



The Advantage of Acknowledgment

Many creative and astute supervisors have figured out that simple, no- or low-cost acknowledgement for their employees' work pays big dividends. Of course, many companies have wisely created formal programs that are designed to praise and reward high performers. Yet, the simple day-to-day effort that employees deliver is often accepted as "what's expected" and not praised or recognized.

We have had too many discussions with supervisors who insist that regular praise and simple rewards are not only not needed but can slow the work down. Fortunately, there is no research to support that position, and typically it is the result of not having received any praise or acknowledgement before they were promoted to supervisor.

So, let's see what we can do to highlight the performance of your employees when they have successfully completed their job tasks:

Focused Praise:

Let's imagine for a moment that you are dissatisfied with a behavior of one of your staff. You know that you need to talk about the problem with the employee. So, as a good supervisor, you would first collect data that demonstrates the poor behavior, because doing so helps separate your subjective opinion or comments from data-driven feedback. You would then discuss the specifics of the employee's poor behavior with the employee.

Watch what happens when you use that same discipline for praise when an employee is doing it right.

Employees are happy to hear an "atta boy" from the boss. It feels good and certainly feels better than criticism. But the goal in the delivery of praise is replication. When the praise is focused and detailed, the positive result of the praise motivates the employee to repeat the praised behavior. When the boss can tie the behavior to positive results for the company, the employee has an increased likelihood to try to repeat the behavior.

Perhaps it might sound like this. "Gwen, nice job on the phone with that upset customer. There were four behaviors you demonstrated that I thought were especially effective. First of all, you never reacted to the customer's anger. You let him vent. The second plus for you was after the venting, you convinced the customer that he had called the right person to get his issue resolved even though his call was not due to an error in our department. Thirdly, you asked for his permission to put him on a short hold (never more than 2-3 minutes) while you connected with the right department and prepped them for the call transfer. Finally, you stayed on the call until the other staff member connected with the customer."

The likelihood is that Gwen will replicate those behaviors. In fact, she probably will go looking for situations when she can do it again. This effort costs the company nothing and the results are powerful.

In an interesting study, it was shown that when an employee learns about a specific weakness in their performance that is communicated to them carefully and compassionately, the employee

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will agree that the weakness is something they want to fix. They will seek ways to fix it, but that search may take time. On the other hand, when praise is delivered in detail (as in our example above) the employee is seven times more likely to replicate the praised behavior than they are to fix the weakness, even when they intend to do so. In short, it appears that we are hardwired to repeat those behaviors that generate praise. While it may be possible that the process of changing the weakness could result in focused praise upon completion, those behaviors that have already generated praise are much more likely to be the first choice.

There are lots of low- or no-cost ways that supervisors can reward and recognize individual and team performance. A banker in the Commercial Loan department takes her team

out for pizza after the deal closes. When her boss learned about the pizza celebration, he offered to reimburse her. Another boss we know gathered his staff and challenged them to list 25 praise and recognition ideas or no- or low-cost suggestions. They eventually agreed to contribute to a fund for celebrations managed by staff.

A word of caution. Be very careful of “employee of the week, month, etc.” events unless you are certain that everyone will win, on occasion. Too often, these contests become too competitive within the department and are counterproductive to team motivation.

Overall, the idea of acknowledging the ongoing performance of teams pays solid dividends, reduces turnover, and attracts the best workers to join the team.

