

Employee recognition: 5 rules to get it right

Recognition is the lifeblood of a manager. No, it's the lifeblood of the workplace.

If you want to keep your employees plugged into their jobs and coming into work with better 'tudes, you're going to have to reinforce them somehow.

But the question is, how? And when? And how much?

This is where it gets tricky.

Here are some rules to follow when handing out the accolades:

Rule #1: Do not reward competence. That is, avoid heaping praise, handing out prizes or serving up special perks for workers who are doing what they are supposed to be doing. If you do, how can you ever expect them to do something out of the ordinary? Save the rewards for the extraordinary.

Rule #2: Don't set rigid parameters. Keep an open mind as to what actions deserve recognition. If you follow a predictable formula, employees will quickly learn how to game your system. Instead, look for opportunities that can really give you a bang for your carrot. Did an employee who's usually aloof go out of his way to wow a customer? A pat on his back will go a long way.

Rule #3: Do it soon. Don't wait until the annual Christmas party to hand out praise for exceptional work that was done in July. The passage of time dilutes the effect. The recognition needs to be done as soon as you become aware of the accomplishment. That spontaneity tells the employee that you couldn't wait to let her know how impressed you are. It's genuine.

Rule #4: Mix up the prizes. A drawer full of \$10 Starbucks gift cards looks like a tip you picked up at the last seminar you attended. Get a little more creative, but be careful to match the reward to the deed. The aloof employee who wowed the customer shouldn't get a paid day off for his fine feat, but maybe the person who put in extra time to perfect a project deserves one. Also, think of what the particular person likes. Two tickets to a ball game for a fan might resonate well.

Rule #5: Mean it. Really mean it. Your recognition should never look contrived, like it came out of the big management retreat you just came back from. Although employees appreciate any recognition they can get, there's nothing like looking an employee in the eye, and from the heart telling her, "You nailed it. I just want to let you know how much I appreciate what you did. Stellar work. Thank you."