

Thanks! *GREAT Job!*

Improve Retention, Boost Morale and Increase Engagement
with High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition

Nelson Scott

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Dedication

To our children Pam and Graham, whose early employment experiences taught me much about the importance of recognizing staff and expressing appreciation.

In Memory

Kojak
(the dog)
1998–2010

A portion from the sale of each book will be donated to The Rotary Foundation, the mission of which is to advance world understanding, goodwill, and peace through the improvement of health, the support of education, and the alleviation of poverty.

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Introduction

It All Started With A Single Question

One unexpected question prompted this book. I was just wrapping up a day-long workshop called *Interview Right to Hire Right* when a participant in my audience in Grande Prairie, Alberta, lobbed it at me:

“You told us how to hire the right people, but how do we keep them? It seems like a lot of work if they just turn around and leave and we have to find someone else.”

A murmur of agreement spread across the room. Others had had the same thought. Keeping people was a bigger challenge than finding them. Turnover rates were high. People were leaving so quickly—in some cases after a few days, or even hours!—that identifying the right people to hire seemed beside the point.

If they were going to invest the time to hire as I was advocating, what could be done to stop these new hires from leaving?

I don't know what my questioner expected me to say in response. Terrific pay? Extended health-care coverage? Flexible hours? On-site daycare? While all these benefits are important, I didn't refer to them in my response.



RECOGNITION

Recognition is an after-the-fact display of appreciation or acknowledgement of an individual's or team's desired behavior, effort, or business result that supports the organization's goals and values.

— **Recognition Professionals International**



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“Let them know that they are appreciated,” I said. “Recognize them for what they achieve and how they help your organization succeed.”

But what did that mean? What could managers and supervisors do to recognize staff more effectively? How could I help them do a better job?

My first step was to introduce a small section on staff recognition and retention to *Interview Right to Hire Right*. I explained the importance of keeping staff, and the financial, productivity and customer-satisfaction costs associated with high turnover. During the short time devoted to this topic, I provided a few suggestions on how to recognize staff and let them know that they are valued for who they are and what they do.

In research first conducted by Lawrence Lindahl in 1949 and replicated several times since, supervisors and workers were asked to rank 10 aspects of their jobs in order of relative importance (with 1 being high). Note the difference between what the workers and supervisors identified as most and least important in terms of on-the-job motivation.

	Supervisor's Ranking	Worker's Ranking
<i>Good working conditions</i>	4	9
<i>Feeling "in" on things</i>	10	2
<i>Tactful disciplining</i>	7	10
<i>Appreciation for work done</i>	8	1
<i>Management loyalty to workers</i>	6	8
<i>Good wages</i>	1	5
<i>Promotion and growth opportunities</i>	3	7
<i>Understanding of personal problems</i>	9	3
<i>Job security</i>	2	4
<i>Interesting work</i>	5	6

When *Briefly Noted*, the newsletter that I circulate to clients and other subscribers, first appeared in 2002, I began to write articles on staff recognition. In each issue there have always been a few high-value, low-cost staff recognition tips. I also developed a presentation on staff recognition and retention, which was followed by a second and then a third. Eventually people began to ask, “So, where’s the book?”

Well, here it is!

Something that I do not write about very often—nor ever advocate—is staff recognition programs. I feel that formal programs such as service awards, employee-of-the-month programs and attendance awards are ineffective. They can be cumbersome, time consuming and expensive and they touch too few people. They do little to boost morale, increase engagement or improve retention. I will have more to say about staff recognition programs in the next chapter.

What I do advocate, for reasons that will become obvious as you read this book, is to redirect the energy and money currently consumed by ineffective programs. Let’s give managers and supervisors the skills and tools they need to provide more informal, day-to-day recognition. This is the type of recognition that staff members crave most and find most meaningful.

A phrase that you will encounter repeatedly is “high-value, low-cost staff recognition.” That is, high-value for recipients, but low-cost for you, in terms of the resources you have to invest: time, money and effort. The book is filled with suggestions for delivering high-value, low-cost recognition.

As you read these tips and techniques, you will find some that you are already using successfully and others that you wish to try. Some will need to be modified to fit your organization, your budget or your personality.

A few may cause you to scratch your head. How could they possibly work? Don’t feel that this reaction reflects a deficit in your understanding of staff recognition. I share your sense of bewilderment about some of these techniques. I have included ideas that I couldn’t imagine using myself, but which have worked for others.

“*Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is... to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated.*”

—**Stephen Covey,**
The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

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“

“Recognition is acknowledgement, appreciation and achievement.”

— **Sue Glasscock & Kimberly Gram, Workplace Recognition**

”

The primary target audience for this book is managers and supervisors who work with front-line staff. I feel this responds to how most front-line staff—nurses, secretaries, teachers, labourers and sales associates—view the hierarchy of their organizations.

Unless they are part of the hierarchy, employees don't spend much time thinking about the CEO and her direct reports. They know they are there, but they are irrelevant to the front-line staff's day-to-day work lives. On the other hand, their direct supervisor may be the most important person in their work lives. The relationship between a supervisor, and his staff is critical to an organization's success. During exit interviews, departing employees frequently cite their relationship with their supervisor and the lack of recognition from that person, among their top reasons for leaving. Surprisingly to some, money is seldom mentioned as an important factor in the decision to leave. More people would prefer to work for a good boss for less pay than for better pay with a boss who is difficult. Staff are more likely to trust and respect managers and supervisors who are good at recognizing staff, and perceive them as effective in their jobs

Not a supervisor or manager?

Different organizations label leadership positions differently—principal, foreman, team leader, department head, superintendent, boss, owner, head nurse and so on. To keep things simple and to make the suggestions accessible to people in different industries, I have chosen to use two terms—supervisor and manager—as generic labels for all leadership roles. The only exception is when I am illustrating a point with a specific example.

Recognition and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

When a pipeline in North America ruptures and fuel begins to leak, people run away. In some developing countries, impoverished people rush toward the leaking pipeline. They want to capture a few litres that they can sell.

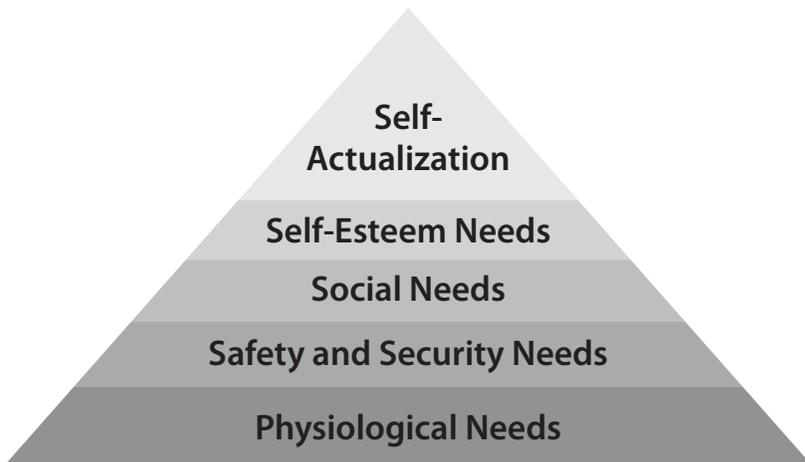
Sounds dangerous, doesn't it? It is. Every year there are reports of explosions killing people who were filling containers. Most know the dangerous consequences of their actions, but they still collect spills from the pipelines. People in developed countries wonder why.

An examination of psychologist Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs"—represented by the pyramid at the bottom of this page—helps us understand what would motivate people to risk their lives for a few litres of fuel.

Maslow said that humans have an inborn order of needs that we pass through in stages. We progress to the later stages—the higher levels of the pyramid—only after our more basic needs are satisfied.

When people live in such extreme poverty that just surviving from one day to the next is a challenge, they will risk all just to survive. When satisfying their most basic needs is the priority, they don't look beyond the physiological needs to consider their own security and safety—the second level of Maslow's pyramid. Desperately poor people will take great risks to meet the basic need for food, clothing and shelter.

Certainly Canada and other developed countries have people who are living in poverty. Some are unemployed. Some are homeless or don't get enough to eat. That this occurs amidst affluence is shameful, and efforts to address their needs should be encouraged and supported.



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In reality, most of the people with whom you work do not face these challenges. Having a job and receiving a regular paycheque enables them to buy food, pay the rent and clothe themselves and their families.

With a job, the need for security and safety is also addressed. They are protected from unexpected medical expenses by government health care and company benefits. Most people who have a job with a regular paycheque and benefits give little thought to their physiological and safety needs. They can begin thinking about satisfying needs higher up the pyramid.

While supervisors usually do not control pay rates and benefits, they are in a position to create work environments in which staff members can satisfy their social, esteem and self-actualization needs. After physiological and safety needs are met, the next need to be satisfied is social, which relates to belonging and being accepted. Supervisors can welcome newcomers, introduce them to co-workers and encourage interaction.

Next is the need to be valued and have a sense of contributing to the organization. By acknowledging staff members regularly for their contributions and achievements, both as individuals and members of the team, supervisors can help staff members meet their needs for self-esteem.

Finding themselves in an oppressive work environment, where criticism and negativism is common, people will shift their focus from meeting social and self-esteem needs to question whether this is the best location in which to meet physiological and safety needs. Is it time to update the resume and begin to search the help-wanted ads?

