

Random Acts of Recognition

By Trenton Hightower

Excellent managers have one thing in common: they know how to help employees become more productive on the job. Contrary to popular belief, the most effective tool for motivating individuals to peak performance is not money. Studies repeatedly show that the single most important way to help employees excel is recognition.

While an Employee of the Year recognition program may provide some motivation to excel, paying more frequent attention to your staff's performance reaps great rewards. Recognizing individuals who perform well on a daily basis, or who achieve shorter term goals, is one of the best things you can do to increase productivity and improve performance.

A great place to catch your staff excelling is through periodic performance evaluations. Rather than exercise this workplace ritual annually, some of the most effective managers find that meeting with their staff several times a year is a better model.

Try this 5-point model:

- Talk about your expectations for each employee's performance
- Identify a set of simple, measurable and specific goals
- Coach the employee on strategies to achieve these goals.
- Establish a timetable for completion
- Determine how success in each identified area will be measured.

Between each performance evaluation, collect concrete examples to gauge your employee's success toward achieving each goal. If you use customer service tools, gather data from them to make your points clearer at each periodic performance evaluation. Pay attention to customer and client feedback to recognize superior performance as well as to suggest areas of improvement for each employee. Specific examples are the most powerful illustrations.

Encourage each performance evaluation session to be interactive. The best managers build trust and rapport with their employees through honest dialogue. Challenge your staff, and invite them to make comments. Welcome an honest give-and-take. Count on your staff to provide a system of checks and balances—together, you can arrive at reasonable goals and develop strategies to attain them on a timetable that is realistic and profitable.

Performance evaluations often involve a level of confrontation that is difficult for even the best managers. Keep in mind, however, that not holding an employee accountable can have tough consequences in the long run. Should an employee's poor performance end in termination, documentation of appropriate coaching and counseling will be important.

While many companies use a scale of 1-5 to evaluate performance, few organizations invest any time negotiating what will constitute each level. Arriving at consensus about how to measure each level will provide a more consistent, objective measure of performance.