

Employee recognition: Have you hugged your employees today?

by Peter Hart

You might think that recognition is about the rewards you give employees for long years of service or for retiring after a notable career. It's really not.

Recognition is about employee engagement. And employee engagement starts with *employer engagement*. How engaged are you with your employees? Do you know their names? Their goals? What makes them tick?

Recognition doesn't have to be about gold watches or cash bonuses. It's even more effective when it's about relationships.

Continue (or start) to appreciate your employees and recognize them for what they do. Know their names, their stories. Let them know yours. Let them in on the organization's mission, vision and values. Establish trust.

2 rules for recognition

Treat your employees well. How you treat people today is going to determine whether your valued employees stay with you when the financial crisis is over. I have two rules:

1. The Golden Rule: Treat your employees as you want them to treat your company. How can you expect them to be loyal to the company if you're not loyal to them? How can you expect them to be engaged at work if you're not engaged with them?

2. The Platinum Rule: Treat your employees as you want them to treat your customers. It's no coincidence that some of the most profitable companies in America are also known as the best places to work.

You can't follow these two rules by simply paying people more. Even though employees often say they want cash, research shows that personal, noncash incentives are much more powerful and a bigger lift than dollars and cents or a tricked-out iPhone.

You can cut back on the tangible rewards, but never cut back on the recognition.

Do it every day

In fact, now is a good time to step it up. When you cut pay and staff and expect more from those who remain, that's a good time to revamp your recognition program. Sixty percent of employees say they do not feel *recognized*.

Make recognition a day-to-day occurrence. Here's how:

- **Say “thank you”** to employees all the time. Say it in front of others; it’s more effective that way.
- **Know when your employees celebrate personal milestones**—and send a note or a token gift to acknowledge them. *Example:* At our company, whenever an employee fills out a change-of-address form, HR automatically sends a plant to the new home as a housewarming gift.
- **Personalize recognition** for your own employees. Don’t let vendors who sell reward items determine your recognition plan. The gift items are just awards; the reasons why employees receive them—and the way they’re given—are the heart of a good program.
- **Encourage managers to stop by an employee’s cubicle** to shake hands every year on the anniversary of the day the person joined your organization.
- **Recognize the behaviors and activities that led to an achievement**, not just the achievement itself. *Example:* Recognize an employee for enrolling in a college course rather than waiting until he or she graduates.
- **Encourage everybody to start recognizing others.** Recognition can flow from manager to employee, from employee to manager, from employee to employee and from manager to manager.

Research shows that the absence of recognition is the second-leading cause of burnout and stress in the workplace. So its presence should have the opposite effect.

Recognition is a powerful tool—but it takes a real leader to use it right. The physical stuff like the gold watches are the things the company usually delivers. It’s the emotional stuff that managers so often fail to deliver. And that’s why people “quit their managers.” You can stop it without spending a dime.

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