



# Successful Leadership Recognition Programs

## *Turning “thank you” into ongoing growth and development*

We all know how great it feels to be recognized and applauded for a job well done. In the nonprofit sector, recognition takes on even more importance because it shines a spotlight on emerging leaders and key issues, allowing us to acknowledge past progress and sustain future successes. If you are considering creating a leadership recognition program, ask yourself the following questions: Who benefits from the program? Who should be considered for recognition? How do we move beyond the award to advancing the leader’s success? Answering those questions before you get started will help you build a great program that meets your needs and acknowledges those you most want to reward.

### 1. Who benefits from the recognition program?

Consider the following four stakeholders. Understanding who these stakeholders are and how your recognition may benefit them will help you to create a program that helps others recognize those whose work they can sustain well into the future.

- **Your honorees** – By acknowledging the work an individual or individuals have done to lead a nonprofit, you are opening doors to their future success. Your nod to their efforts can help them gain recognition and legitimacy in the field and among potential partners, and it may provide access to greater funding while extending their network and increasing their commitment.
- **Your honoree’s organization** – Just as acknowledging the leader of an organization can benefit the individual, it does the same for the organization. Your acknowledgment creates new awareness of the organization, helping it to build its capacity, collaborate with other organizations, and strengthen its reputation in the field.
- **Your honoree’s field** – When you honor a person for the great strides he or she took in a particular field, you shine new light on all the work being done. You can create new or heightened awareness of the issue and the various ways it is being addressed.
- **Your foundation** – While you are acknowledging the leaders of nonprofits, your foundation can benefit as well. You are behind the scenes funding the work of these leaders and their organizations, making their work possible—and people will take notice. Your foundation will benefit by building brand awareness, leveraging funds with future partners, and identifying new experts in the fields you support.

### 2. Whom should you consider for recognition?

There are four areas you may want to consider for recognition. Keeping your mission in mind, you may choose to build your program around one of these, or you may consider creating awards for several—or even all— areas. Knowing that your program can evolve over time, and that you can add (or take away) categories, can make selecting one or two individuals for your first recognition program a bit easier.

- **Age and stage** – You can design your award program around a particular age group or those who have achieved a specific stage of development. Perhaps you want to recognize and undergraduate or graduate student, emerging leaders early in their career, or those who have contributed a lifetime of service.



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- **Community** – You may choose to recognize emerging or well-known leaders from a specific culture or an underserved group. You could focus on the same ethnic group annually or change it each year. You could recognize women leaders or those within the LGBT community. This approach can be especially effective if your organization prioritizes women, for example, or a particular ethnic group.
- **Issue area** – Many recognition programs focus on one area, such as the arts, or on a specific benchmark, such as quality of care for seniors. This award may be coupled with one of the other recognition areas. For example, depending on your mission, you may choose specifically to recognize someone from the GLBT community who is doing amazing work in senior care.
- **Sector** – You may choose to recognize nonprofit leaders or look to those in business or government who have contributed to a designated field of interest. You could consider a business leader whose contributions to local nonprofits enhance the entire community. Or you may select a local government leader whose contributions to environmental causes throughout your region have sparked long-term, lasting, positive changes.

### **3. How do we move forward from recognition to building the program?**

Once you have made some of the big decisions—who will you recognize and what the benefits are—you will want to define ways to further the program so that it grows from being not just a recognition program but a true leadership development program. The following six building blocks will provide a continuum from saying “thank you” to developing greater leaders.

- **Recognize the leader** – Your first step is choosing the leader you want to recognize, pinpointing the specific reasons you have selected this person, and actually acknowledging the person. You may have a ceremony, you may send a press release to your local media, or you may contact other foundations and nonprofits to share your news. Whatever you do, you must acknowledge the recipient to the right audiences.
- **Provide money or time** – Often, award recipients receive a gift in the form of a financial reward or sabbatical. While this approach isn’t feasible for every foundation, it will elevate your program and increase its effectiveness. Alternatively, you could provide a smaller cash award or grant to an organization of the honoree’s choosing, coupled with some of the suggestions that follow.
- **Organize a convening** – Bring together current and past award recipients to let them network and share ideas. Whether you have speakers, hold a dinner, or choose some other format, the goal of this convening is to let these individuals share with and learn from one another.
- **Provide access to decision makers** – One of the most valuable resources leaders need is exposure to key decision makers. Provide access to business experts, nonprofit and foundation leaders, policy makers, and others so the recipients can further build their networks and their reputations among these groups.



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- **Offer continued training** – Provide workshops and training sessions that are consistent with these leaders' needs. Whether these sessions are in the areas of advocacy, fund-raising, organizational development, leadership skills, or other categories, professional development and continued training is always a must.
- **Plan for additional support** – When you first create your leadership recognition program, you may not know what else your leaders need to thrive. Keep an open mind and listen to any other ideas they raise. Mentors and peer networks may be supports they want; access to online resources or libraries may fill other needs.

Recognizing and honoring the leaders with whom you work can be valuable and strategic for your foundation. It shows a commitment to those who are among the biggest champions of the issues you care about, and provides incentive for engagement. If you are considering a recognition program, answer these questions now so that you can bring your strongest recommendations to your team when you are ready to get started.

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