Chapter 41
Section 4. Holding Awards Ceremonies

- WHY SHOULD YOU HOLD AWARDS CEREMONIES?
- WHEN SHOULD YOU PRESENT AN AWARD CEREMONY?
- HOW DO YOU ORGANIZE AND CONDUCT AN AWARD CEREMONY?

Somebody in your initiative has been doing an excellent job and has just achieved a professional victory. Everybody knows about it, and you have all congratulated your colleague for the good work. But you'd like to do more; you'd like to publicly recognize that person's achievements and accomplishments. After all, this person is an example for everybody on the team.

It's time to hold an awards ceremony. Presenting awards at a special ceremony is a good way to honor staff members and volunteers who have shown outstanding commitment and accomplished big things.

Achievements that deserve to be rewarded include many different types of victories. A successful international fundraiser is an achievement for the person in charge of it, and preparing cookies is an exemplary accomplishment for Girl Scouts. But no matter how big the success, all exemplary accomplishments and achievements have in common a great deal of determination, hard work, and commitment.

In this section, we'll be discussing how your organization can conduct awards ceremonies to recognize special achievements. We'll talk about why you should publicly present awards for unusual accomplishments, and when you should think about conducting an awards ceremony. Finally, we'll take you step-by-step through organizing a ceremony that will leave your awardees feeling recognized and your entire organization energized.

WHY SHOULD YOU HOLD AWARDS CEREMONIES?

There are many good reasons to present awards for outstanding achievements. For example:

- An awards ceremony makes people feel that their work is valued. It shows approval and gratitude for each person's good job, and it makes people aware that good work will be rewarded. It shows others, such as the general public and other staff members, that you're aware of outstanding accomplishments. Recognition motivates others to strive for excellence and we all benefit from it.
- Recognition motivates people. For instance, if a social worker receives an award for an
outstanding performance in the outreach program, other social workers will strive to do better also, so that they too can be recognized. Being rewarded for doing well is one of the biggest incentives anyone can receive.

- An awards ceremony or activity is a chance for celebration and reflection. People will get a break and a party, getting their minds away from everyday work, allowing them to see the bigger picture. At the same time, they will have the chance to discuss the importance of their work and the achievement of the person being awarded. Gathering and sharing experiences is a very powerful means of encouragement.

WHEN SHOULD YOU PRESENT AWARDS FOR EXEMPLARY ACCOMPLISHMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT?

How often and under which circumstances your organization presents awards is entirely up to you. Some organizations hold an annual awards banquet to recognize outstanding work; others present awards only occasionally, and only in response to truly outstanding achievements.

You may choose to give an award during another event not designed specifically for this purpose. For example, if your organization has an annual board of directors meeting, you may wish to present one of the directors with a special award during the meeting. Planning for this type of presentation mainly involves incorporating the presentation into the agenda of the event.

WHO SHOULD RECEIVE AWARDS?

Deciding who receives awards may be done by an individual or a committee. In many organizations, more routine awards, such as plaques for 5, 10, or 25 years of volunteer service, are given out at ceremonies alongside larger awards for outstanding acts of service. However your organization chooses to do it, it's important that you be fair and consistent. For example, if you present an award to one person for recruiting 100 new volunteers to your program, you can't neglect the next person who does the same thing!

Awards ceremonies are also a great way to recognize people such as volunteers without whom an organization would be unable to run. Volunteers' accomplishments may not always be "extraordinary," but their value to the organization might be such that recognition and reward is important. For example, the Lied Center theater at the University of Kansas holds an annual award-giving ceremony for its ushers. All the ushers there work on a voluntary basis and without their help, the theater performances would not run as smoothly. The Lied Center feels that recognizing its volunteers is a way to show them how it appreciates their help and recognizes their achievements. Although their achievements may not be mark-setting, their work is essential.

HOW DO YOU ORGANIZE AND CONDUCT AN AWARD CEREMONY?

When we think about awards ceremonies, the Academy Awards come to mind. Not all awards ceremonies have thousands of guests gathered in a gala atmosphere, but all award ceremonies surely have their stars and memorable moments. Usually, there's more to an awards presentation or activity
than meets the eye. There are many details that must be arranged beforehand, without which this rewarding opportunity may not be as successful as you want it to be.

Of course, an awards ceremony isn't only speeches. Keep it going and keep it fun. An awards presentation must be entertaining; at the same time, it should remind all participants of the significance of the occasion.

