



The Power of Appreciation

Little Expressions of Gratitude Can Go a Long Way in the Office

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Hey, what about me!?

It's the whine heard 'round the world after a tough day at work. People want to be recognized, whether it's a little thank-you e-mail from a client, or a plaque given for great service at the company awards dinner.

A few months ago, someone wrote to me to inquire if it is ever appropriate to ask for that recognition. The reason this person asked? "A number of the people I've worked with on the project in another organization are leaving. . . . Is it appropriate to ask them for some sort of recognition (not even money), e.g., a plaque, to memorialize my contribution before they leave and I'm left to establish new relationships with their successors?"

While that may sound tacky to many of us, it's not *entirely* inappropriate. And perhaps it's a good lesson for managers and companies out there: A little recognition can mean a lot to most workers.

Several years ago, Cendant Car Rental Group, the parent company of Avis Rent A Car Systems Inc., created a formal reward program in which managers, supervisors and co-workers can log on to a company intranet and select a level of recognition that they want to give to a particular colleague. The request is sent to that person's supervisor, who then checks it out and okays it. Sometimes the recipient can get a Starbucks gift card, a plaque or other gift through the program. During the past four years, the program has grown 400 percent in terms of usage, said Mark Servodidio, executive vice president of human resources with Cendant.

"We understand what's important to employees and what drives their engagement," he said. "One is being recognized by co-workers and by a boss."

Some studies have shown a good return on investment for reward programs, but official reward programs like the one at Cendant are not necessary. Sometimes a good word or note of thanks will send someone over the moon for days.

Kristine Dunn, for instance, knows that when she is happy with an employee's work, a mention of that to a manager can literally change that person's life. Dunn is director of the

Global Young Leaders Conference in the District, a group that runs educational programs for high-achieving young people. She has 11 direct reports. At the end of the summer, most of those employees must move on, as the students go back to school. However, some would like to stay on and work for Dunn's group as it prepares for the following summer. Dunn said she tries to speak with the hiring directors who take on summer employees, if she was pleased with their work.

"I suppose I started doing it because it was something I myself really appreciate," she said. "The work my staff does for me is not often the glorious work. You know the times that you feel like 'no one appreciates what I'm doing or how hard this is.' "

And because Dunn knows that it is often those difficult days that go unnoticed by higher-ups, "I like to take a moment to let my supervisor know that my staff member is doing a good job," she said.

She readily admits that because she is the director, she often gets the credit for her staff's good work. So she makes sure her supervisor knows about the individuals who are doing the grunt work. "It's something very little, and it doesn't take long to do that," she said.

Other employees are not so lucky as to have a manager with the time or interest in taking the effort to recognize them. A federal worker wrote to me that when he first started 15 years ago, a relative in a similar position told him that if he wanted to be recognized for something, "I would need to write up a summary of the accomplishment(s) for my supervisor. This seemed a little cynical to me," the employee wrote. However, after a couple of major projects for which he received no recognition, he tried it. "They simply didn't want to do the paperwork. Now, whenever I lead a successful project, I fill out the forms for an award and write a glowing summary of my accomplishments. And my supervisor is grateful when I present it to her. She simply signs it and sends it on its way. She gets credit for successfully managing my efforts. I get rewarded. Everybody's happy."

But I wonder: Should we expect a pat on the back for a job well done when, really, that's our job? I mean, we get paid for this stuff. We're not exactly doing someone a favor by doing our job well, right?

That may be true. But Chester Elton, co-author of the book "A Carrot a Day," notes that the bottom line of companies that provide some sort of recognition is much healthier than of those that don't.

As for asking for that recognition oneself, the way the federal worker did? That may be an okay thing to do. "What it does is, it starts a dialogue," Servodidio said. "Normally, even in a company like ours, there's still an opportunity where you don't always get it right."

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