The final need—self-actualization—is related to achieving one's potential and self-fulfilment, becoming everything one is capable of becoming. Supervisors can support staff members in this pursuit by providing training and coaching to reach their potential, and challenges that require them to perform at the high level that corresponds to their capability. And they can praise them when they achieve success.

“*Praise works with only three types of people—men, women, and children.*”
— **Anonymous**

How the Book is Organized

This book is divided into four sections:

- Why formal staff recognition programs are frequently ineffective and unnecessary
- 5 ingredients of **GREAT** staff recognition: **Genuine, Relevant, Explicit, Appropriate** and **Timely**
- Lessons—many from unlikely sources—that have shaped my thinking on staff recognition
- Tools and techniques for meaningful staff recognition that will increase engagement and productivity, boost morale and improve staff and customer retention

Throughout this book you will encounter stories of staff recognition successes and failures. Some of the stories are mine, others were told to me by others. In some cases, I have modified the details to preserve privacy.

To support my message that recognition is important, I enlisted the assistance of a variety of experts and authorities, whose words appear throughout the book. They are actually quite a diverse group: ancient philosophers, historical figures, contemporary and classical authors, business gurus, poets, cartoon characters, literary figures, religious leaders and film stars.



“Ladies and gentlemen: the story you are about to hear is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent.”

— Dragnet radio series, 1949 – 1957



Puhutko suomea?*

Writing this book in Finnish would have simplified it, a bit. I'm not joking. In Finnish, there is no distinction between male and female. Both “he” and “she” are covered by “hän” and “his/her” by “hänen.” No clumsy constructions of “he or she” or “his/her” and “they or their” are necessary.

Alas, I can't speak, read or write Finnish. Likely, you can't either. So, I've come up with a compromise. To maintain gender neutrality I have consciously varied references to managers and employees as men or women...or should that be, “female or male?” Hopefully, I have achieved a good gender balance.

**Do you speak Finnish?*

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When some managers and supervisors are asked about staff recognition at my seminars, they respond with reasons for not recognizing staff. When I ask, “Why is recognition so scarce in many workplaces?” they quickly round up the usual suspects—the most common reasons for not acknowledging staff for their contributions.

Many of these “reasons” are listed in this book, under a label that exposes them for what they truly are—excuses, rationalizations and cop-outs. They are no more valid than justifications for not exercising, for continuing to smoke, or for not following a healthy diet.

“

*“People will accept
your idea much more
readily if you tell them
Benjamin Franklin
said it first.”*

— **David H. Comins,**
author

”

What’s Up...and Down...with Staff Recognition

When we acknowledge staff and recognize them for their efforts, contributions and successes, good things happen:



The reason for recognizing staff regularly in meaningful ways is so much more compelling: It works!

Some of the conclusions in this book are based on my research and observations, as well as those of experts in the field. But don't just take our word for it. Become a do-it-yourself recognition researcher. Throughout the book, you will find suggestions for DIY Recognition Research projects. Conducting this research will add to your understanding of staff recognition and the impact it can have.

There is one last truth about a book that had a 10-year gestation period. There is much that could have been included that isn't. There just weren't enough pages. Some of the missing pieces—including recognition tips and techniques, resources and quotations—are available at www.GREATstaffrecognition.com. I invite you to visit, and while you are there, leave your own stories of staff recognition—both successes and failures.

The acronym **GREAT** reminds us of the five ingredients that make staff recognition work—recognition that improves increases engagement, boosts morale and improves retention—and most importantly, makes recognition meaningful for the recipients. For recognition to work, it must be **Genuine**. It should also be **Relevant, Explicit, Appropriate** and **Timely**.

I have devoted Section Two to these five ingredients, but for now, I will leave you with this thought:

Not all five ingredients need to be used when recognizing staff, but the presence of one is essential. Recognition must be **Genuine**. If it's not, it becomes an empty exercise. Once recognition is **Genuine**, the addition of one or more of the other components strengthens the message of appreciation.

Top 7 Reasons to Recognize Employees NOW!

1. Reduce turnover
2. Increase profitability
3. Increase productivity
4. Retain top performers
5. Create a positive work environment
6. Elevate customer service, sales and satisfaction
7. Attract a better recruiting pool

Source: Recognition Professionals International, October 29, 2008

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At Least 4 Ways to Use This Book

1. This is not a whodunit. You can begin anywhere. Thumb through the book, stopping wherever something catches your eye. Jump around from chapter to chapter.
2. Abuse this book. You have my permission. Even I don't think this is great literature, or a piece of art. And it's not a textbook that you will hand on to another student for the next term. Write in it. Highlight passages. Make notes in the margins. Circle ideas you like. Cross out those you don't. Fill the book with sticky notes. If someday you would like a "clean" copy of the book, send your marked-up book back and I will replace it. No charge. Not even shipping.
3. Don't read it all at once. Look at some parts now; save other parts for later. Select a few high-value, low-cost recognition techniques to try. If they work, that's great— but you will still need to find different ways to recognize staff. As I conclude in Chapter 24, "This fat lady will never sing." Return to the book regularly or visit www.GREATstaffrecognition.com to find fresh ideas.
4. Share your book with others. Better yet (at least, from my point of view), buy them their own copies (Check out www.GREATstaffrecognition.com for quantity discounts). Discuss what you read, so that more people are focused on staff recognition. What ideas can we implement? When?

“

“There are two things people want more than sex and money... recognition and praise.”

**— Mary Kay Ash,
businesswoman & author**

”

Excuses, Rationalizations and Cop-outs (Part I)

“I don’t have time to recognize staff. I already have too much to do.”

Granted, managers and supervisors are busy people. But we can always find time to do what we feel is important. It’s a matter of setting priorities. People don’t have time to acknowledge the contributions of others because they have decided that other tasks are more important than recognizing staff.

In my view, few tasks are more important than encouraging and motivating staff by acknowledging them for doing their jobs well. Staff that’s well and frequently recognized will be more motivated, more productive and more focused on doing what is important. By what you recognize them for, you demonstrate which tasks and actions are **Relevant** to meeting your organization’s goals successfully.

Instead of spending time with top and average performers, supervisors focus much of their time on underperformers. Instead of catching people doing good work and praising them, supervisors watch for things that go wrong that they can correct. They closely supervise these employees to ensure things don’t go wrong and reprimand people when they do. When supervisors spend their days looking for what’s wrong, it’s hardly surprising that they don’t see what’s right, nor take the time to let staff know that doing what’s right is appreciated.

Recognizing staff regularly will actually save you time. People who feel appreciated are less likely to look for jobs elsewhere. Low turnover means you will spend less time recruiting replacements—hours spent preparing advertising, reviewing applications, scheduling and conducting interviews, checking references, completing new-hire paperwork and orienting and training new employees.

“

“It’s been about two months since I’ve worked out. I just don’t have the time. Which is odd, because I have the time to go out to dinner. And watch TV. And get a bone-density test. And try to figure out what my phone number spells out in words.”

**— Ellen DeGeneres,
TV host & actor.**

”

“I’m not good at recognizing people. I don’t know how.”

If you can say, “Thank you,” you already have what it takes to provide meaningful staff recognition. All we need to do is to thank people for **Relevant** contributions or achievements that assist the organization to achieve its goals. Meaningful staff recognition is no more complicated than that.

To be meaningful, recognition does not have to be formal or structured, with a series of awards reflecting different levels of achievement. Formal recognition may have a place, but the recognition that most of your staff and co-workers want is to hear a simple thank you from time to time.

At first, you may feel nervous and uncomfortable when recognizing others. This is natural, especially if recognition is new to you and your workplace. To overcome this awkwardness, begin with small steps. Pick a few simple techniques from this or another book on staff recognition that will work for you and your staff. With practice, you will become more comfortable letting others know that you appreciate what they do. You will grow your own repertoire of staff recognition techniques, which will make it easier for you to provide meaningful and **Appropriate** recognition.

“

“The problem today is that it’s a rare company, and an exceptional leader, who dares to devote the time and make the effort to form the human relationship with co-workers that lead to the commitment and to the unleashing of human potential we all say we’re looking for. . . We must make unleashing the potential of people a strategic imperative.”

— **Gary Heil, Tom Parker and Deborah C. Stephens,**
One Size Fits One

”

“Recognition is bad for morale. Others will resent my recognizing one of their co-workers.”

This could be true, if the recognition is seen as undeserved or unfair. If one worker or a team is recognized frequently while the contributions and achievements of others are consistently ignored, others may be resentful. Justifiably so—it looks like favouritism.

It's not that everyone should receive an equal quantity of recognition. Some supervisors feel that treating everyone the same would be easier. It could be, but it would also be dishonest. Recognition should be based on performance. Top performers who see underachievers receiving the same recognition as they do may view this as unfair, which may cause them to consider leaving—either physically, or just by switching to cruise control.

If recognition is bestowed regularly on all staff for specific contributions and achievements, those not being recognized today will celebrate the success of their co-workers, knowing that their turn will come. They understand that good performance is appreciated and will be praised.

“No one ever recognized me and look how well I've done. I can't see why it needs to be different for the people who work for me.”