Keep in mind that you don't have to be "formal" to deliver an award. Formal ceremonies are certainly a very common way to present an award, but there are other possibilities. A concert, a play, a picnic, a party, a movie, or a press conference might be more appropriate or more to the liking of the person being recognized. Most of these activities involve the same kind of planning and execution as a formal ceremony.

ORGANIZING THE AWARDS CEREMONY

One of the best things in life is when an awards ceremony works; the speakers are good (and nobody canceled on you), the ceremony is upbeat (and never boring), and the one(s) receiving the award feel really recognized (and not just fake-happy). But for everything to run smoothly you need to put effort into planning the ceremony. There are many details, and they are all important. Depending on the size and what kind of event you have in mind, you might want to delegate chores to a committee or to a "point person" who will recruit helpers. It can be dangerous to take the responsibility all on yourself, because the organizing of an event can become overwhelming.

The planning of a presentation goes hand in hand with the budget. Are you going to have a fancy reception or not? What kinds of awards are you going to give -- certificates, gifts, recognition plaques? Who are you going to invite? Are you going to bring a special keynote speaker, or are you going to do the presentation yourself? All these details should be planned in advance so that there are no unhappy surprises during the ceremony.

ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER WHEN PLANNING AN AWARDS CEREMONY

Money

First of all, decide on your budget. How much you spend on an award presentation can vary a lot; be sure you can afford what you're planning. If your initiative has a lot of resources, you may have a big budget to spend on a ceremony. On the other hand, smaller organizations have to be creative and make do with a limited amount of money. Deciding your budget will determine the menu, the number of guests, the venue of the event, and other details that involve spending money.

Location

Before planning anything, decide where to hold the ceremony. Think about what kind of event you're going to hold and then try to find a location to match. Before choosing a place, take into consideration all the next items so that you don't limit yourself choosing the place before determining what you really want. Does your company have a recreation center? A presentations room? Will you need to rent a room somewhere else? Are you going to serve food? What do you need in the room? Tables? Podium? Hook-ups? A kitchen? How big does the place have to be? A big hall will look empty if there are only a
few people in it, and a small one will limit how many people you can have.

**Type of award**

They say that awards should fit the action being recognized. It also should fit the person and the occasion. For some, a donation to a particular organization may be most appropriate, for instance, volunteers for an AIDS project may want their award to be converted into a contribution to the project. For others, a new title or job definition will be the perfect award. What sort of symbol you choose says a lot about what and whom you are recognizing.

Here are some types of recognition you might consider:

- Pins
- Statuettes
- Certificates
- Prizes
- Plaques
- Framed recognition citations
- Gifts
- A promotion
- Complimentary tickets

Something else to have in mind is the surprise element. Is the recipient going to be told beforehand that he is going to receive an award? Surprises can be fun, but you don't want the honoree to have a heart attack from shock before reaching the podium to accept the award.

**Number of guests**

So, is this going to be a blockbuster, everybody's-invited type of party, or an invitation-only, intimate awards ceremony? You need to consider the immediate guests and their guests (family, friends, significant others?)

**Food**

Ceremonies are fun, but people can get cross if there isn't anything to nibble on. You'll want to serve some sort of refreshments. The size of the event and the resources the facility offers will help determine what kind of food you'll serve. You're not going to serve a sit-down dinner someplace where there's no kitchen

When considering food for your ceremony, you have two options: plan it yourself, or get help from a catering service. Doing it yourself can save money, but do you have the manpower and expertise to put on a spread for the number of people invited? Remember, you have to plan, buy, prepare and serve the food, and clean up, all of which the caterers will do. On the other hand, you're paying the caterer for a pre-established number of people, whether they show up or not. If more show up, you're out of luck.
Waiters and other support staff

Speaking of food, you'll probably need people to set up the place, serve the food, put the water glass close to the speakers, serve the guests, and clean up afterward. You may need to hire support staff to help you, or you may have to assign some people from the organization committee (if you have one) to divide the labor. You can consider hiring specialized help, such as caterers.

Tables/chairs arrangement

No matter how small the ceremony, you don't want people tripping over tables or sitting with their backs to the podium. If the ceremony is large, then you need to be even more careful. Who will sit where? Who will sit with whom? Who needs to be close to the podium? You need to consider all these questions.

