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Results Driven Recognition

Recognition Best Practices:

Why Managers Don't Use Recognition

(and How to Get Them to Start)

By Bob Nelson, Ph.D.

Background

Employees expect to be recognized when they do good work. Thanking employees for doing good work is not just common sense, it increases the likelihood that they will want to continue to do good work and serves as a catalyst for attracting and retaining talented employees you and your organization need to be successful. In addition, I have found that managers who used recognition reported that it helped them:

- Better motivate employees (90%)
- Increase employee performance (84%)
- Provide practical feedback (84%)
- More easily get work done (80%)
- Enhance productivity (78%)
- Better achieve their personal goals (69%)
- Achieve their job goals (60%)

So the question remains, if recognition really does work at driving performance of all types, why don't more managers use it? This was the primary research question of my doctoral dissertation that I spent three years answering as part of my Ph.D. requirements at the Peter F. Drucker Graduate Management School of The Claremont Graduate University in Los Angeles. The study was of managers from 34 national employers ranging from The Walt Disney Corporation to the U.S. Postal Service, representing seven industries: healthcare, financial services, insurance, hospitality/restaurant/retail, information technology, manufacturing, and government.

In each organization, I used three-way validation to identify both high-recognition and low/no-recognition managers in each organization. Once those two camps of managers were established, I systematically examined 140 variables taken from research and motivation theories as well as my own field work with hundreds of organizations to determine what exactly helped or hindered managers to use recognition with their employees. Open-ended questions were also used to collect managers' perceptions of the primary variables that encouraged or inhibited their use of recognition. The validity of the study was enhanced by an exceptional response rate of 69 percent.

Why Managers Don't Use Recognition

The results of the study were illuminating and at times surprising. Of the 140 variables I analyzed, 99 had some degree of significance, that is, predictability beyond chance that the variable influenced the use of recognition by managers in the study. The primary reasons why managers did not use recognition with their employees were found to be (in priority order):

1 "I am unsure how best to recognize my employees."

Although thanking an employee for doing a good job may seem like a common sense thing to do, the behavior does not come easily to most low-use managers who often have a blind spot regarding the value of the behavior. As such, they need to have the awareness increased of the importance of recognition, to be trained in the skills of recognition, to be provided feedback about their use of recognition, and to be shown positive examples and techniques that they can actually do, no matter their time and resource constraints. Managers should discuss ways their staff wants to be recognized when they do good work and seek feedback on the recognition behaviors they plan to use with their employees.

Example: At Bank of America in Boston, managers give employees a blank index card on their first day of work and ask them to make a list of those things that motivate them. The manager ends up with an individualized motivation checklist for every employee. In fact, Bank of America has also made it a corporate policy for every meeting to begin with some type of recognition.

2 "I do not feel providing recognition is an important part of my job."

Organizations need to set the expectation that providing recognition is not an optional activity, but rather an integral part of every manager's job that helps drive the organization's strategies, and goals. Managers need to be evaluated on the success of their efforts at providing recognition in a frequent and meaningful way and to be held accountable for using recognition with their employees. Recognition should be made to be an important part of the ongoing planning of organizational, team, and individual goal setting, and not "management by announcement" in which an initiative is announced once and then never heard of again.

Example: A vice president at AAA of Southern California personally writes notes of thanks to individuals in the organization's field offices, demonstrating to all managers under him that if he could find time to acknowledge employees, they need to do so as well.

3 "I do not have the time to recognize my employees."

Who does have time to do something they don't feel is important to do to begin with? The reaction by low-recognition users of not having enough time is in relation to their perceived priorities that other things are more important in their jobs. Such perceptions can be countered with recognition techniques that can be readily applied, even by busy managers.

Example: The CEO of Paragon Steak House once told me that he knew recognition was important, but he never seemed to have time to do it. One day he decided that if people really were his most important asset, he needed to find time to recognize them when they did good work, and to find a strategy he could systematically do. He committed to taking a few minutes at the end of each day to reflect on the day and whose actions stood out, jotting each person a personal note. To make his commitment a reality, he proceeded to purchase some note cards and keep them on his desk top as a reminder to do the activity every evening prior to leaving his office.

4 "I am afraid I might leave somebody out."

Another common concern of managers is the possibility of leaving out someone who is deserving of recognition. Whereas low-use managers take this concern and use it as an excuse for not recognizing employees at all, high-use managers take the same concern and use it to be sure that no one is left out. This might, for example, mean checking with a team leader to see if you have all the names of people that assisted with a successful project before commending the team in public. If at any time someone deserving is left out, it is perfectly acceptable to simply apologize and make amends as appropriate; that is, to acknowledge the oversight, apologize for it, and still provide the recognition. It is managers that learn from such an experience that get better at the behavior.

