

The Power of Positive Employee Recognition

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How to Provide Effective Employee Recognition

Prioritize employee recognition and you can ensure a positive, productive, innovative organizational climate. Provide employee recognition to say **thank you** and to encourage more of the actions and thinking that you believe will make your organization successful.

People who feel appreciated are more positive about themselves and their ability to contribute. People with positive self-esteem are potentially your best employees. These beliefs about employee recognition are common among employers even if not commonly carried out. Why then is employee recognition so closely guarded in many organizations?

Why Is Employee Recognition Scarce?

Time is an often-stated reason and admittedly, employee recognition does take time. Employers also start out with all of the best intentions when they seek to recognize employee performance. But, they often find their recognition efforts turn into employee complaining, jealousy, and dissatisfaction. With these experiences, many employers are hesitant to provide employee recognition.

In my experience, employee recognition is scarce because of a combination of several factors. People don't know how to provide employee recognition effectively, so they have bad experiences when they do. They assume that **one size fits all** when they provide employee recognition. Finally, employers think too narrowly about what people will find rewarding and recognizing. These guidelines and ideas will help you effectively walk the slippery path of employee recognition and avoid potential problems when you recognize people in your work place.

Guidelines for Effective Employee Recognition

Decide what you want to achieve through your employee recognition efforts. Many organizations use a scatter approach to employee recognition. They put a lot of employee recognition out there and hope that some efforts will stick and create the results they want. Or, they recognize so infrequently that employee recognition becomes a downer for the many when the infrequent few are recognized.

Instead, **create goals and action plans for employee recognition.** You want to recognize the actions, behaviors, approaches, and accomplishments that you want to foster and reinforce in your organization. Establish employee recognition opportunities that emphasize and reinforce these sought-after qualities and behaviors. If you need to increase attendance in your organization, hand out a three-part form, during your Monday morning staff meeting. The written note thanks employees who have perfect attendance that week. The employee keeps one part; save the second in the personnel file; place the third in a monthly drawing for gift certificates.

Fairness, clarity, and consistency are important in employee recognition. People need to see that each person who makes the same or a similar contribution has an equal likelihood of receiving recognition for her efforts. For regularly provided employee recognition, organizations need to establish criteria for what makes a person eligible for the employee recognition. Anyone who meets the criteria is then recognized.



For example, if people are recognized for exceeding a production or sales expectation, anyone who goes over the goal gets the glory. Recognizing only the highest performer will defeat or dissatisfy all of your other contributors, especially if the criteria for employee recognition are unclear or based on the supervisor's opinion.

For day-to-day employee recognition, **you'll want to set guidelines so leaders acknowledge equivalent and similar contributions.** Each employee who stays after work to contribute ideas in a departmental improvement brainstorming session gets to have lunch with the department head, for example. Each employee who contributes to a customer sale deserves employee recognition, even the employee who just answered the phone; his actions set the sale in motion.

This guideline is why an employee of the month-type program is most often unsuccessful for effective employee recognition. The criteria for results and the fairness of the criteria are not clear to people. So, people complain about "brown-nosing points" and the boss's "pet employees." These employee recognition programs cause discontent and dissension when the organization's intentions were positive. It's one of my common management mistakes in managing people.

As an additional example, it is important to recognize all people who contributed to a success equally. A CEO I know perpetually announced employee recognition for major projects at the company holiday celebration. Without fail, he missed the names of several people who contributed to the success of the project. With the opportunity for public employee recognition past, employees invariably felt slighted by the post-banquet thanks - no matter how sincere.

Employee recognition approaches and content must also be inconsistent. Contradictory? No, not really. You want to offer employee recognition that is consistently fair, but you also want to make sure your employee recognition efforts do not become expectations or entitlements. As expectations, your employee recognition efforts become entitlements. Bad news.

For example, a company owner provided lunch for all staff every Friday to encourage team building and positive work relationships. All interested employees voluntarily attended the lunches. He was shocked when a group of employees asked him for reimbursement to cover the cost of the lunch on days they did not attend. I wasn't shocked; the lunches had become an expected portion of their compensation and benefits package. Sincere recognition had turned into entitlement.

Inconsistency is encouraged in the type of employee recognition offered also. If employees are invited to lunch with the boss every time they work over-time, the lunch is an expectation. It is no longer a reward. Additionally, if a person does not receive the expected reward, it becomes a dissatisfier and negatively impacts the person's attitude about work.

Be as specific as you can in telling the individual exactly why he is receiving the recognition. The work purpose of feedback is to reinforce what you'd like to see the employee do more of; the purpose of employee recognition is the same. In fact, employee recognition is one of the most powerful forms of feedback that you can provide. While "you did a nice job today" is a positive comment, it lacks the power of, "the report had a significant impact on the committee's decision. You did an excellent job of highlighting the key points and information we needed to weigh before deciding. Because of your work, we'll be able to cut 6% of the budget with no layoffs."

Offer employee recognition as close to the event you are recognizing as possible. When a person performs positively, provide recognition and a thank you immediately. Since it's likely the employee is already feeling



good about her performance; your timely recognition of the employee will enhance the positive feelings. This, in turn, positively affects the employee's confidence in her ability to do well in your organization.

Specific Ideas for Employee Recognition

Remember that employee recognition is situational. Each individual has a preference for what he finds rewarding and how that recognition is most effective for him. One person may enjoy public recognition at a staff meeting; another prefers a private note in her personnel file. The best way to determine what an employee finds rewarding is to ask.

Use the myriad opportunities for employee recognition that are available to you. In organizations, people place too much emphasis on money as the only form of employee recognition. While salary, bonuses, and benefits are critical within your employee recognition and reward system - after all, most of us do work for money - think more broadly about your opportunities to provide employee recognition.

