

Rewarding Employees: A Person Example

An eye-opener

My position in the laboratory, by definition, is pretty far removed from dealing with day-to-day personnel issues. I do not make schedules, OK vacation, or deal with covering a work station when an employee calls in sick. However, I do enjoy getting out from behind my desk and working on projects in the laboratory. Occasionally, as special projects come to the lab, I have the opportunity to work more directly with our Medical Technologists 'at the bench'. Recently we completed two technical evaluations of a reformulated analyte for a client. Included in one of these evaluations was a complex clinical utility component. When the last bit of password-protected data was sent off to the client, I did something that I had never done before in my relatively short tenure as Assistant Laboratory Director: I wrote a letter of commendation to be placed in the file of the Med Tech who I directed on these projects. There were several reasons for doing this, but overall, her performance on these projects was above and beyond what was expected. This reward process was a revelation for me, because the gratitude expressed by the technologist was very satisfying. I discovered that ten minutes of my time meant more to this individual than I had ever realized.

Who doesn't like praise?

Positive reward is a tremendous motivator. It starts at birth and continues through life. Ask anyone raising a small baby if they don't see of positive reinforcement every day. Who can forget the first time that your three month old breaks into a smile? Parents begin to make all sorts of strange faces and noises and 'goo-goo-gah-gahs' to try and get that next smile. Exactly who is rewarding whom? Such rewards continue though all aspects of life. There is no doubt that as we get older, **money** becomes the prime motivator. However, handing out raises or special bonuses in the workplace is not routinely possible. A quick look through some of the references below, or related internet sites shows that there are many ways of rewarding our employees in ways that are independent of direct financial gain.

Rewarding the Individual

A personal thank you

I know that I enjoy a well-placed 'Good job!' whether verbally or tacked on the end of an email. This costs the company nothing, and can motivate employees tremendously. You can imagine that these rewards can come often, if appropriate.

Letter of praise

One of the events leading to my actions in the anecdotal story above on writing a letter for our technologist was my discovery (while cleaning a shelf in the basement) of a letter that had been written on my behalf more than 15 years while I was an emergency 911 dispatcher. I had forgotten the letter was written, but I believe that its discovery had an even bigger impact on me now, than when I initially received it. A police captain had taken time out of his day to 'write me up' and I had saved that particular signed 8 ½ X 11 piece of paper because it had value to me. Fifteen years later I wrote my letter because it seemed that for this particular employee, two years of work on various projects were coming to a completion. I listed specific reasons why I thought that the technologist had performed above expectations and asked that a copy be placed in her personnel file. A placed a cc: in a confidential envelope for the employee, her immediate supervisor, and the laboratory director. Documenting the praise in writing, bumps up the level of value of the reward.

Annual Evaluations

Evaluations provide a periodic opportunity to highlight performance excellence in specific areas of work.

Including employees in the decision process

When appropriate asking for employee input on work related projects or processes demonstrates that you value their opinion. I often find that a ten-minute brainstorming session with the people involved in the process changes the direction of a project. The employees are more likely to approach the project as a team effort and take on a sense of ownership as opposed to a directive. Keeping employees informed about new projects or upcoming changes instills a sense of responsibility as well.

Time Off

Granting time off as a reward can be controversial. I personally feel that granting time off is a Reward. However, I have had discussions with others who equate time off from work with a school suspension- a punishment rather than a reward. Depending on the circumstances, time off is usually not free to the company.

Rewarding the Group

Celebration

Most of the above topics are directed at individuals. In truth, few projects, if any, in our laboratory are individual projects. Success usually depends on many factors and people in the lab working toward a common goal. Company-wide accomplishments can be rewarded at periodic company meetings. A few kind words from someone in authority can carry the lab through the next crisis. Free pizza never hurts either! We have had a bread-pudding cookoffs and ice cream socials. A margarita happy hour was recently suggested, but has yet to materialize. Our company celebrates National Clinical Laboratory week with games, contests, and a luncheon.

Activities beyond the workplace

Group picnics or a barbeque at the boss' house can be a fun way to learn about fellow employees and thank them for their efforts at work. These activities often provide a glimpse of another side of the people who work side-by-side with you. Sometimes this glimpse is surprising!

Opportunities beyond the day-to-day

If an employee is so inclined, we encourage them to learn new skills. Ranging from phlebotomy to the use of spreadsheets, to programming a new analyzer. Although sometimes seen as a chore, some level of confidence and self-esteem improvement is realized by learning new skills.

Personalizing the workplace

Another method of highlighting all employees is to have a Fact Board about the rotating employee of the month. Of course this depends of the size of your company, but can be tailored to a department or division as well.

Upgrades

Upgrading outdated equipment or computers can be interpreted as a reward. Not only can this improve morel, but it may improve productivity as well.

Precautions

Too much of a good thing?

Excessive praise can dilute the impact of well-directed efforts. In addition, your actions may begin to seem insincere if they are inappropriate. Of course, rewards should be distributed when deserved. In my opinion, rewards differ from encouragement. Excellent employees should be rewarded. Struggling employees should be encouraged.

Teacher's Pet

One point that I had not considered is what effect a managers actions of praise have not only on the target of the praise, but also on other laboratory employees. You can imagine two extremes:

1) other employees will seek positive reinforcement and strive to demonstrate their best behavior and 2) other employees may resent the fact that their efforts have been ignored and that the employee receiving the accolades is somehow now becoming the 'favorite'. My approach to this is similar to pay scales- keep it confidential. If the recipient of the praise chooses to share this information that is their option.

In summary, rewarding employees for positive behavior and putting forth extra effort can go a long way toward promoting a positive work environment and motivating employees to do their best. As I recently discovered, taking a small amount of time from my schedule to reward a fellow worker was a very satisfying experience for us both.

For Additional Reading

1001 Ways to reward Employees, Bob Nelson, Workman Publishing, New York. 1994.

How to Recognize and Reward Employees (Worksmart Series). Donna Deepröse. 1994

Empowered Laboratory Team. William Umiker. AACC Press. 1996.

The High Cost of Low Morale...and what to do about it. Carol A Hacker. AACC Press. 1997