

RECOGNITION ISN'T ROCKET SCIENCE . . .

Then why is it so darned hard to say, “thank you?” By Dee Hansford

You're working as hard as you can to recruit and retain top performers. You hire right-fit talent, pay competitively, train extensively and offer an enviable benefit package. Yet you're probably losing the people who matter most to your organization. Why?

- 84% of employees thought their performance could be improved if management gave them more information.
- 61% said their bosses don't place much importance on them as people.
- 88% said they do not receive enough acknowledgment for the work they do.

(Source: Adele B. Lynn, Ph.D., *Lynn Learning Labs*)

Businesses are suffering from initiative overload, you tell yourself. No wonder employees are feeling devalued and demotivated. Heck, you feel that way sometimes, yourself. It's no shocker that the number of “start-up” home businesses has grown phenomenally in the last 5 years. Even the most pampered, perk-laden executives are beating a path for the door, citing lack of recognition as the number one reason they leave Fortune 500 companies.

Now multiply those numbers by the rank and file and what do you get? Thousands of “Dilberts” out there, finding lots of ways to do as little work as humanly possible in the cubicle right down the hall. Who created this guy anyway? No, not the Dilbert (created by cartoonist Scott Adams).

Who created the legions of disenfranchised “Dilberts” who don't believe they matter? And, why should they care about a place that doesn't care about them? Oh, those Dilberts. We created them.

A nationwide survey of nearly 2,300 workers was commissioned by the Hudson Institute, a think-tank based in Indianapolis and conducted by Walker Research. They found that only 44% of workers believe their employers show genuine concern for them or care about long-term development. Only 59% believe their employers trust them. The study found that over half of workers were “high risk”—neither committed to their organization nor planning to stay

more than two years. 39 percent of those studied were classified as “trapped” — not committed to the organization but planning to stay. The problem with those workers is that they may perform only well enough to keep from being fired*.

(*Source: *Employer Wake-up call: Most workers don't feel loyal*, John Koenig, *Orlando Sentinel*, November 18, 1999)

Many of us were trained to manage things — projects, budgets, deadlines, capital assets — anything but people, heaven forbid! As a result, many leaders don't understand what a powerful management tool recognition can be for improving employee performance and meeting bottom line objectives. The traditional leader views most forms of recognition as standalone, feel good programs concocted by well-intentioned human resource types who are clueless about his or her business needs. Well, as FDR was one to say, “the buck stops here.”

That may have been then. This is now. We all want to make a difference where we work. We all want to know that the difference we make is noted and appreciated. And we all have the ability to do this. Great leaders (as opposed to managers) know they need to align recognition processes with the corporate mission, values and strategic objectives. Michael Hammer, author of the best seller, *Beyond Reengineering*, captured the concept in this statement:

“If you don't have a very coherent design for your operation—if you don't have a control system, a reward system, and a culture all working in concert—how can you possibly become the best?”

Good question. We do have choices after all. We can let the words on the wall say one thing and the way we treat our people say another. Or we can behave congruently. I like John Woolman's clarity.

“Conduct is more convincing than language.”

Step#1: Decide to start with your own behavior first.

Be honest. Are you a “critic?” Do you

try to help people improve their performance by pointing out what they did wrong to save them from making that mistake again?

Well, stop it. Just for today, try to find someone doing something well; no matter how small the action. Then praise him or her. Right then, right there. Visualize yourself giving recognition that is:

Sincere
Specific
Timely

Why do this? Because 30% of employees improve their performance after being criticized. 90% improve their performance after being praised. You do the math.

A Story: During my stint as manager of Cast Recognition at the Walt Disney World(r) Resort, I often talked with supervisors about how they motivated “problem performers.” One told me that she had “inherited” an employee with a very negative attitude and a personnel file to match. She consciously and strategically set out to praise the person every time she saw him do his job right. Of course, there was the initial cynicism and the cast member's change in behavior and performance didn't happen overnight — but it did happen. Now, he's one of her star performers and often mentors others.

Step # 2: Ask yourself this question.

Would you rather work for Company A — which is spending millions of dollars on restructuring, downsizing; retraining, outsourcing and scores of other initiatives designed to make them more profitable. And ignoring their people.

Or Company B — which is taking a more humanistic, cost-effective approach to re-energizing their business and their employees. The Big “B” rediscovered one of the most misunderstood and underutilized management skills ever. Recognizing employees for their contributions to the business.

Seems like a “no-brainer,” doesn't it? Well, treating employees with respect; saying a simple and sincere “thank you” in a timely manner does make sense. It

makes good business sense, too. Consider this. When you compare lists of “The 100 Best Companies to Work For” from the most recent Working Mother and Fortune magazines, the same names keep popping up on both. SAS Institute. Deloitte & Touche. MBNA. Hewlett-Packard. First Tennessee Bank. To name just a few.

