



Rewarding and Recognizing Employees Is More Important Than Ever

Description

Reward and recognition is always important. It's a vital piece of employee engagement, which of course is the key to everything else we want to achieve. But right now, as we are coming out of a long, hard year, it's more critical than ever. Employees are weary and worn. They need all the positive recognition they can get.

Unfortunately, when things are stressful, we might be more likely to let things we don't deem essential fall by the wayside. But reward and recognition *is* essential. It keeps people engaged and motivated. It keeps the emotional bank account full. It builds relationships. It helps with retention. (People don't quit their job; they quit their boss.) And recognized behaviors get repeated.

It's not enough to reward and recognize occasionally. We need to hardwire reward and recognition so that it happens often. It needs to be woven into the fabric of the culture.

I used to believe a myth I had heard around positive recognition, which was that we can use it to balance out the negative. But I came to learn that "balancing out" is a fallacy. It takes at least three positive interactions for each negative interaction for one person to feel good about another. A 2-to-1 "positive-to-negative" ratio creates a neutral feeling, and a 1-to-1 ratio creates a negative feeling. So if we want our employees to feel good about us, we cannot recognize too often.

A few tips:

1. Make sure reward and recognition is hardwired. Companies need a system for saying thank you regularly. If we don't have a system in place, when things get tough, we will surely forget to do it. And that's when people most need to hear it. Reward and recognition is the most important thing we do—we need to make sure it happens.

2. Don't wait for big milestones. Reward and recognize people where they are. For example, when I was at Holy Cross Hospital in Chicago, we held a hospital-wide celebration when we hit the 40th percentile in patient satisfaction. Some might think, *How can you celebrate being in the 40th percentile?*

Well, considering we had been in the single digits, getting to the 40th percentile was pretty strong. I contemplated updating my résumé to read that we had quadrupled patient satisfaction while I was there. We celebrated the progress. But then we raised the bar and said, "Now our next goal is to get to the 60th percentile, then 75th, then 90th, then 99th." Eventually we were in the top 1 percentile in patient experience.

We then had a month when we dropped from the high 90s to the low 80s in patient experience. That happens. It's normal to have some ups and downs. But at times we have to celebrate the milestones along the way to get to the end result.

3. Don't work off only the metrics. Ask others in the organization whom you should reward and recognize. You will find that sometimes people are doing great things behind the scenes that aren't connected to the numbers at all. Ask regularly and collect the stories. Storytelling is an extremely powerful way to keep people engaged and connected to their sense of purpose. It goes hand in hand with reward and recognition.

4. Handwritten thank-you notes can be extremely powerful. They make a huge impact on people. When we send these notes to an employee's home, it is even more powerful. It makes a huge impression on people's families. They, along with the employee, feel even better about the leader and the organization.

You can take this kind of recognition a step further. I once worked with a radiology department whose staff loved the manager, and I found out one reason was that they sent a birthday card to every child of every employee. I was so impressed by this that my wife and I started doing the same thing for children of people we work with. We have done this since 2000, and it has been wonderful.

5. Be specific in your recognition as often as you can. This is especially important in thank-you notes. Don't just write "thanks for your hard work." Spell out what the person did that was so great. The more specific you are, the more the person will appreciate the recognition. The more specific the compliment, the more meaningful it will be.

People ask me about group recognition. Sure, there is a time and place for this, but try not to overdo it. When we say, "Everybody's doing a great job," it can be confusing. People in the group who actually *aren't* doing a great job may think they are. Plus, those who are will know about the coworkers who aren't, so the words won't mean much to them.

Never underestimate the power of reward and recognition. It makes people feel cared for. Small gestures that convey "I notice how hard you work" and "I know none of this is easy" mean the world to people. They create a multiplier effect. Gratitude and positivity will spread across the organization like the ripples a stone makes when you toss it into a pond.

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