

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Five Keys to Effective Recognition

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In my day-to-day work as an executive coach, I talk to a lot of ambitious young men and women. They have their eyes set squarely on the top.

At some point I always ask them, "What happens if you never get that dream job at the pinnacle of the organization? Will it be the end of the world?" Most say, "No."

"Then what are you looking for, day by day, to make it all worthwhile, even if you never get the big office in the executive suite?" Surprisingly, few people ever mention salaries and benefits. No, the most common answer is, "I want to feel recognized and respected for doing a good job."

It's Important To Everyone

Can you relate to that? Probably so. All of us want to be acknowledged for being a solid performer. Even if we know we are not a superstar, and don't expect the recognition that goes with superstar status, we still want to feel assured that our contribution is valued. And that's true whether we are on an executive career track or not.

Thus, when a client tells me that he or she longs for recognition, my next query is, "So if recognition is so important to you, how important is it for your people?"

This is a "set up" question, of course, because no one is going to say, "Oh, it's not very important to them at all." I can always count on them saying, "It's very important to them."

To which I then reply, "Then what are you doing – specifically – to assure that you are giving them the kind of feedback that will help them feel recognized and appreciated for what they do well?"

That's a question all of us in leadership need to ask ourselves regularly. Am I giving my people the strokes they need? And am I giving these strokes in the most appropriate, opportune, and effective manner? These questions, moreover, are not just important in the workplace. They are equally relevant to parenting, teaching, or managing volunteers.

A Formula for Recognition

Needless to say, we all intend to give our people proper recognition for a job well done. But how faithfully do intentions translate into action? As we start a new year, what a great time to set goals for ourselves in terms of bestowing effective recognition. And to

help carry through on that resolve, here is a "Five S" formula for providing recognition that genuinely triggers motivation.

The first "S" stands for "straightforward." Be as straightforward as possible in your feedback.

Some people give feedback indirectly, even through silence. I think of a man and his wife who came to a friend of mine for counseling. The woman complained, "He never tells me that he loves me." With a straight face, not to mention a tone of disbelief in his voice, the man actually said, "The day I married you I told you that I loved you. And if I ever change my mind, you'll be the first to know."

As laughable and as sad as that story may be, I've actually had managers tell me much the same thing about their non-recognition of employees. "The people who report to me have a job," they explain, "and their duty is to do it well. Why should I be praising them for doing their duty? That's what they're supposed to do."

In other words, this manager is saying, "The only time my people are going to hear from me is when they mess up. They have to learn that my silence is my way of telling them that they are doing well."

Unfortunately, most people don't interpret silence quite that way. They tend to see silence as evidence that their efforts are unnoticed, unappreciated, or unimportant. Passive recognition – i.e., assuming a "no news is good news" approach – is totally inadequate. People should never have to guess about whether their good work is recognized.

Being Specific

Which leads to our second "S" – be specific. Don't tell someone, "That was a good presentation." Let them know specifically what was good about it. "Your slides communicated clearly, because they were so well thought out and uncluttered." Or, "I thought it was particularly artful the way you fielded that hostile question without appearing defensive."

By offering specific commendation, you achieve two outcomes. First, those you commend have a clear picture of what they did well. That gives them confidence to continue the enforced behavior. And second, you overcome what I would call the "generalizing dilemma."

If you only say, "You're doing a good job," people easily generalize your comment to mean that you are pleased with everything they are doing. Later, when you have to correct them on something, they are likely to react in one of two ways, both of which undercut their enthusiasm. Either they feel that they have suddenly taken a turn for the worse (after all, they thought you saw them as doing a good job in everything). Or they are left confused by the mixed messages they feel they've received from you.

So be specific in your recognition. When you make specific recognition, you build people up, while leaving the door open at the same time to offer constructive criticism later in arenas where their performance needs improvement.

Sooner, Not Later

The third "S" is for "sooner." The sooner you give recognition after a person performs well, the more powerful the resulting motivation. Study after study has confirmed this principle. Awards dinners are great. But don't wait for an awards dinner to recognize people. When you see them perform commendably, tell them then, while they are still feeling good about it.

Our fourth "S" is for "steadily." Give recognition steadily. This goes back to the awards dinner above. Dinners that celebrate milestone achievements are great tradition builders. Dinners that pass out awards for milestone accomplishments are also worth every penny you invest in them.

But the world is beating your people down every day. The defeats and frustrations they feel from other venues of their life inevitably flow over into their work life. Their productivity at work will inevitably be impacted – usually adversely – by the distractions they bring from their outside world.

Your steady practice of recognition serves to offset the morale-sapping impact the world throws at your people. And when you keep their spirits high, you and your organization reap immediate benefit.

Frame Recognition Strategically

I base my fifth "S" on the experience of working for several years alongside one of the most motivational leaders I've ever known. He was superb at giving the kind of recognition I've outlined above. But he added a masterful dimension to it. He tied recognition to strategic priorities. Not only would he send you notes, call you, or drop by to see you to commend something specific you had done, he would regularly expand on his commendation by saying, "That's the very kind of thing we have to do everywhere in our organization in order to achieve our strategic goal of"

He helped you see the significance of your performance against the backdrop of organizational vision. As a consequence, you not only felt you had done something well. You felt you had done something vital.

So set your resolve for the year to recognize straightforwardly, specifically, sooner (rather than later), and steadily. And whenever possible (and I've found it's almost always possible), tie the recognition to strategic priorities. Follow this formula faithfully as the year unfolds, and a year from now you'll look around and find a more motivated, more effective team that's making you look great as a leader!!

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