Example: I recently attended an awards presentation at which the presenter and top manager personally checked in advance to see that everyone who was receiving an award that evening was present (and how to pronounce each person's name who is being acknowledged!) so that no one's name would be called who was absent. (Those individuals who were not present were acknowledged separately in person by the leader).

5 "Employees do not value the recognition I have given in the past."

Instead of being put off by what might not have worked in the past, low-use managers should make a fresh start and seek to find out what forms of recognition their employees would most value and make an ongoing commitment to do those things, not a passing commitment to "give it a try." Managers can talk with employees one-on-one or have a group discussion about potential forms of recognition that employees value or ask each employee to name two personal motivators at the next team meeting. By involving employees in decisions that affect their own motivation, managers increase the employees' commitment and buy-in as well as the likelihood that what is done will be successful.

Example: A manager at the Hyatt Corporation asked her employees at a staff meeting what ideas they had for increasing recognition. One of the employees suggested that the department rotate the responsibility for recognition throughout the group so that each week one person would be responsible for identifying some area of performance and then recognizing the person responsible in some way of his or her own choosing. Creativity flourished and recognition skyrocketed as employees were empowered to be an integral part of the recognition process.

6 "My organization does not help facilitate or support recognition efforts."

Although recognition efforts can flourish even in the absence of formal organizational support, such support, if made available, can help managers maintain their commitment. Information, training, tools, budget and programs that reinforce recognition should be made available on an ongoing basis to support recognition efforts and the expectation that the organization has for every manager to take the responsibility of providing recognition seriously.

Example: At each morning's plant-wide meeting at Honeywell's industrial fibers plant in Moncure, North Carolina, employees are allowed to publicly exchange thanks and acknowledgements with one another, as deserving. Upon hearing of an employee achievement from one of his managers, the plant manager would suggest possible recognition activities for that manager to consider doing for his employees. In another example, all supervisors at Busch Gardens in Tampa, Florida, are provided tokens inscribed with the words "Thank you" to use as an on-the-spot form of recognition for any employee caught demonstrating one of the organization's core values which only takes a moment to do.

Why Managers Use Recognition

What's different about managers who use recognition? You might think the list of why managers use recognition would be a mirrored image of the list as to why managers don't use recognition, but that is not the case. Instead, the top reasons I found as to why managers use recognition are:

1 **Personal Responsibility.** Managers who frequently use recognition have internalized the importance of the behavior and make intentional plans to practice it on a daily basis, that is, they actively looked for and then acted upon opportunities to recognize their employees and tried to do so every day. This is the state of mind we need to get all managers into. "Low-use" managers feel strongly that recognition is not important, and therefore do not use the behavior.

2 **Skills & confidence.** High-use managers have the interpersonal skills and confidence to use recognition, are good at the behavior, and get better at using recognition over time. Low-use managers did not know how to effectively provide recognition and felt that its use would lead to undesired outcomes. For many low-use managers, the challenge is often just to "get them in the game" by having them experience a positive success in the use of employee recognition that they can then build upon.

3 **Recognized for recognition.** High-use managers were recognized for using recognition (most notably by their employees), suggesting that the more recognition someone gives, the more likely that he or she will be thanked by recipients—and the more likely the behavior will become a habit. Organizations interested in creating a recognition culture should thus consider vehicles for employees to recognize their managers at different levels of the organization.

4 **Manager's age.** My research showed that older managers (over 50) who had worked many years in the same job or for the same organization were more likely to feel that recognition was not an important behavior to practice. In fact, age was the only significant demographic variable that distinguished the group of high-use managers from the group of low-use managers. This suggests that older managers may be more reluctant to use recognition and that they thus may need additional convincing and encouragement to make it happen.

5 **Role models.** High-use managers were significantly more likely to have had parents who used recognition, although neither high-use nor low-use managers reported that their own managers recognized them(!). While there's little we can do about the upbringing of those with whom we work, it is encouraging to know that high-use managers recognize their employees despite not receiving similar recognition from their own managers. This suggests that a culture of recognition can be built from the bottom up, and not just from the top down.

Unexpected Findings

Surprising differences in the comparison of low/no-use managers to high-use managers include:

Perceptions of Time. Most managers are pressed for time, but high-use managers did not see time as a major constraint. Instead, they felt that few things had as much power and effectiveness as recognition that could be done with so little time, in that some of the best forms of recognition (personal or written praise, public recognition, positive voicemail or e-mail messages, etc.) require very little time to implement. Low-use managers, however, cited "limited time" as one of the main reasons why they didn't use recognition. It seems that a lack of time is not a true obstacle to giving recognition, but only an excuse for those managers who don't believe in the value of the behavior.

Omissions of Recognition. Most managers are concerned about the possibility of overlooking deserving employees when people are singled out for recognition. Evidence from my study indicates, however, that concern over leaving someone out when using recognition is more of an excuse for low-use managers and more of a consideration for high-use managers. Low-use managers use this reason as an excuse not to recognize employees, whereas high-use managers take into account this consideration and are careful not to exclude anybody who deserves it.