How do they do it? I won’t keep you in suspense here. All I have to do is quote James H. Goodnight, founder of software developer, SAS Institute: “If you do right by people, they’ll do right by you.”

Another story: How many times do we let ourselves off the hook by saying we’re “too busy” to do something special for our staff? Well, three exceptional supervisors at the California State Employees’ Retirement System didn’t let long days and heavy workloads keep them from saying thanks to their Central Records Unit staff for great performance. Debbie Mayberry, Candy Mapel and Jerry Tafoya-Perry spent some of their lunch hours gathering river rocks, shopping for bromeliad plants and moss and planning a festive lunch. Other lunch hours were spent hot gluing the plants and moss to the rock and writing specific messages of appreciation to each person on their staff. The most amazing part is that they managed to keep all of this secret for an entire week!

When “Rock Day” rolled around, Debbie called a mandatory staff meeting for 11:00 am. While she used another meeting as an excuse to sneak off and set up the lunch in another room, Candy and Jerry conducted a “normal” staff meeting. At the end of the meeting, the trio presented each staffer with a personalized “rock plant” as the rest of the team applauded each recipient. The grand finale was a surprise lunch and “thank you” cake. Staff was delighted, re-energized and really grateful to be recognized for their hard work and they told their supervisors so repeatedly!

The moral to this story is — the next time you think you’re “too busy” to give thought and energy to this critical leadership task of recognition — think of Debby, Candy, Jerry and that glue gun!

Step #3: Think of the impact you can make with recognition.

While Fortune magazine’s criteria for selection is more bottom line focused

and includes revenues, job growth and voluntary turnover, both Working Mother and Fortune magazines look at employee-appreciative philosophies such as balance between work and personal life, flextime, telecommuting, on-site child care and stock options. Heck, Autodesk even lets employees bring their dogs to work, allows casual dress every day and grants a six-week paid sabbatical every four years.

Now, if this recognition stuff pays off in greater retention of valued employees, less absenteeism, exceptional customer service, yadda, yadda, yadda. Why the heck aren’t we doing more of it?

We don’t know how. And we don’t realize how much impact it can have.

A national survey of more than 29,000 employees conducted by the Neighborhood Marketing Institute in Palm Beach revealed that 67 percent felt that doing their job well did not lead to recognition and respect.

Yet another story: One top leader at an organization operated on the old “I pay them, why should I have to thank them?” theory until he began to receive specific feedback from his employees. The recognition he received let him know that what he was doing was right and was exactly what his team needed to do their jobs more effectively. As he analyzed his feelings about receiving the praise, he knew that he had neglected a critical factor in the art of motivating employees. Needless to say, he became a “born again” recognizer and the company’s most avid champion for recognition.

Step #4: As Nike says, “Just do it.”

Through training, consulting and coaching and involvement with the National Association for Employee Recognition (NAER), exceptional leaders are learning these key skills:

- Understanding what recognition means to you and those you lead;
- When to reward, recognize and reinforce behavior;
- Identifying the most effective internal and external motivators;
- Learning to provide positive reinforcement in a meaningful manner;
- Linking key business goals to day-to-day behaviors.

One last story: This is a very personal one. While managing Cast Recognition at Disney, I relied on one of our excep-

tional photographers to take cast member portraits as part of an award ceremony. On the day of the event, our photographer arrived right on time and went about his task in his typically efficient manner. However, I noticed that he was not his usual ebullient self and when we had a break, I asked him about it. His mother had died the night before after a long illness, he told me, and rather than let me or our cast members down, he decided to come and work the event. Now, I ask you, how do you recognize such dedication and commitment? After much thought and discussion, we made reservations for him and his family for an upcoming evening at Disney’s Hoop-De-Doo Revue. He called later to tell me that it was the first time his family was not under incredible stress and the first time he had heard his young son laugh in many, many months. He told me he would never forget the kindness shown to his family during that very trying time. I learned the lasting power of recognition that day.

About the author:

In her former role as manager of the Walt Disney World® Resort Cast Recognition department, from 1995 to 1997, Dee Hansford and her team gathered input from over 1,000 cast members to design and implement Walt Disney World’s first global recognition program, Partners In Excellence, which debuted in 1996. Ms. Hansford is the owner of Dee Hansford Consulting, based in Orlando, FL. She is a founding board member of the National Association for Employee Recognition (NAER), www.recognition.org, whose membership has grown to over 500 since 1998. She may be contacted at www.deehansford.com

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