Recognition—or the lack of it—isn't about you. It is about the people who you supervise and those with whom you work. Obviously, you were a good worker and self-motivated. It also appears that you were cheated out of the recognition you deserved. This was wrong, just as it would be wrong for you to withhold recognition from deserving individuals when they perform well. It is dangerous to assume that your staff is made up of people who are as self-motivated as you are. Some will be, but others will need your praise and encouragement to remain engaged and productive.

Before reading further, ask yourself these questions: What would have happened if you had received more positive feedback along the way? Would you have reached your potential sooner? Might you have achieved even more if your supervisors had expressed appreciation more often?

“

“Tenderness and kindness are not signs of weakness and despair, but manifestations of strength and resolution.”

**— Kahlil Gibran,
poet & writer**

”

Thanks! **GREAT** job!

“If I recognize them for doing something well, what happens when they don’t do well? Won’t they use the fact that I recognized them previously against me if I criticize their work?”

Recognizing people for doing their jobs well does not mean that they should not be corrected or reprimanded for failing to perform satisfactorily.

Part of a manager or supervisor’s role is to provide both positive and negative feedback as required. They should reinforce good performances and confront and correct poor performances.

The best way to avoid having employees use previous positive comments to defend themselves from negative feedback is to ensure that all feedback is specific. Focus on a single action or event. Avoid generalizations about the individual’s performance (“You always do a wonderful job,” or “You never get anything right the first time.”) Whether praising or reprimanding, it is important to focus on the person’s actions and not his personality. Focus your feedback on the quality of the performance and not the quality of the person performing the task.

Generally, supervisors and managers seem better at—or at least, more focused on—noting what has gone poorly, rather than letting people know when they have done well. This is despite the fact that most staff members are dedicated, committed and doing their jobs well.

Not only would more positive feedback be the right thing to do, it may also reduce the need to provide as much negative feedback. Any type of meaningful feedback helps staff know what is expected of them. Positive feedback leads them to repeat these desirable behaviours for which they are recognized.

“
“We found that the most exciting environments, that treated people very well, are also tough as nails. There is no bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo... excellent companies provide two things simultaneously: tough environments and very supportive environments.”
— **Tom Peters, author**”



DIY RECOGNITION RESEARCH: Making a List, Checking It Twice

What you will need for this research project:

Pen and paper

Research Process:

Divide the paper into three columns.

Employees/Co-workers	What this person did well	Recognized?
	1. 2. 3.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	1. 2. 3.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	1. 2. 3.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	1. 2. 3.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	1. 2. 3.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

1. In the first column, list the names of 5 employees or co-workers.
2. In the second column, write three things that each person has done well over the past month.
3. In the third column, put a check mark next to each of these well-done tasks for which you have recognized this person.
4. Count the number of check marks.

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Implications for the Workplace:

- Score your responses

Number of Check Marks

13 – 15 Congratulations! You understand the importance of staff recognition and have been “walking the talk.” You should write a book on staff recognition.

9 – 12 You’re doing well. Sometimes we miss opportunities to recognize people for a job well done. Commit to being more alert for times when you can let staff know they are appreciated.

6 – 8 You’re doing okay, but you will need to pay more attention to staff recognition. Try some of the ideas that you will find in this book.

5 or fewer You have a way to go, but you have taken an important first step by reading this book. Find a few ideas you feel comfortable with and begin with them.

Hint: Now that you have a list of reasons to recognize staff, go and do it!

Please note that this form is available online at:

www.GREATstaffrecognition.com/bookbonus/DIYforms

You have permission to print it for your use to conduct this recognition research.

SECTION ONE
The Road to Recognition Hell

Chapter 1

Paved with Good Intentions

People who create staff recognition programs are well-intentioned individuals. They understand that people are key to the organization's success and that most employees work hard. Staff deserve to be acknowledged for their contributions and successes—for what they do and what they achieve for the organization.

Unfortunately, recognition programs often lose their focus. What they were meant to recognize is replaced with whatever the person using the program wants to recognize, or feels should be recognized. Frequently, they become bogged down with rules. Unfocused and cumbersome, programs become ineffective staff recognition tools.

Today's supervisors were once the people being supervised. They recall what it was like. They remember how they felt when their contributions were acknowledged and their work was praised. Being recognized felt good.

They may also recall what it was like to be dumped on all the time, when all they ever heard from their supervisors was bad news. Back then, they vowed that things would be different when they became supervisors. They would treat those that they supervised better than they had been treated.

“

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

**— English proverb,
often attributed to
Samuel Johnson**

”

Thanks! **GREAT** Job!

Most of today's supervisors preferred working for supervisors who acknowledged employees for their contributions. They understand that the same is true for the people they supervise. Their experience is consistent with what researchers have discovered. Meaningful staff recognition increases engagement and it is an effective staff-retention tool. People tend to stay where they feel valued.

The Challenge for Senior Executives

Elsewhere in the organization, there are senior executives who also understand the importance of staff recognition. They wish to express gratitude for what staff do, but are largely powerless to do anything about it. Superintendents of schools don't observe what happens in individual classrooms every day. Senior hospital administrators don't see what nurses, laboratory technicians or physical therapists do every shift. Corporate CEOs aren't in every branch office or store on a daily basis.

Their solution is to create corporate-wide recognition programs, hoping these will convey the message to staff that they are appreciated for their contributions. It would be more effective if executives encouraged informal recognition throughout the organization. They should begin by expressing appreciation for the contributions of managers and others who report directly to them, including acknowledging them for doing a good job of recognizing their staff. When executives leave their offices, they should also watch for behaviours by other staff that they are able to praise immediately.

In addition to people who initiate staff recognition programs for the right reasons, there are those whose motivation is less altruistic. They are not bestowing **Genuine** expressions of gratitude. *Appearing* to recognize staff is more important to them than actually recognizing staff. Their reasons are not **Relevant** to the organization's values, mission statement and goals.



Formal Recognition: *consists of a structured program with defined processes and criteria linked to organizational values and goals, a nomination and selection process, and an Awards ceremony where employees receive public recognition and are presented with awards in a formal setting. Generally speaking, it is an annual program and only a small percentage of employees are recognized.*

— **Recognition Professionals International**



Introducing a Staff Recognition Program for All the Right—and Wrong—Reasons

The Right Reasons

- The managers and supervisors realize that staff are working hard and deserve to be acknowledged for that.
- The managers and supervisors feel that staff recognition is the right thing to do—staff deserve to be acknowledged for doing their jobs well.
- The managers and supervisors understand that most staff members want and need to be thanked for what they do.
- The managers and supervisors remember fondly when they worked for a boss who genuinely praised staff—and less fondly those whose approach to leadership was to demand and reprimand.
- The managers and supervisors know that research has shown that recognition is an effective staff retention tool—people stay where they know they are appreciated.

The Wrong Reasons

- The managers and supervisors want to improve satisfaction scores on staff attitude surveys.
- The managers and supervisors have been told by their superiors that they must recognize staff more.
- The managers and supervisors want to be able to demonstrate they are doing something to express appreciation to staff.
- The managers and supervisors want to control what happens related to staff recognition.
- The managers and supervisors feel that what is important about recognition are the tangibles—certificates, banquets, plaques and gifts—the bigger the better.
- The managers and supervisors want something that is seen as fair and politically correct. They believe that one staff recognition technique will fit all.
- The managers and supervisors are uncomfortable with spontaneous recognition; recognition is easier when provided according to a schedule.

Thanks! **GREAT** Job!

So, What Is Being Recognized with Service Awards?

Service awards are the most common type of formal recognition. They are used to mark milestones in an employee's tenure with the organization, usually in multiples of five years, beginning on the employee's fifth anniversary. Frequently, the employee is presented with a pin or certificate to mark the occasion, along with a gift or gift card—the value of which varies, depending on the financial state of the organization and the length of service being recognized.

How the presentations are made varies. Some organizations invite the honoree and a guest to a recognition event, such as banquet or reception. Some fly those being honoured to another city, providing meals and accommodation in the hotel where the event is being held. Other times, presentations are made in the workplace, with only the honoree's co-workers present, or in the privacy of the supervisor's office. There are occasions when a pin, certificate or gift simply appears in the employee's mailbox one day, without any explanation or words of appreciation.

Putting a Value on Service

Organizations often have policies that assign a cash value to gifts presented to an employee who has reached specified service plateaus:

- \$50 after 5 years of service
- \$75 after 10 years of service
- \$100 after 15 years of service
- \$150 after 20 years of service

Imagine how employees might interpret the cash value associated with their years of service. After 10 years, an employee discovers his employer has assigned a value of \$7.50 to each year he has worked for the company. That works out to less than four cents per work day. How special does that feel?

Having labelled service awards as an ineffective staff recognition tool, I must confess to having once created such a program, and must state my belief that there is nothing wrong with pausing to acknowledge those who have continued with the same employers for five, 10, 15 or more years. But let's be clear about what is being acknowledged. Often those presenting service awards—and occasionally those receiving them—seem confused about what is being recognized.

The CEO who stands before a banquet audience and proclaims that “these people are being recognized for all the great things they do for our company and our clients,” just doesn’t get it. Service awards are not about doing a great job. They recognize one, and one thing only:

Survival!

“We appreciate that you have remained with this organization. You have saved us the expense and task of hiring your replacement,” might be a better message from the CEO.

