show appreciation to volunteers on behalf of the program. Genuine appreciation shown often by a variety of people in the program may contribute to a volunteer’s satisfaction with their role and could lead to increased support and sustainability. Finding ways to show your gratitude can help your program, those who serve it, and ultimately can give you a positive feeling and outlook on your job.

Don’t delay; start appreciating your volunteers today!

References:

S. Pleskac. (2010). *ISOTURE Model of Volunteer Administration and Development*. Retrieved at URL: <https://4-h.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISOTURE-Model.pdf>

Culp, K. & Schwartz, V. (1999). *Motivating Adult Volunteer 4-H Leaders*. Retrieved at URL: <https://archives.joe.org/joe/1999february/rb5.php>

S. Fritz; J.E. Barbuto Jr.; D. Marx; & A. Etling. (2000). *Motivation and Recognition Preferences of 4-H Volunteers*. Retrieved at URL: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=aglecfacpub>

Chapman, G. D, & White, P. E. (2019). *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace: Empowering by Encouraging People*. Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing.

Jamie Morris

jkenton@umd.edu

This publication, *Speaking of Appreciation: Ways to Incorporate Informal Recognition into Your Program* (FS-1151), is a series of publications of the University of Maryland Extension and the Department of 4-H Youth Development.

The information presented has met UME peer review standards, including internal and external technical review. For help accessing this or any UME publication contact:

itaccessibility@umd.edu

For more information on this and other topics, visit the University of Maryland Extension website at extension.umd.edu

University programs, activities, and facilities are available to all without regard to race, color, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, marital status, age, national origin, political affiliation, physical or mental disability, religion, protected veteran status, genetic information, personal appearance, or any other legally protected class.