



MANAGER'S TOOLBOX: EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION

The motivational power of a positive workplace

By John Hall

During a recent visit with a client, Alexandra Powell spent a few days watching a powerful CEO dampen the moods of 3,000 employees with his body language. An unconventional type, the man privately admitted to her he wasn't in the habit of smiling, even though the company value of compassion was specifically described as "smiling and greeting others."

"It gave 3,000 people the message that the company value of compassion wasn't present in senior leadership," recalls Powell, U.S. director of Client Culture and Engagement for Reward Gateway: The Employee Engagement People. After acknowledging his introverted tendencies, the CEO spent the next few days at headquarters purposely, yet genuinely, smiling at everyone who crossed his path.

"After that, we saw an uptick in employees' confidence in their values because of that one behavior," adds Powell. "That CEO felt he was a compassionate person with integrity, but his team needed evidence they could see: a leader who'd smile at them in the hallway. If you or your people don't know what living by your values looks like, then you need to start working on that."

The anecdote is instructive. Powell believes providers would fare better imbuing basic values into everyday workplace life, even if that means spelling it out



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Strong cultural values translate to improved retention, partly by providing the basis for staff engagement.

in ways that can be clearly seen by others.

"Maybe we need to be very explicit about what we think practicing specific values looks like," she says. "If you don't know what they mean, then define them. In sum, these values send powerful messages to new employees. If I feel welcome and I'm not getting elbowed out of the way in the breakroom and instead people are smiling and greeting me, then this seems like a more comfortable place to stay," she says.

How do strong cultural values translate into better retention? For one, they provide the basis for staff engagement. "In this day and age, people want to work for a company with a soul and they're making decisions on where to work based on how well they will be treated," Powell says.

Recognition is a powerful way

to make that point.

Powell believes one of the ways to make sure your recognition efforts are effective and strategic is to tie the work people do to a higher purpose. In a nursing home or assisted living community, the obvious one is the impact their work has on residents. The problem for many leaders, however, is finding the time and "enthusiasm" to do the task of recognition, she says, referencing a recent Harvard Business Review study that found people are almost twice as likely to help others when the last person they helped demonstrated a genuine gratitude.

"It's human nature to listen more when you start a team meeting recognizing what went well," she says. "It says, 'We're going to celebrate what works and not just pick on what's broken.'"

Powell believes many providers today grapple with the kind and appropriateness of rewards.

"If your managers are handing out Starbucks cards to their team, maybe some of them hate coffee," she explains.

The key is variety. "Rewards are wonderful — especially if you have frontline people who are worried about paying bills and making ends meet," she says.

Tying the gift from a more thoughtful place, like grocery gift cards for lower paid nurses aides, achieves better results.

"That's why it's well worth spending a few minutes each week asking your people what makes them feel appreciated because, in the long run, if we can engage them, we're not only going to continue getting their employment, but their best work as well." ■

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