Among any group of service-award recipients you will find quite a range of talent. There are top performers who deserve to be recognized for “doing great things.” But there are others whose prime accomplishments over the past five years were to have done just enough to avoid being fired—and to have not died.

Long service is often equated with loyalty, but this isn’t always the case. Some long-serving employees may not be so by choice. They have remained where they are because no other organization will make the same hiring error that you—or your predecessor, or the person before her—made five, 10, 15 or more years ago. Some long-serving employees are more disloyal than anyone who has left. They regularly bad-mouth their employer, shop in the competitors’ stores, or sabotage (sometimes intentionally and sometimes inadvertently) efforts to achieve the company’s goals. On the other hand, there are former employees who fondly recall working for the organization, and actively encourage others to apply for vacant positions.

Neither Pain or Fever Shall Keep Employees from Their Assigned Desks

Somewhere, sometime in the past, someone had this brilliant idea—combat absenteeism in a positive manner by rewarding those who showed up every day. Discourage poor behaviour (absenteeism) by rewarding good behaviour (attendance). The perfect attendance award was born.

Perfect-attendance awards seem to make sense. After all, absenteeism is seldom a good thing. When someone is away, productivity suffers. Tasks for which the absentee is responsible go undone. Projects are delayed. Co-workers become less productive because they require information or material that only their absent colleague can provide. They may be required to leave some aspect of their jobs undone to take up the slack.

Thanks! **GREAT** Job!

Hiring replacement workers— if they are even available—can be expensive and they likely will be less productive than the people they are replacing. Customers become upset because the person with whom they have been dealing is unavailable.

Perfect-attendance awards work something like this: show up every day for a month or a year and we'll do something nice for you. Show up every day for twice as long and we'll do something nicer. Improve your attendance even more, and we will do something even nicer yet.

The underlying belief is that perfect attendance is desirable. This might be true, if the person who is present is healthy and productive. This employee's perfect attendance would certainly benefit the company, co-workers and customers. The only one who doesn't benefit is the potential replacement worker who doesn't have the opportunity to replace this employee—but there are likely lots of other opportunities to fill-in for someone else who is absent.

Assuming that the rewards of such a program are attractive to the employees, a perfect-attendance program is more likely to punish the person who may miss work occasionally for legitimate reasons than encourage chronically absent or late employees. No incentive will be significant enough to change the behaviour of those with attendance problems. Individual attendance problems should be addressed directly, with disciplinary action taken when necessary.

There are times when not being at work is better than maintaining a record of perfect attendance.

- Far better to spend a day or two at home wrapped in a blanket, drinking warm liquids and getting lots of rest, than dragging oneself into the office and trying to be productive, while running a fever of 39°C and sharing germs with co-workers and customers.
- Far better to spend an afternoon in the dentist's chair than trying to remain productive while suffering with an abscessed tooth.
- Far better to remain at home during the season's worst snowstorm than risking life and property just to get to work.

However, doing any of these sensible things will take the staff member out of the running for this year's perfect-attendance award. What attendance programs may do is encourage people who are sick to come to work, rather than stay in bed. The term for the resulting phenomenon is "presenteeism"—being physically present, but not functioning well.

A study by the Cornell University Institute for Health and Productivity suggests that sick people should stay away from work. In fact, they should be encouraged to stay away. Doing so can save employers money.

The researchers concluded that people who come to work sick with headaches, arthritis, asthma, allergies and mental health-related problems such as depression cost employers in lost productivity.

Sick people are less productive. They have trouble concentrating and take longer to complete tasks. They can also infect co-workers, which can lead to further productivity loss.

Productive or not, all employees who meet the basic criteria are rewarded for waking up on time and navigating their way to the office day after day over a specified time period. What they do after they punch-in doesn't matter. Perfect attendance programs reward people for where they are, not what they do.

One-in-a-hundred Chance of Being Recognized

Service and attendance awards do have a couple of things going for them:

- Both have criteria to determine eligibility for the awards—achieving a minimum number of years of service or days without an absence.
- Eventually everyone could qualify for the award.

The same cannot be said about most employee-of-the-month-type programs.

Anyone considering implementing an employee-of-the-month program should first do the math. There are only 12 months in a year. In an organization with 100 employees, each employee has only a one-in-a-hundred chance of being chosen each month. If everyone had a turn being the employee-of-the-month, it would take eight years and four months before the last person became the employee-of-the-month. This calculation assumes no turnover, which is unlikely if employees are only recognized once every eight years and four months.

The criteria for employee-of-the-month is often vague, such as going “above and beyond the call of duty.” Not only is the meaning of “above and beyond” unclear, it can also become a moving target. Many factors, such as gender balance, length of service, improved performance and a desire to share the award among different job categories can influence who is selected as the employee-of-the-month.

Thanks! **GREAT** Job!

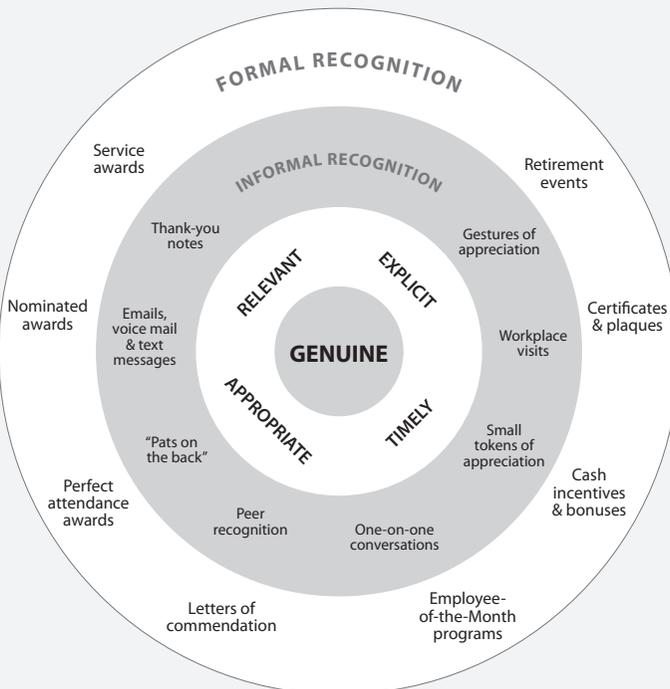
Culture of Recognition

A culture of recognition can be illustrated with a series of concentric circles that form a model for meaningful staff recognition. At its core, recognition must be **Genuine**. Recognition fails when it is characterized by insincerity and empty rituals.

In the next circle there are four ingredients which, along with being **Genuine**, create the strong basis for meaningful staff recognition.

The next circle contains the tools and practices of informal, day-to-day recognition—the high-value, low-cost recognition that can be provided by supervisors and co-workers. This is the area in the model that, if filled with frequent and varied recognition, creates a foundation for formal recognition activities to be effective. The greater the amount of informal, day-to-day recognition, the greater the potential for formal recognition to be meaningful, although the demand for formal recognition is diminished.

Recognition fails when programs are dragged into the centre of the model, replacing the five basic ingredients of **GREAT** staff recognition—**Genuine, Relevant, Explicit, Appropriate** and **Timely**. A discussion of these five concepts begins in the next section of this book.



Where there is uncertainty about how the recipient will be selected from one month to the next, the award appears to be a popularity contest. Becoming employee-of-the-month is irrelevant to most and a joke to many. An employee-of-the-month program is ineffective as a means of expressing gratitude, despite the good intentions of those who introduced it.

As part of my research, I have sought out current and previous employees-of-the-month. Most were shy to talk about the designation. They were unsure why they were selected over others, concluding on many occasions that it must just have been their turn. Others, who had never been the employee-of-the-month, could describe the process used to select the winners (“It’s done by management from among people nominated by customers”), but were unsure about the criteria upon which the decision was based.

Programs Generate Rules

Programs may not generate feelings of being appreciated, but they always seem to create the need for policies. For every program, there seems to be an ever-expanding list of rules to which adherence seems more important than celebrating the accomplishments of staff.

“Nothing is more destructive of human dignity than a rule, which imposes a mute and blind obedience.”

— **Anthony Eden,**
former British
Prime Minister

“Common sense is the knack of seeing things as they are, and doing things as they ought to be done.”

— **C.E. Stowe,** **American author**

Thanks! **GREAT** Job!

While they may not always begin that way, most programs are soon burdened by a myriad of rules—some of which may be real, many of which are imagined or made up on the fly, and most of which frustrate efforts to recognize staff:

- Once you have been the employee-of-the-month, you can't be the employee-of-the-month until everyone has had a turn. If being the employee-of-the-month was meant to motivate people, what motivation would exist when one realized that the next such recognition was likely years away?
- Employee-of-the-month recipients must come from different departments and reflect gender balance.
- Certain levels and types of absenteeism are acceptable and do not disqualify you from getting a perfect-attendance award (e.g., you are allowed to be absent for one day per quarter, but this is not cumulative; you may attend the funeral of a family member, but not a friend; you may attend dental or medical appointments that take less than two hours).
- An elaborative appeal process is in place for employees who believe they have been denied a service award for which they have qualified.
- One health-care facility with a high number of part-time employees calculates years of service based on hours worked, rather than calendar years. A half-time person will take 10 years to qualify for a five-year service award. (What about overtime? Is it credited at 1.5 time regular time? Looks like an opportunity to create another rule.)
- Perfect attendance is based on a rolling 12-month year. When a staff member returns after missing a day due to illness or a family crisis, the 12-month clock restarts at zero.