Decorations

This part is fun but, beware: it can make or break your presentation. Decorating is hard work, especially if you're dealing with a large space. Your choice of decorations will depend to a large extent on the tone you want the ceremony to take; for example, silly balloons and festive noise-makers would be inappropriate for a sober, dignified ceremony. Here's a list of things you may wish to consider when thinking about decorations for a formal awards ceremony:

- Flowers
- Balloons
- Bows
- Tablecloths
- Center pieces
- Pictures on the wall
- Banners
- Posters
- Plants
- Candles

Key speakers

Who is going to actually present the awards? Is it going to be you? The director of your initiative? The awarded person's best friend? A nationally known motivational speaker? A choice could be made depending upon the recipient's job or accomplishment. It could be a colleague, the recipient's spouse, parent, or child. Whoever it may be, you need to contact that person in advance and to allow time for preparation. If necessary, arrange a rehearsal to fine-tune length and tone of speeches.

Order of presentation

Who is going to speak first? How are you going to start the ceremony? When will it end? At what time will the award be presented? The presentation schedule doesn't have to be followed to the minute, but you want to know who speaks after whom, so you can print a program for the guests. Also, people should know how much time they have to present their speeches and comments. If you expect everyone to take about three minutes, and someone takes 30, it can not only be boring for the
audience, but it can throw off the timing of the whole event, and change the feeling of it. In general, the clearer you can be about timing, the more likely you are to get close to what you want.

**PREPARING YOUR PRESENTATION**

You've secured a location, arranged for refreshments, ordered the awards, and planned the decorations. But who is going to present the awards? If that job falls to you, don't worry!

**TIPS FOR A SMOOTH, CONFIDENT PRESENTATION**

- Be sure to be warm and friendly in your presentation. Remember, this is not a business presentation, so you shouldn't be too formal. You're supposed to put the audience and the awardees at ease.
- Even if you wrote a speech, make it sound like you're saying it, not reading it. Use language you're comfortable with. You don't have to memorize the speech word-for-word, but try to deliver it from notes rather than from a full text.
  - Use simple words. Say begin instead of commence, and after instead of subsequent to
  - Use contractions - didn't, won't - to make your speech sound more relaxed
  - Use voice inflections and hand gestures
  - Use personal pronouns such as I instead of one, and we instead of you
- Your speech should be interesting, creative and exciting. Do you know any stories about the person receiving the award that the audience at large is not aware of? Or an anecdote? Choose these stories carefully so as not to embarrass or ridicule the awarded person. If the story doesn't put the awardee in a positive light, forget about it.
- Tell brief stories, and use quick examples. The audience is interested in knowing more about this person receiving the award: her personal life, what she does in her free time, how you met her, any story that people can identify with. Use your presentation to show the personality of the person being awarded. Demonstrate how her life is inspiring to others, and illustrate it with authentic examples.
- Be attentive to your body language, eye contact, speech rhythm and mannerisms.

**WHAT NOT TO DO DURING A PRESENTATION:**

- Be pompous and monotonous
- Be formal and stuffy
- Be vague and complex
- Start hyper-intense or be unenergized
- Be unsure and nervous
- Read, and sound like you're reading
- Talk for a long time. This is your awardees' day, not yours.

**SHOULD YOU INVITE THE PRESS?**

Media attention is usually good and desired for this type of activity. Depending upon the size and scope of the event, you probably want as much public notice as possible, both for the honoree(s) and for your initiative. For example, it may be a good idea for a gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered rights association to invite the press when presenting an award for the association's straight allies. It
would bring visibility to the group and energize allies, not to mention how glad the awardee would be to be mentioned in the press.

AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS
If you have slides of the awarded person doing his or her work, a home video of this person that describes perfectly his or her personality, or taped testimonies of people thanking the recipient of the award, these are great ways of keeping the audience interested, bringing new perspectives to the ceremonies, and pleasing the person receiving the award. Make sure you have arranged the necessary equipment (overhead projector, slide projector, screen, TV set, stereo) if you decide to do a presentation like this.

IN SUMMARY
Finally, everything is ready for the ceremony or the activity you chose to recognize someone's exemplary accomplishment and achievement. Now you just need to relax so that you look your best for the big day, especially if you are presenting the award. Sleep well before the presentation so you feel rested and refreshed.

Recapping, here is a list of things to pay attention to when presenting an award:

- Know why you’re doing it
- Think about what you want to do
- Plan carefully
- Relax - make it as upbeat as possible

Conducting ceremonies to reward outstanding achievement is a great way to show the people you work with that their work is appreciated and admired. And by letting them know this, you will undoubtedly strengthen your organization as a whole.

Contributor
Marcelo Vilela

Resources


