

Powerful Motivators: Positive Reinforcement and Praise

Positive reinforcement and praise are two of the most powerful employee motivators. They're also free. Unfortunately they're frequently not used or not used productively. The following discussion provides a few suggestions as to how to use recognition more effectively.

Guidelines for Effective Recognition

- Give it often.
 - ✓ When an individual has done something "above and beyond."
 - ✓ When an employee has significantly improved performance.
 - ✓ When an employee has met organizational expectations over a long period of time. (These people often get overlooked.)
 - ✓ As a strategy to improve performance or make changes in behavior.
- Provide recognition as soon as possible, to link praise with the performance. It's much more powerful that way.
- Focus reinforcement on specific individuals or teams. General statements such as, "Good job everybody" are not very helpful.
- Make your reinforcement as specific, descriptive, and precise as possible. People need to know why they are being reinforced and what they did to earn your attention. If they know why you are praising them they are more likely to do it again.

Examples:

- ✓ Too general: "Great work, Bob."
- ✓ Better: "You've increased production by 15% while maintaining your error-free record for over 3 weeks. Great job!"
- Make sure the employee knows why his performance is important to you and the company.

Example:

- ✓ "Jose, the sales stats that you compiled for us were clear, usable, and complete. They allowed marketing to quickly develop our plans for next year and immediately target the markets in the southwest region. Your work was critical to our successful expansion."
- Customize your recognition. People value very different things. Avoid thinking "I know what motivates me so I know what motivates my employees."

Examples:

- ✓ Some employees prefer to be recognized privately, while others prefer it in front of people.
- ✓ Some like to receive a simple memo thanking them, while others may like an award certificate.
- Make your recognition personal. It shows you cared enough to take the extra time to do it.
- Make your reinforcement appropriate and proportionate. Don't exaggerate or you will lose credibility. Be sincere and substantive.
- Think small. Acknowledge small achievements. Do not wait until an employee has completed a project or performed perfectly to provide recognition.
- Try to avoid qualified praise (e.g., "This looks good but...")
- Make sure you are reinforcing what you think you are reinforcing. Remember, you get what you reward.
- Align the goals of the organization with the goals of the employee. Identify the organization's, department's, and position's goals so that you know what you want from employees. Then reinforce employee performance that promotes those goals. Clearly convey how employee performance relates to organizational results.
- Consider implementing formal recognition programs company-wide, enabling employees to easily provide praise or send messages of appreciation (e.g., providing company "thank you" notes or appreciation note cards.) Train your employees and managers in how to provide effective recognition.
- Recognition seems like common sense. However it is not commonly given. So practice recognizing employees and their achievements on a daily basis. It may take a bit of effort to remind yourself of it at the beginning.