"You are remembered for the rules you break."

— **Douglas MacArthur, American general**



Without a Foundation, the Playhouse Collapsed

Back when our kids were young, I decided to build them a backyard playhouse. I didn't know anything about building a playhouse, but I had a design in mind. I envisioned an A-frame, with a door at one end and a window at the other. On one side, a ladder would lead up to a second floor, and on the other, a deck above the sandbox. A beam would extend out from the peak of the roof to which I would attach a rope on which the kids could swing. It would be perfect for our kids.

A weekend was set aside for this project. A work colleague—who knew as much about construction as I did—volunteered to assist me. Early that Saturday morning, I was off to the building-supply store to purchase everything I felt I would need—lumber, nails and an assortment of tools.

When Dave arrived, we set to work. Soon the frame of the playhouse took shape. Satisfied with our work to this stage, we retreated into the house for what we felt was a well-deserved break from our labours—and to reward ourselves with an essential ingredient to our success that I had picked up on the way home from the building supply store—beer.

We had just opened a couple of cans when there was a knock at the back door. It was Jamie, the boy who had been watching our construction project from across the alley.

“Mr. Scott, your playhouse just fell down.”

Dave and I rushed to the kitchen window. Yes indeed, where the frame of the playhouse stood just minutes before, there was now a jumbled mass of two-by-fours. We would have to start over...but not before we had finished our beers, and maybe a couple more.

A few minutes later, there was another knock at the door. Jamie was back. And this time, he had his father—an engineer—in tow.

We joined them in the backyard, where the father surveyed our unsuccessful construction project. He explained that our efforts had failed because we had tried to erect the playhouse without first having a foundation upon which to build.

He suggested that we begin with six-by-six timbers, arranging them as a foundation for our project. Once this was done, we would have a base upon which to build a playhouse that wouldn't fall over.

We followed his advice, and eventually had a structure that would provide our children with years of play value. When we moved 24 years later, the playhouse—a little worse-for-wear and now used as a storage shed—was still standing. Without the solid foundation that Jamie's father had suggested, this would not have been possible.

Thanks! **GREAT** Job!

Recognition programs—such as employee-of-the-month, and service and perfect-attendance awards—are like that playhouse. They are destined to collapse without a strong foundation. The playhouse needed a base of six-by-six timbers. Recognition programs need the foundation of a strong culture of appreciation, rooted in informal, day-to-day recognition that is meaningful to recipients and valued by staff.

Where Programs Would Be Most Meaningful, There Is Less Demand

If expressing gratitude is not part of the culture, formal recognition programs have little chance of success. Programs alone, installed in a work environment where informal recognition is rare, will not lead to greater engagement, better motivation or enhanced staff morale. High-value, low-cost staff recognition can.

Frequent and varied informal recognition creates a sound foundation for formal programs. The more informal recognition, the greater the potential for formal recognition programs to be meaningful to the staff.

Ironically, the more that informal recognition occurs, the less pressure executives and managers will feel to introduce formal recognition in response to staff members' expressions that they feel unappreciated.

“Employees will be more receptive to formal, organization-wide programs if they believe that the company really cares about them on a personal, day-to-day basis.”
— **Roselind Jeffries, Rewards & Recognition Consultant**

Don't Cancel Your Recognition Program...Just Yet

If you are reading this book, you likely fall into one of two groups. You have one or more recognition programs in place, but feel they aren't delivering a good return on your investment. Or nothing much is happening in your organization to let staff know that their efforts are appreciated and you are searching for strategies to introduce more recognition into your workplace. Maybe you are thinking about creating a staff recognition program.

If you have a staff recognition program, I am not going to tell you to discard it. But I won't be disappointed to hear that after examining the effectiveness of your program you decide to phase it out. Are the benefits your organization receive justifying the investment of time, money and other resources that it takes?

If you don't have a program, I suggest that you not start one. It would be foolishly optimistic to believe that a recognition program or two would create a culture of recognition in your workplace. Focus on introducing more informal, day-to-day recognition—high-value, low-cost staff recognition.



“[The] primary focus of effective recognition efforts is on creating a true culture of recognition, not launching programs or hosting events.”

**— Bob Nelson, “The Importance of Strategic Recognition”
Human Resource Executive**



Thanks! **GREAT** Job!



DIY RECOGNITION RESEARCH: You Are the Employee-of-the-Month Because...?

What you need to conduct this research:

An organization that displays photos or names of its current and former employees-of-the-month, the chutzpah to ask a few questions.

Research Process:

1. Seek out the employee-of-the-month. Ask, “Why were you selected as the employee-of-the-month?”
2. Listen to the response. Note particularly responses such as, “I dunno” or “I guess it was my turn.”
3. Next, seek out previous employees-of-the-month (if they still work there). Ask, “Why were you only the employee-of-the-month once? Haven’t you been doing a good job since?”
4. Listen to the responses. Note particularly responses such as, “You can only be the employee-of-the-month once,” or “Everyone has to have a turn to be the employee-of-the-month.”
5. Be prepared to leave quietly when asked to do so by store security.

Supplementary Questions (for added credit):

- “When you were selected as the employee-of-the-month, was it because you were the most productive employee, or just because it was your turn?”
- “How did being selected as the employee-of-the-month change how you regard your company and supervisor? Did it make you feel more appreciated for what you do?”

Implications for the Workplace:

Do your staff members know why they are recognized? Do they feel recognition comes because they have done a good job, or do they simply feel people are recognized because it’s their turn?

Hint: If recipients don’t know why they are being recognized, there is a need to link recognition to what the organization says is important—its mission statement, values and goals.

Genuine
Relevant
Explicit
Appropriate
Timely

SECTION TWO

GREAT Staff Recognition

Chapter 2

The 5 Ingredients That Make Staff Recognition GREAT

I think I have always had a special relationship with the number five. I don't know when it began, or why. But five has been my favourite number for as long as I can remember. Maybe it's just about having five fingers on each hand or five toes on each foot.

In school, I learned to count by fives. And the five-times table was the easiest part of learning the multiplication facts. If I did something well, the teacher would attach a sticker to my assignment—one that was star-shaped with five points.

When I was a kid, five cents was actually worth something. There were five-cent chocolate bars and five-cent ice-cream cones. It only took five cents to mail a letter to Grandma.

My first “job” was as a newspaper carrier, and what did I charge my customers for their daily newspaper? Five cents. When was 12, I had an article published in our local weekly newspaper. It was the first money I ever earned for something I wrote. The editor paid me the princely sum of five cents per column inch when it appeared in his newspaper.

About the same time, I began listening to jazz on the radio. The Dave Brubeck Quartet was getting a lot of radio time with its newly-released *Take Five*, written by band member Paul Desmond. Eventually, that single reached No. 5 on *Billboard's* Adult Contemporary chart.

In the world of work, five seems to have some significance, as well. Five defines the length of the typical work week. After five years, companies begin to give employees service awards and continue to do so, every five years thereafter.

Thanks! **GREAT** Job!

And five minutes is enough time to write a thank-you note, to compose a congratulatory email, or to leave your office to acknowledge an employee for a contribution and return—or stay to discover another example of a job well done.

“

“There are only five notes in the musical scale, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be heard. There are only five basic colours, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be seen. There are only five basic flavours, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be tasted.”

— Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

”

Great Performances by Great Staff Deserve GREAT Recognition.

And most importantly for me, recognition that is most meaningful and valued by recipients has five ingredients that are represented in the five-letter acronym **GREAT**:

Genuine

Relevant

Explicit

Appropriate

Timely

These are the building blocks of staff recognition. Not all five pieces need to be present in every statement of appreciation for it to be meaningful, but *one* is essential to any expression of gratitude. Staff recognition must always be **Genuine**.

The person expressing appreciation must *genuinely* believe—and the recipient must know—that recognition is deserved. Recognition that is insincere, given because it is the “thing to do,” or offered to an undeserving recipient is meaningless and diminishes the credibility of future recognition.

“

“Good praise is timely, sincere and specific. It focuses solely on the positive and is best when personally delivered.”

— Bob Nelson, *author*

”

Once you begin with **Genuine** belief that recognition is warranted, you need to add at least one of the other ingredients to express gratitude. The more ingredients you add, the stronger the message of appreciation becomes.

Recognition that is **Relevant** relates to what the organization says is important, often expressed in the form of a vision, mission statement, values or goals. **Relevant** recognition focuses on behaviours that are key to employees' on-the-job success, be it as part of the team and as an individual.

Explicit recognition makes the reason for recognition clear. There is a specific description of what the recipient did that is deserving of recognition.

Appropriate is about knowing staff members as individuals—their strengths, their passions, their interests—and, of course, their recognition preferences. **Appropriate** is understanding that not every member fits into the same square or round staff recognition hole—there are some whose recognition preferences are shaped more like an oval, triangle or octagon.

Recognition does not improve with age. The longer you wait to recognize someone, the less its impact. **Timely** recognition is delivered within hours or days of the event for which the recipient is being acknowledged, not weeks or months later.

