

Lunch ... with a Side of Carrots

By Chester Elton

It was the last of four days of training in Beijing, China. I was seated in a very familiar restaurant. Each day, all the trainers and students from our human resource classes had gathered at the same eatery—and each day I had been assisted by the same server. She was great. My glass was always full. She expertly helped me navigate the unfamiliar menu. And she always had a smile on her face.

So, during my last lunch in Beijing, I decided to return the favor. Near the end of my meal, I called her over to say thanks for the great service. I explained to her (through my interpreter) that in my company we recognize and reward outstanding service. She immediately brightened and said, “Well, I want to work for you, then.” I went on to explain that we call it the “Power of the Carrot,” or “Positive Employee Recognition,” and to commemorate her great service I presented her with a “Garrett the Carrot.”

Now, Garrett is simply a plush orange, smiling carrot. They cost a dollar or two to make, and (you guessed it) we manufacture them in China. An inexpensive gift to be sure, but to our server it was like receiving an Academy Award. She called her friends over and we took many pictures. For the rest of the lunch hour she was a super star: the most valued, appreciated and productive server in the restaurant. And all because of a one-dollar carrot and a simple “Xie Xie” (thank you). Amazing what a little thanks can do.

Even more amazing is that nothing got lost in the translation. Through that experience (and many more since then) I've found that the language of recognition is absolutely universal. Everyone has an innate human need to be valued and appreciated. And the companies that meet that need, do best.

The lesson came as something of a surprise—and a bit of a relief. Of course, I've known for years that recognition works like gangbusters in North America. In fact, over the last four years, my co-author Adrian Gostick and I have presented at conferences all over the continent, teaching that when you appreciate and value your employees, they become more engaged and productive.

But would that message ring true with the people of China, I had wondered? After all, for generations the Chinese methodology has been state and company first, individuals (a distant) second. Chinese managers had never before worried about recruitment. They hadn't worried about retention, for that matter, either. If you needed workers, the central government sent them to you. And they stayed. It was that simple—until recently.

Times are changing in China. The emerging free market has brought options to both employers and employees. Leaders in China have glimpsed different management styles within American and European companies and are eager to apply them. With recruitment, retention and motivation becoming issues for the first time. Chinese businesses and managers are looking for ways to go beyond the paycheck to increase productivity and profits. They are open to new methodologies for engaging and valuing their employees.

In this climate, our message of valuing the individual was received with great enthusiasm. We taught that successful free-market businesses have:

1. A sound business plan coupled with a product in demand
2. Fair product pricing and effective distribution
3. The right technology and economic planning

And to those, we added a critical fourth concept:

4. A culture that values and recognizes employees.

That's because, after all the technology is in place and every way to wring the last bit of efficiency out of every process has been exploited, it is the people who become a company's greatest advantage. It works like this: the companies that succeed are the ones that execute their plans and strategies the best. And the companies that do that the best are the ones with the most engaged and committed employees. Engagement and commitment come from a culture that values and recognizes people. In other words, companies that understand the power of a "Carrot Culture" will win every time ... and everywhere.

Recognition is a principle that rings as true in Bangor, Maine, as in Beijing, China. I have seen it at work all over North America. And on the last day of training in a crowded restaurant in Beijing, I watched the magic of "Thank you" make a server a superstar. And it all happened because in any language and in any culture, recognition is just good business.

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