

ACTIVITY DIRECTORS AS VIEWED BY AN ENTERTAINER

Steve Field

For many years, I have entertained at numerous types of facilities and communities in my state singing familiar songs and telling stories. As you might imagine, I have encountered many Activity Directors over the years. Some have remained at one place for a year or more, a few switch to another facility in the area, and a number just disappear after a few months.

In the facilities and communities I visit on a regular basis, I have experienced both excellent and incompetent behavior from the Activity Directors. Let me begin by listing what I consider the necessary conduct of a motivated "professional" staff member in this job.

COMPETENT

First, I am greeted warmly by the Activity Director on arrival. She (some are men, but let's stick with she) has already promoted my coming in her posted calendar of events and often on an easel outside the concert area. While I'm setting up, she is busy filling the room with residents. During the performance, she remains in the room, sometimes with an assistant on hand and adds to the atmosphere by applauding and laughing at my corny jokes. If there are loud interruptions from insensitive staff members outside in the hall or in the concert area, she will politely ask them to talk softly or move out. After the show, she will thank me, and we'll look forward to another show next month. Should the Activity Director be unable to attend, she would appoint a competent assistant to replace her.

This simple scenario, unfortunately, is not prevalent. Those few dedicated Activity Directors are a pleasure to work with, but there is room for improvement from the majority.

INCOMPETENT

I assume the Administrator or Executive Director of each establishment does the hiring of the Activity Director and should be supervising her performance. Obviously, in most cases, this is not being done. Now, let's look at examples of what I consider incompetent behavior on the part of the Activity Director.

* The Activity Director does not welcome the performer, and if she is out of the building, often fails to assign her role to an assistant. I've had to rouse other staff members to locate an audience.

* If the Activity Director is on hand, she often waits until I arrive before starting to round up residents. This should begin at least 15 minutes before start time. At the better-managed houses, residents are filling seats a half hour before the show.

* Often, other staff members walk by in the hallway talking loudly or a relative will walk in and just start up a conversation with an audience member. It never occurs to many Activity Directors to ask for courtesy. I've actually had someone start up a vacuum cleaner during a performance. Residents are aware of these interruptions, look up at me, and shake their heads.

* More often than not, these Activity Directors seem apathetic and barely tolerate the residents. There is no awareness or sensitivity to the needs of the residents and certainly no show of empathy with the volunteer entertainer. The Activity Directors leave the room, if they were there at all and are not seen again. In a nursing situation, I've had to go out and find a staff member to take care of stranded people.

* Most Activity Directors do not know much about the early music and talent that the seniors are familiar with. If they would do simple research on the Internet, they would be able to discuss the period with the residents who grew up listening to the music and knowing these personalities. It would improve communication and encourage bonding.

* In all fairness, many of the Activity Directors are given conflicting duties such as driving buses and taking residents to doctors' appointments, in which case a replacement should be appointed. I encourage Administrators and Executive Directors to be more responsible in managing and evaluating their Activity Directors.

Meanwhile, I take off my hat to the handful of people who support and enhance my joy in bringing familiar music and therapeutic humor to seniors.

Editor's Note: *This article could have come from any volunteer. Do you see yourself or your assistants in any of these examples? What are the impressions that your volunteers have of your activity department?* ☞