

# Improving Staff Morale Through Authentic Appreciation

BY PAUL WHITE

Employee recognition will have little to no effect if it doesn't appear to be genuine.

## CHECKLIST

### Reasons Why Appreciation Isn't Perceived as Authentic

- The behavior is new and inconsistent with prior ways of relating to colleagues.
- A person's tone of voice or facial expressions don't seem to match their words.
- How the person relates in front of others (especially supervisors) differs from how he interacts privately.
- The individual has a history of saying one thing and doing another.
- A past relational conflict hasn't been addressed and is essentially ignored.

**W**hen stress levels in a workplace are high and they continue over time, burnout often follows, with team members leaving their jobs as a result.

The reality is that most Americans are not satisfied at work. A 2013 Gallup poll found that only 30 percent of U.S. employees are actively involved in and emotionally committed to their place of employment, with more than 25 percent strongly disliking their job.

While the vast majority of organizations and businesses in the United States report having some form of employee recognition program, most American workers do not feel appreciated or valued. Interestingly, research shows that nonfinancial factors are key to improving employee morale and motivation.

Although the purpose of employee recognition programs is well intentioned, such programs often have an unintentional negative impact. For example, Appreciation at Work has found that 30 percent to 35 percent of employees don't want to go up in front of a large group to accept an award.

Additionally, the generic nature of the typical award—the recognition plaque or certificate that every recipient receives—has an impersonal feel. Many awards given tend to be tangible—gift cards, coupons, and small token gifts—while most people report they place greater value on such intangibles as verbal praise, personal attention, or lending assistance.

Also, the most common type of recognition award is given for length of service, which has little impact on motivating staff.

The combination of group-based, generic, impersonal awards leads recipients to feel the recognition is more for show than genuine appreciation for them individually. The result? Apathy, sarcasm, and cynicism. To remedy this, try authentic appreciation.

### What it is

Communicating appreciation is not the same as giving a passing compliment or establishing a policy to write three thank-you notes each month. The goal is not to go through the motions; it's to authentically communicate appreciation for the value each team member contributes to the organization.

A key principle to understand is that not everyone feels valued or encouraged in the same way. Most people attempt to communicate appreciation in the ways that are meaningful to them, but those you work with have different actions that encourage them.

## Why it works

Feeling appreciated at work is critical because each of us wants to know that what we are doing matters. We don't just want to put in our time or get a paycheck.

A survey conducted by the *Chicago Tribune* of more than 30,000 individuals found that the number one reason cited by employees who enjoy their work was: "I feel genuinely appreciated at this company."

## Guidelines

Appreciation at Work has found that communicating "authentic appreciation" has a significant, positive impact on staff morale and on-the-job satisfaction. So how do you convey it genuinely?

**Consider how you express appreciation.** Since not everyone feels valued in the same ways, leaders need to learn different ways to communicate appreciation.

Although giving verbal praise may be meaningful to you, some individuals may think that "words are cheap." Some employees are encouraged when someone helps them with a task; others want to do it themselves.

Spending time is another way to demonstrate support. One staff member reported, "I just want my supervisor to stop by my office every once in a while and see how I'm doing."

Bringing a colleague a special cup of coffee when you know he has had a long day is yet another way. Even a "high five" or a "fist bump" can be a form of acknowledgement when a problem has been resolved.

**Make it personal.** Group-based recognition is a good start, but if the appreciation communicated doesn't relate to what the individual team member did, the message will have little impact.

A team member wants to know (and

hear about) what she has done that is valued. State specifically what team members do that you value—that you appreciate that they remained calm while relating to a difficult customer, or that you noticed them providing assistance to a new salesperson learning the customer relationship management system. Also, tell them why their actions were important to you and the organization.

**Always be genuine.** If the communication of appreciation is not perceived as being genuine, nothing else really matters. If you don't mean it, don't say it.

How do you get past people's perception that you don't truly value them? There is no magic bullet. However, the best course of action is to repeatedly communicate appreciation for the specific actions or character qualities that you value, doing so in ways important to your colleagues. Over time, you may be able to convince them that you truly mean what you are saying.

**Provide regular feedback.** How often appreciation is expressed varies and depends on many factors—the type of work setting, how often you interact, the quality (length, history, and closeness) of the relationship, for example. Regardless, communicating appreciation should be more than a perfunctory once-a-year occurrence.

Beware: When recognition is only given during events structured by the company, its genuineness will be questioned.

## Results

The goal of communicating authentic appreciation is not just to make people feel good. There are significant financial benefits to the organization, and when employees feel truly valued, the business gains a competitive edge in hiring new talent because it becomes one of the places people

## RESOURCES

Chapman, G., and P. White. 2012. *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*. Chicago: Northfield Press.

Chapman, G., P. White, and H. Myra. 2014. *Rising Above a Toxic Workplace*. Chicago: Northfield Press.

Chapman, G., P. White, and H. Myra. 2014. *Sync or Swim: A Fable About Teamwork and Coming Together in a Crisis*. Chicago: Northfield Press.

want to work. Other positive results include:

- Employees show up and on time.
- The amount and intensity of staff conflict subsides.
- Losing quality team members decreases.
- Policies and procedures are followed, with increased productivity.
- Customer satisfaction ratings rise.
- Managers and supervisors enjoy their work more.

Overall staff morale improves in workplaces where people feel truly valued by their supervisors and colleagues for their contributions to the organization.

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