Impact of Stress & Change. As the amount of stress and change, pressure and constraints in an organization increases, so too does the need for a concerted effort to enhance employee recognition. Also compounding the need for recognition is the influx of technology which has most employees spending more time with a computer screen and much less time face-to-face with their managers who today are likely to be located in another facility or time zone. For employees in high pressure, high-stress positions the need for recognition also increases. Thus, it's often in times of stress and change, when managers are least likely to use recognition that they most need to use it with their employees.

Helping Low-Use Managers Become High-Use Managers

Can a low-recognition use manager become a high-recognition use manager? The overwhelming answer is "yes!" Our behaviors tend to follow our beliefs, which follow our values, so I advocate a Head, Hands and Heart approach to getting managers to use recognition:

Head

All behaviors stem from our beliefs, so the starting point for converting managers to use recognition is with their conceptual model for effective managing. You need to share the evidence that recognition is highly desired by today's employees, that it really works to create a performance culture and that the organization is mandating that all managers make the behavior a priority in their sphere of influence in the organization. Employee recognition will only be as effective as those managers who use it, thus management training is integral to driving effective recognition efforts within any organization.

Hands

A manager can be well-intended, yet still lacking in the skills to do recognition. That's why it's important to explicitly discuss with managers what recognition looks like in practice, while at the same time reminding them how easy it is for them to do the behavior well. Simple techniques may be most effective—placing a stack of thank you cards on a manager's desk and getting his commitment to write a few notes to deserving employees at the end each day, or having them list their direct reports on their weekly "to do" list and checking off each employee once they've "caught him doing something right." Techniques such as these can go a long way toward making recognition seem both simple and doable.

Heart

Managers need to personally experience the behavior and potential to truly become believers in the activity and systematically build upon its use with subsequent successes. Once they are convinced of the value of recognition, tools, resources and encouragement can help to make the identification of recognition opportunities and the practice of recognition routine. Having managers share what has worked for them when they use recognition on an ongoing basis is a great strategy to keep an ongoing focus on the activity.

The core element for an environment of effective and sustained recognition is the role of your managers and their awareness, ability and commitment to using recognition on an ongoing basis. By encouraging managers to make the first step in recognizing others, you can set them on a journey that can prove successful. The trick lies in finding a catalyst—an event or trigger mechanism that will help low-use managers personally experience recognition in a positive, meaningful way. Such a stimulus as seeing an admired leader in the organization use recognition, personal feedback for the manager, a rational discussion, or even an article that persuades the individual to act differently can lend immediate credibility to the behavior and start the person on a journey toward increased recognition use. A seemingly small step can make a profound difference.

Summary

Two-thirds of the reasons why managers do not use recognition stem back to the beliefs they have about the topic. Recognizing employees is one of the most important things a manager can do to build morale and enhance performance in today's fast-moving, competitive workplaces. It is also essential to an organization's ability to attract and retain talent, and get the most out of the investment being made in that talent. Managers can't control their age or upbringing, but they can learn to understand their biases and overcome those beliefs that hamper their effectiveness and learn new behaviors that will help them — and the organizations for which they work — be successful. Managers who do not already recognize their employees need to make employee recognition a part of their daily behavioral repertoire.

Insights & Implications

- Employees expect to be recognized when they do good work.
- The top reasons given by managers who seldom recognize employees include they are unsure how best to recognize their employees, they don't have time, and they are afraid of leaving someone out.
- The top reasons given by managers who frequently recognize employees is that they feel it is their personal responsibility as a manager to make recognition happen, they have the skills and confidence to do so, and they are recognized for using recognition—primarily by their employees.
- Comparisons of low/n-use manager and high-use managers show stark contrasts in the perception of time and recognition omissions in using recognition.
- As the degree of stress and change accelerates, managers need to use recognition more often, although the tendency in such instances is for managers to use recognition less.
- When converting managers who seldom use recognition into managers who often use recognition, a Head, Hands, and Heart approach typically works best.

About Dr. Bob Nelson

Bob Nelson is considered the world's leading authority on employee recognition, rewards, and retention. He earned his Ph.D. on the topic of employee recognition (specifically addressing why managers do or do not use recognition with their employees), working with Dr. Peter F. Drucker, the Father of Modern Management at The Claremont Graduate University and holds an MBA from UC Berkeley. He is a multi-million-copy, best-selling author of 1001 Ways to Reward Employees (now in its 57th printing) and The 1001 Rewards & Recognition Fieldbook, as well as over 800 articles on the topic of recognition and rewards. He has worked with over 3/4s of the Fortune 500 companies on the topic of employee motivation and is a frequent keynote presenter for national conferences, associations and management groups worldwide. www.nelson-motivation.com

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