Each of the next five chapters focuses on a different element of **GREAT** staff recognition. They include more in-depth discussion of the ingredients, stories that illustrate why they are important, and practical suggestions to deliver **GREAT** staff recognition, that is **Genuine, Relevant, Explicit, Appropriate** and **Timely**.



“Praise is a gift gently wrapped in thoughtful words and gracious gestures carefully chosen with the recipient in mind.”

— **Sharon F. Marks, *It Pays to Praise***



Genuine
Relevant
Explicit
Appropriate
Timely

Chapter 3

The Wisdom of Baby Bear

Baby Bear was excited. In his paw he held something that almost made him forget what had happened a few days earlier. That was the day when he came home to discover his little bowl empty, his favourite chair in pieces and a girl asleep on his bed.

Today, things were pretty much back to normal in the Three Bears' home. Mama Bear cooked porridge and ladled it into three bowls on the dining room table—a big bowl for Papa Bear, a middle-sized bowl for Mama Bear and a little bowl for Baby Bear. While the porridge cooled, the Three Bears went for a walk.

In the only departure from past practice, Papa Bear now checked to ensure the doors were locked and all the windows were latched before leaving the house. The Three Bears didn't want a repeat of the Goldilocks incident.

On that morning, Baby Bear had cried out, "Someone has been sleeping in my bed and she's still there!" His shrieks had awakened the little girl. With three puzzled, furry creatures peering down at her, Goldilocks leapt from the bed, bounded down the stairs and out the front door. She hadn't stopped running until she was out of the woods. Safely back inside her house, Goldilocks had sat down at her writing desk.

When the Three Bears returned from today's morning walk, Mama found three envelopes in the mailbox. One was addressed to Papa Bear. One was addressed to Mama Bear. And one was addressed to Baby Bear.

Thanks! **GREAT** Job!

Mama Bear handed an envelope to Baby Bear. "It's from Goldilocks," she said.

"Open it," Papa Bear said. "What does that little girl have to say for herself?"

Baby Bear tore open the envelope and removed a card decorated with little pink flowers. He began to read:

Dear Baby Bear -

How are you? I am fine. I really enjoyed visiting your home recently. I had such a great time. Thank you for everything. I appreciated your hospitality. I wish I could have stayed longer so we could have gotten to know each other better.

Have a good day!

*Your friend,
Goldilocks*



"Isn't that nice?" Mama Bear said.

"She is such a thoughtful girl," Papa Bear said.

Baby Bear said nothing, but his smile extended from ear to ear.

Mama Bear picked up her envelope and studied the return address. "My letter is also from Goldilocks." She opened the envelope, removed a card decorated with little pink flowers, and began to read aloud:

Dear Mama Bear -

How are you? I am fine. I really enjoyed visiting your home recently. I had such a great time. Thank you for everything. I appreciated your hospitality. I wish I could have stayed longer so we could have gotten to know each other better.

Have a good day!

*Your friend,
Goldilocks*



“Isn’t that nice?” Mama Bear said, as she laid the note next to her bowl of porridge.

“She is such a thoughtful girl,” Papa Bear said.

Baby Bear still said nothing, but that huge grin was beginning to fade.

Now it was Papa Bear’s turn to read from a card decorated with little pink flowers:

Dear Papa Bear -

How are you? I am fine. I really enjoyed visiting your home recently. I had such a great time. Thank you for everything. I appreciated your hospitality. I wish I could have stayed longer so we could have gotten to know each other better.

Have a good day!

*Your friend,
Goldilocks*



Before Mama Bear had finished uttering, “Isn’t that nice?” Baby Bear had crumpled his thank-you note and slammed it down so hard that his porridge spilled and began to drip onto the floor.

“It’s not nice at all!” he screamed. “And she’s not thoughtful either!”

His eyes filled with tears, Baby Bear ran from the table, past his now-repaired little chair, up the stairs and into his bedroom. He threw himself onto his little bed. His confused parents followed him up the stairs.

“What’s wrong, Baby Bear?” Papa Bear asked.

“Why are you so upset, Baby Bear?” Mama Bear asked. “Why are you crying?”

“When Goldilocks came to our house, she tasted your porridge, but she didn’t eat it all up,” said Baby Bear, between sobs. “She sat in your chairs, but she didn’t break them into pieces. And she lay down on your beds, but she didn’t go to sleep on them.”

“But, when she got home, she wrote such nice thank-you notes to each of us,” Mama Bear said.

Thanks! **GREAT** Job!

Baby Bear stopped crying long enough to wail: “She wrote the *same* thank-you note to each of us!”

“Yes, they did say the same thing, but each of us got our own card, with our names on them,” Papa Bear responded.

“That was the only difference,” Baby Bear said. “She didn’t say anything about eating all of my porridge or breaking my chair or sleeping in my bed. I don’t think that she really cares. She only wrote the thank-you notes because someone else told her she should do it.

“And,” he added, “I hate little pink flowers! I’m ’lergic to them.”

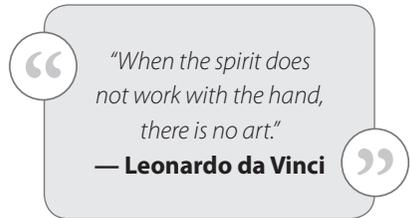
Then Baby Bear said something that captured the essence of his anger. “It wasn’t **Genuine**. She didn’t really mean any of it!”

Baby Bear was right. Despite their daughter’s predilection towards break and entry, vandalism and petty theft, Goldilocks’ parents had taught her all the social niceties. Good manners had been emphasized. She had been drilled in proper etiquette, including how to follow up social visits. She knew she should thank people for their hospitality. So as soon as she had returned from her harrowing adventure in the woods, she had sat down to write a thank-you note to each member of the Bear family in her very best handwriting. She always did what she had always been told she should always do.

In this, Goldilocks had something in common with some of today’s managers and supervisors. For her, writing thank-you notes was a ritual. For them, recognition is a ritual.

This type of recognition doesn’t work. Employees know that they and their co-workers contribute in different ways, at different performance levels, and with different degrees of commitment. When they learn that they all received the same message of appreciation, they soon doubt the sincerity of the message and its author.

Goldilocks-type recognizers understand that it is important to express appreciation for how staff contributes and what they achieve. They have seen the research that says recognition can increase staff motivation and commitment, and improve retention. They may have read books—such as this one—that are filled with tips and techniques. They are equipped to go through the motions of staff recognition, but seem to have no emotional connection to the process.



A supervisor for whom recognition is an intellectual exercise knows when to recognize in a classic stimulus-response sort of way. Specific actions trigger specific recognition: completion of a project, an employee reaching a service anniversary or the arrival of a designated day or week. Each results in a predictable (a.k.a. ritualized) recognition response. Always. Every time. In the same fashion. These gestures sound as hollow as they are.

These supervisors seek programs and trinkets to express appreciation for them, rather than using simple day-to-day gestures that have high value to the recipients. They are always careful to recognize everyone equally for fear that someone will feel left out and unfairly treated. By doing so, they run the greater risk of alienating top performers and reinforcing below-average work.

Staff understand what's going on. They are quick to sniff out insincere praise and recognition. Just like Baby Bear, they know when someone is just going through the motions, providing recognition because "it is the thing to do." Or because senior managers have decreed that supervisors must recognize staff more often. Employees know this type of recognition isn't **Genuine**.

“*Anything you buy by the gross probably won't be reinforcing for very long.*”
— **Janis Allen,**
***I Saw What You Did
& I Know Who You Are:
Giving and Receiving
Recognition***

Such recognition can be worse than no recognition at all. The individual being recognized feels that the person providing the recognition doesn't know him, doesn't care about him and doesn't understand what he does. When everyone is thanked in the same way, it suggests that supervisors are not paying attention to what individuals do.

Telling someone he did a great job, when everyone knows he didn't, reduces the supervisor's credibility and damages her ability to deliver **Genuine** recognition when it is deserved.

The "Genuine" Recognizer

Recognition is truly meaningful only when the person providing recognition feels the need to recognize at an emotional level. **Genuine** recognition comes from the heart.

Genuine recognition is seen, heard and felt as being honestly deserved and honestly delivered. **Genuine** recognition thrives in a climate of mutual respect and trust. Supervisors who respect and trust employees for who they are and what they do, in turn receive respect and trust from their staff.

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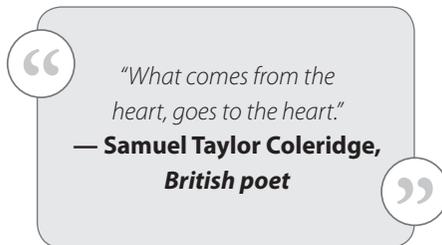
Note the sequencing of that last sentence. “Supervisors who respect and trust employees for who they are and what they do, in turn receive respect and trust from their staff.” The order is important. It is a lesson that I learned from high school students.

For a number of years, our consulting company conducted annual student attitude surveys for a school district. One question asked students to, “Think of one staff member who has made a difference in your school career. What made that person special?” Year after year, students in one high school explained why a particular teacher had their respect. Most noteworthy about their descriptions was how they felt this teacher had earned their respect by first showing respect for them.

