

TWO MAJOR MISCONCEPTIONS LEADERS HOLD ABOUT APPRECIATION

by Dr. Paul White

“Appreciation” has become a major buzz word in many workplaces—to the point that there have been numerous commercials in the media boasting “We Appreciate You” (often in the context of employees to customers).

In the recent past, the emphasis has been more on employee recognition, with numerous books, articles, and seminars and even companies committed to helping leaders and managers recognizing their team members for work well done. In fact, experts in human resource management estimate 90% of all businesses and organizations in the U.S. have some form of employee recognition program.

The problem is—in terms of helping employees feeling truly valued and appreciated—employee recognition programs have failed. While recognition and reward programs have proliferated, the level of employee engagement in job satisfaction has actually *declined* over the same time period. This is largely because most employee recognition activities are generic (everyone gets the same award organizationally in contrast to being individualized and personal) and ultimately, come across as inauthentic.

As a result, emphasizing authentic, personal appreciation has become the new focus and many work environments. While pursuing individualized appreciation is a positive direction, there remain two major misconceptions about appreciation that are held by many leaders.

Misconception #1: The primary goal of communicating appreciation is to make employees feel good.

This belief position seems to be held more frequently by individuals on the cynical side, who disparagingly condemn all appreciation as being ‘touchy feely crap’. “Work is about getting things done: I don’t care how people feel about it” is a common mantra stated.

Unfortunately, there is some basis for holding this belief. In the world of encouragement and positive thinking, some well-meaning individuals have taken the appreciation emphasis to the point of having a goal of “making everyone happy.” In

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fact, there are some (misguided) proponents of creating “Chief Happiness Officers” in the workplace.

As a psychologist, I can easily assert that this is, and will be, a failing endeavor. If it ever gets off the ground, the focus of making others happy will crash and burn quickly. Why? Because no one can make anyone else happy. (We actually can't even make ourselves happy! Happiness is a result of other positive habits in our lives.)

Even if our focus is narrowed to helping people “feel good”, attaining this goal will also fail. We now know that our feeling responses are essentially a result of whether our expectations are met in “real-life.” If they are met, we are pleased; if they are not met, we become frustrated, angry, or disappointed. Although we can assist people in learning to adjust their expectations more closely to reality, no one can make anyone else feel anything.

Misconception #2: The primary purpose of communicating appreciation is to increase productivity.

A second mistaken belief about communicating appreciation in the workplace has grown out of a distorted view of recognition. When recognition experts and researchers began to share the positive financial benefits that occur when people feel valued, business leaders who were excited about the results started focusing primarily on the fiscal aspects.

Research has consistently demonstrated a strong return on investment in response to employees being recognized and feeling appreciated including:

- increased daily attendance (not a small factor for retail stores and fast food restaurants)
- decreased tardiness
- employees following policies and procedures more faithfully
- reduced conflict between staff
- increased productivity (in some work settings), and
- higher customer satisfaction ratings.

These benefits all add up to save companies money and make them more competitive in the marketplace. In fact, high staff turnover has been shown to be the single greatest non-productive cost to businesses.

But when the purpose of appreciation is driven primarily (or in some cases, solely) by financial factors—the game changes. The issue now has moved into the arena of manipulation and displaying certain behaviors for ulterior, selfish motives.

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Hence, in the world of employee recognition, a huge “push back” from employees (and some managers) is occurring. Cynicism and resentment are two of the most common responses from employees who believe employer recognition activities are implemented primarily to increase their productivity and the profits for the company (or bonuses for their managers).

The true purpose for communicating appreciation

What then is the real purpose of communicating appreciation for those with whom you work? Ultimately, this is a personal issue for each individual: Why do I communicate a sense of appreciation to my colleagues?

Multiple reasons exist, including some that are self-serving, but foundationally ***appreciation for colleagues communicates a sense of respect and value for the person.***

An important factor to note is that the appreciation doesn't always have to be for the work they do. Yes, we can appreciate the skills, talents, and abilities a coworker brings to the organization and how they help the company (department, or you) be more effective and successful. But people are more than production units. Employees have more value than just what is measured in how much they “get done.”

Some individuals are appreciated by their colleagues for just “who they are”—their personality, demeanor, or other qualities. For example, some add a brightness to the office because of their cheerful demeanor and positive outlook. Others are appreciated because of their calm demeanor and ability to think through the issues in the midst of a crisis. And some are respected for what they do outside of work—a single mother committed to her family, an individual who gives a lot to the community through volunteerism, or someone who demonstrates self-discipline by training for a marathon.

Conclusion

Having an accurate understanding of the concept of appreciation and its role in successful organizations is important for leaders. Some leaders mistakenly believe communicating appreciation is all about “making people feel good”. Pursuing this as a primary goal will fail since no one can “make” anyone else feel anything.

Research has shown that when employees feel valued and appreciated, good results occur within the workplace, many of which have positive financial benefits for the organization. However, when managers or leaders attempt to use recognition and appreciation for the purpose of achieving secondary financial gains, they are playing a risky game of manipulation which can seriously undermine trust in work relationships.

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The foundation of authentic appreciation is respecting and valuing each employee for who they are as a person, in addition to the contributions they make to the organization. When appreciation is communicated from this perspective, all stakeholders win – the employee, the supervisor, the organization, customers and clients, as well as the family and friends of the employee who get to enjoy a more positive, encouraged individual.

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