

Employee Rewards and Recognition

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EMPLOYEE REWARDS AND RECOGNITION 101

Todd Dewett, Ph.D.

People always seem to be looking for the magic motivation bullet. There are thousands of books and articles written about this topic when, in fact, I will assert that the topic is not complex. We simply get so busy at work and focused on our own trials and tribulations that we don't think very deeply about the manner in which we reward and recognize others. Read this very simple prescription and then take a serious look at your workplace practices.

The major premise: thoughtful extrinsic rewards can be useful motivators. Thoughtful extrinsic motivators must:

Always be provided contingent on performance

Never reward mediocrity or low performance in an effort to be "fair." Many managers think "fair" means equal treatment. Wrong – that is only a recipe for long term mediocrity. It creates an unproductive entitlement mentality with lower performers. Worse yet, it upsets the highest performers and encourages them to find another organization more capable of applauding their efforts. Fair means creating a positive and transparent work environment where how one gets ahead is well known and above board. It does not mean equal rewards.

Be personal

Don't assume that others like what you like. Don't assume that Employee A will enjoy and appreciate the same thing as Employee B. Leaders must ask themselves what they know about employees and groups and their unique interests. To the extent possible, make rewards reflect their unique individuality and the unique nature of the work they have done to earn the reward. When everyone is handed an identical award, over time, nobody will be motivated.

Involve some personal choice

You might be talking about goal setting as part of the motivation process or an actual award to be given in recognition of a significant achievement. In either case, offering the person or group some voice in the process is ideal. When offered a choice, when afforded input into the process, the individual or group will feel genuinely involved and respected. Believe it or not, in study after study, high quality interpersonal treatment of this sort is often seen as more fulfilling than the actual award itself.

Be provided in a timely fashion

Whenever possible reduce the amount of time between the act of performance worth rewarding and the receipt of the award. Too often well intentioned leaders will wait until that once per quarter meeting or that annual event to stand in front of a microphone and say thank you. While that can be terribly useful, it is even better to move fast and say thanks ASAP. The reason is simple – it shows that the leadership team is paying attention, and it provides more useful reinforcing feedback to the individual or group because they very recently completed whatever work is being honored. Memories are still vivid and the effect of

the award is much stronger.

Not break the bank

I saved the biggest for the end. Last but not least, realize that all extrinsic rewards – while potentially useful – ultimately take a back seat to intrinsic motivation (how much folks innately enjoy their work and workplace). The more grand the material “carrots” are that we dangle in front of employees, the more we risk them becoming fixated on the carrot instead of the work itself. Thus, err on low cost approaches which follow the themes noted above.

You are welcome. Thousands of books and articles boiled down to just a few paragraphs. Motivation does not have to be mysterious, just thoughtful. Good luck motivating your troops!

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