Like some managers and supervisors, there are teachers who believe that they are owed respect from their students by virtue of their positions. Others, such as that high school teacher, understand that respect does not come with the territory. Respect is earned. The most effective way for teachers to earn respect is to show respect for their students first. This is a lesson that transfers well from the classroom to the world of work. Employees are more likely to respond with respect when treated with respect.

In workplaces where **Genuine** recognition thrives, staff members feel valued for who they are and what they do. These workers are more energized, more engaged and more committed to their work, the company, their supervisors and their co-workers. Companies with reputations for providing **Genuine** recognition have less trouble attracting qualified applicants—and with lower turnover, have to fill positions less often.

Genuine recognition does not come from programs, but from people: supervisors and co-workers who consistently watch for opportunities to recognize others and take advantage of those opportunities when they arise.



**At Least 12 Clues that Employees
Use to Identify When Recognition
is More Ritual than Genuine:**

1. The message is generic. Everyone hears the same words or receives the same letter of commendation.
2. Recognition seems to depend on tokens of appreciation—baseball caps, company jackets, certificates, plaques or bonuses.
3. Recognition is impersonal. Recognition usually occurs in groups, rather than individually. The focus is on events, rather than day-to-day recognition. Gifts are sent, not presented in person.
4. Recognition isn't spontaneous. It is saved until the next scheduled event.
5. The person making the presentation doesn't know the person being recognized, can't pronounce his name, doesn't know what he did or understand why it was important.
6. The recognition is calendar-specific, happening only on specific dates (birthdays, employment anniversaries, employee recognition days) or during special weeks (Administrative Professionals Week, Education Week, Nurses Week, etc.).
7. The person doing the recognition lays it on too thick, as if he hopes that among many platitudes there will be at least one that fits the circumstance.
8. Someone who the employee doesn't respect or doesn't trust delivers the recognition.
9. The recognition is disproportionate to what was achieved, such as presenting someone who just saved a million dollars with the same mug as everyone gets, or calling everyone together to celebrate someone completing a simple, routine task on time.
10. Recognition is used to buffer bad news. The only time an employee is praised is just before he is told what he did wrong.
11. The words of praise are out of sync with the tone of voice or body language of the recognizer.
12. There appears to be no relationship between the words of appreciation and anything the recipient did.



"Some fellows pay a compliment like they expected a receipt."

— Kin Hubbard



At Least 15 Ways to Ensure that Recognition is Genuine

1. Really care about the people with whom you work and about what they do.
2. Create an environment of trust and respect. Relationships between supervisors and employees are important in creating a culture where **Genuine** recognition thrives.
3. Search for reasons to recognize others. Once you start looking for reasons, you will find them.
4. Express your emotions. Let the recipient know how you feel about his actions—this shows the individual nature of your praise.
5. Be consistent. Recognize what deserves to be recognized, no matter who did it, when or where. And never recognize what doesn't warrant recognition, just because you feel bad that Joe has not been recognized recently. Wait and watch. His turn will come.
6. When recognizing staff, make eye contact and use the person's name. Eye contact conveys your sincerity. Using names, especially the person's first name, makes the process seem friendlier.
7. Focus on informal, day-to-day recognition rather than formal recognition. Use thank-you cards, rather than letterhead. Recognize in private, rather than always in public. Your purpose is to recognize others for doing a good job; not to demonstrate to others what a good job you do of recognizing staff.
8. Remember: how you say something is more important than the words you use. Speak from the heart, not a script. Feelings are more important than well-crafted words. Heartfelt recognition is always worth doing.
9. Before recognizing someone, turn off your cell phone. That's right. Turn it off; don't just switch it to vibrate. That way you won't be interrupted mid-acknowledgement. You won't have to decide who's more important, the person who you are recognizing or the person on the phone. Actually, it's really a no-brainer. The person being recognized is always more important. The caller can leave a message, because now is the time to express gratitude for a job well done. You can always return your boss's call when you're done.
10. In formal recognition situations, ensure that recognition comes from the right person—the most senior official who has some personal knowledge of the person being recognized and what she does.

11. Keep it short and simple. The longer and more flowery a presentation, the more artificial it seems.
12. Frame certificates when you give them to staff. This shows that you believe they are important and that the recipients should as well.
13. Provide honest feedback. When someone screws up, tell him. When he succeeds, tell him. Both types of feedback will be more believable.
14. Be **Explicit**. Focus recognition on specific performance and achievements of individuals and work groups. The more focused the recognition, the more **Genuine** it seems. Generic phrases sound disingenuous.
15. Say what you mean and mean what you say. There is no need to embellish. Explain how the person's action was **Relevant** to the company's purpose and how it helped the company achieve its goals.

“

“Flattery is from the teeth out. Sincere appreciation is from the heart out.”

— **Dale Carnegie, American writer**

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SECTION THREE
Insights and Inspiration
from Unlikely Sources

Chapter 8

Nearly Everything I Really Needed to Know About Staff Recognition I Learned From My Dog

Exercise is important for good health and fitness. We all know that. Getting fit is near the top of most annual lists of resolutions. North Americans spend billions each year on fitness equipment. As happens with most New Year's resolutions, our commitment to fitness fades soon after the exercise equipment is purchased. Almost-new treadmills and stationary bicycles sit idle and ignored in basements and storage rooms. Their main workout value is the exertion owners put into dragging them up the stairs to be sold at their next garage sale.

Kojak was the only dog I ever owned. He was an extremely hairy, 100-pound border collie/German shepherd cross that shared his name with the 1970s TV detective played by a very bald Telly Savalas. He was better than any piece of exercise equipment I ever owned. While it may be easy to ignore an inanimate treadmill or exercise bike, it was not so easy to ignore a large, active dog that knew it was time for his walk.



"A dog is the only exercise machine that you cannot decide to skip when you don't feel like doing it."

**— Carolyn G. Heilbrun,
American academic and author**



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For several years, meeting this need meant spending 45 minutes, morning and evening, rain or shine, from +30°C or -35°C, on the trails near where we lived in Fort McMurray, Alberta. Kojak and I often found ourselves alone on routes more frequented by deer, moose, black bears and foxes, than by other human beings or their pets. This solitude created opportunities for contemplation. It was also a time for Kojak to teach me lessons about people and their recognition needs.

Learning about people by observing dogs is nothing new. Ivan Pavlov, the Russian physiologist and Nobel laureate laid the groundwork for behavioural psychology through his experiments with dogs related to salivation and digestion.

When Pavlov presented food (an unconditioned stimulus), the dogs salivated (unconditioned response). Next, he combined the food with the sound of a bell (conditioned stimulus). Once the dogs had associated the ringing bell with food, they would salivate at the sound of the bell, alone. The promise (the ringing bell) of reward (food) was all that was needed to stimulate the desired behaviour (salivation).

Teachers and managers, alike, knowingly or unknowingly apply the principles of classic conditioning in their classrooms and workplaces to motivate students or workers. Work hard today and you will be rewarded (with a good report card, a raise or a promotion) in the future.

The routine of our walks didn't vary much from one day to the next. At the start, Kojak would stop to sniff trees to see who had passed that way recently and leave evidence that he, too, had been there—the canine equivalent of punching a time clock or signing a guest book. Later, he would wander off on his own to explore along the trail. As the walk progressed, he would appear at my left side from time to time, demonstrating the heeling position that he had learned when the two of us had enrolled in puppy kindergarten.

Here was my first lesson:

Dogs will do what they believe we expect of them.

This was the behaviour that I had learned to reward (and Kojak had learned I would reward) during our obedience classes.



Having taken this position at my side, Kojak went through a series of behaviours, which if not interrupted with a treat or the unexpected appearance of a squirrel, always followed the same sequence.

At first, he seemed content to trot along at my side, eyes looking forward. After a short time, he would turn his head to look up at me expectantly, hopeful of making eye contact. Had I noticed how well he was heeling? Would I reward this desired behaviour?

If ignored, he would progress to the next phase. Still at my side, continuing to look up, he would emit a gentle growl. Not an angry growl; in fact, it was nearly inaudible. Just enough, he hoped, to catch my attention. Maybe I had not noticed how well he was heeling.

When there was still no response—I still hadn't reached into the pocket from which he had seen treats pulled before—Kojak would escalate things. Moving a couple steps ahead, he would turn to face me, and bark three times. "Surely, by now, you have noticed how well I have been heeling. I have done what you expect of me, now it is time for you to do what I expect of you."

Through this sequence, I discovered the second lesson:

Sometimes dogs will ask for feedback in the form of praise and reward when they know they have performed as expected.

When there was still no reward—likely because I had not remembered to refill my treat pocket—Kojak would once again return to heeling position, but only momentarily. Sensing that no reward would be coming, he would leave my side to explore in the nearby woods.

I was left to contemplate the third lesson:

Ignore your dog and he will soon begin to ignore you.



As we returned home, Kojak and I would walk through an open field. If we both had energy, I would pick up a stick and toss it for the dog to retrieve. When he dropped it at my feet, I would give him a pat on the head, which was sometimes accompanied by a treat, before throwing the stick again. Having discovered that a retrieved stick would lead to a cookie, Kojak would

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chase a stick, even if he had not received a cookie the last time he retrieved the stick. There was always the promise of a cookie the next time ...or the time after that. That anticipation is what Pavlov observed in his salivating dogs and what he labelled “conditioned stimulus.”

As a young dog, Kojak would chase several sticks without receiving the cookie he anticipated. As he grew older, he seemed to grow wiser.

He would still chase a couple of sticks and return them with no more than a pat on the head as reward. But throw the stick the third time, and he would only watch it fly through the air before turning to look at you in a stance reminiscent of a defiant three-year-old, refusing to do what his mother asks.

“So! What are you going to do for me now that I have tracked down your stupid stick?”

Kojak had taught me a fourth lesson:

You can't fool an old dog with the same old tricks.

How Do These Lessons Apply To Recognizing The Performance Of Human Beings?

People are not dogs and should not be treated like dogs. But sometimes what we learn from dogs can guide how we treat people.

While it is easy to see how these observations may apply to dogs, how do some things that dogs do relate to people? When Kojak's lessons are reworded, they can serve as a reminder of what most supervisors and managers already know about human nature.

Lesson #1: People will do what they believe we expect of them.

Just as dogs want to please their owners, staff want to please their supervisors by doing what they understand the supervisors want them to do. But how do employees learn what is important for on-the-job success?

This knowledge should come from managers and supervisors who should explain what is expected of staff when they first come to work for the organization, and then remind them through regular feedback. Staff will be more productive and the organization more successful when expectations are clear.

In the absence of direction and feedback from supervisors, new employees will do what they believe is expected of them. These beliefs will be based on what others tell them they should do, what they see co-workers doing, how they handled similar tasks in previous jobs, or what they imagine is expected of them. Depending on the quality of the advice they receive, the appropri-

ateness of behaviour they observe, and the relevance of their previous work experience and training, the beliefs they form based on these sources may or may not fit well with the employer's expectations.

A better way for employees to learn what is expected of them is by receiving recognition and seeing others recognized for doing the right things, the right way.

Lesson #2: Some employees will ask for feedback in the form of praise and recognition when they have performed their jobs well...and that's okay.

While ideally there should be few occasions when an individual feels the need to ask for feedback, that's not the way it is in many fast-paced work environments.

Supervisors may be unaware of each employee's contributions and achievements. In addition, the recognition needs of staff members vary. Some employees have a greater need for feedback than others. These individuals need to know that you are pleased with their performance and that they have your acceptance and support. This is necessary for them to maintain their self-esteem and self-confidence. Better that they ask for—and receive—feedback, than they interpret your silence as dissatisfaction with their performance. Too much worry about your assessment of their performance will distract them from performing well.



Few staff members will be as obvious as Kojak was—no growls, no barks. Their requests for praise and recognition will be more subtle, often taking the form of questions:

- “What did you think of the presentation I did for the board last week?”
- “Have you seen the sales figures for last month? What did you think?”
- “Did you like that idea?”
- “How do you feel about how I dealt with that upset customer?”
- “What can I do to make your job easier?”
- “I just completed my diploma at night school and will be graduating next week.”

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Supervisors and co-workers need to be alert to these requests and be prepared to respond appropriately. Lukewarm responses such as, “Oh, it was fine,” or “Those figures seem all right,” or “Yeah, you did okay,” can be more painful than no feedback at all. The staff member will see the manager as disinterested in what she does and accomplishes—and indeed, in the employee herself. It is important to listen for the request behind the questions. Take time to listen, to look at something the staff member wants to show you, or to go with the employee to see what she is talking about.

Your response should reflect your true assessment of the individual’s performance. If you were pleased, let the staff member know this, and why you feel as you do. If you feel the performance was not up to standard, let the employee know this, too. Include advice about how the employee’s performance could be improved, and express your confidence that she will do a better job in the future.

For many employees, asking for recognition will be difficult. As a supervisor, you can make it easier by providing opportunities when it is easy to ask. When you meet with an employee one-on-one, visit a worksite, or encounter someone in the break room, you can create an opportunity for the employee to request recognition by asking, “What has gone well for you over the past couple of weeks?”

When the staff member mentions something, pick up on the theme:

- “I hadn’t heard about that. Tell me more.”
- “Wow! Sounds like you handled that well.”
- “Why do you think it went so well?”

Lesson #3: Ignore your staff and they will soon begin to ignore you and your expectations.

Supervisors have a choice of three types of feedback they provide to employees. Positive feedback is the most effective type. It is the feedback that most staff members prefer—being told what they have done well and how much their contribution is appreciated. Positive feedback leads to enhanced self-esteem, improved morale and increased motivation—all of which lead to greater commitment and productivity.

Sometimes, when an employee’s performance is inadequate, negative feedback is both deserved and appropriate. When given properly, negative feedback can lead to improved performance. Well-delivered negative feedback can even demonstrate that the supervisor cares about the employee and

How Do They Ask For Applause?

Think that no one asks for recognition? Think again. It happens every time we go to a sports event or concert.

No one is better at asking for applause than professional athletes and performers. And most aren't very subtle about it, either:

- A performer greets his audience with two simple words: "Hello [insert city's name here]!"
- The concert begins with the performer's greatest hit.
- The comedian inserts a local reference into one of his stock jokes—a local politician or celebrity, or a put-down of a rival city.
- Athletes on the field and on the bench wave their arms to encourage fans to cheer.
- A singer thrusts her arm into the air as a signal that the song is over and it's time to applaud.
- An athlete performs a victory dance after scoring.
- The performer praises the quality of the venue. "The acoustics here are so good. I love performing here."
- Someone on stage asks, "Are you having as much fun out there as we are having up here?"

Each gesture or comment is designed to elicit a response—applause, laughter, cheering.

Getting the audience involved in these ways is important to those on stage or the playing field. It creates an energy upon which they can build. No one wants to perform in front of a silent audience, with the possible exception of one of your teachers back in junior high school.

Your staff will also feed off the energy of regular applause. Unlike the professionals, they aren't as overt and proficient when making their requests. You will need to watch for subtle signs that staff members feel recognition is warranted.

If it's acceptable for professional athletes and performers to ask, shouldn't it be as acceptable for the professionals on your staff to ask for applause?

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his development. To be effective, negative criticism must be constructive, focused on specific behaviour, and followed by an expression of confidence in the employee's ability to meet expectations.

Too much negative feedback—or only negative feedback—can be destructive. It can reduce people's self-esteem and self-confidence. Staff members' focus shifts from doing the job well to doing it well enough to avoid the boss's attention. "If I don't do anything wrong, I won't get yelled at." In a workplace where the only feedback is negative, staff become so worried about avoiding criticism that they stop thinking about anything else.

As destructive as negative feedback can be, there is another type of feedback that is even worse—no feedback at all. The boss doesn't even care enough to yell at me. It doesn't matter what I do, no one notices. While positive feedback leads to commitment to doing the job well and negative feedback to compliance to minimum standards, no feedback leads to employees ignoring job expectations and only doing whatever they feel like doing.

Ask on Behalf of Others

In a busy workplace with lots of employees, many of whom work with minimal direct supervision, it is often difficult for the supervisor to be aware of each employee's contributions. When you are aware of a performance deserving of recognition, ask on another's behalf:

- **As a supervisor, you can let your boss know:**

"I think the people in my department did a great job on this project. I am sure they would appreciate a few words of acknowledgement for their contributions from you."

- **You can ask your supervisor on behalf of a co-worker:**

"Joe worked hard to get the month-end report done on time. He came in on the weekend when no one else was here to gather all the necessary information. I think he deserves to be recognized for all this extra work."

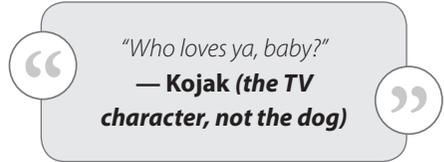
- **As a supervisor you can also point out to a staff member when peer recognition would be fitting:**

"You may not even know this, but Susan was the one who discovered that we were running short of the P12 forms and quietly ordered more without anyone telling her to do that. If she hadn't done that, all of us would have had difficulty completing orders for our clients. You may want to let her know that you appreciated what she did."

Lesson #4: You can't motivate staff with the same old recognition tricks.

Most staff recognition techniques have a short shelf life. An employee may be thrilled the first time she receives a thank-you card from the boss. The next couple are great. And the next few that follow them are seen as “a nice gesture.” But when the only way appreciation is expressed is with a thank-you card, the value of this gesture is diminished. How many thank-you cards does a person need?

Using the same recognition technique over and over reduces its effectiveness. To maintain the impact of recognition, supervisors need to vary how they recognize staff. A thank-you card this time, a small gift the next. Maybe a few words on a sticky note or the opportunity to take an extended lunch break. When it comes to effective staff recognition, variety is the spice of life.



One Final Lesson from the World of Dogs and Dog Owners

Dog owners are like grandparents, without the photo albums. When they gather, dog owners talk about their pets. They brag about how cute and intelligent their canine companions are. They describe how obedient and affectionate their dogs are.

“Look at the new trick I taught my dog.”

“I found a test of dog IQ in a book. When I tested Rover, he did really well on all 12 tests. He is so smart!”

“I think my dog can tell time. She always knows when my husband is due home from work.”

Suppose dogs had similar discussions about people when they meet. Having sniffed each other in places I won't mention here, the conversation would soon turn to their owners.

“They only feed me table scraps,” a sad-faced basset hound complains.

“Mine serves me only canned dog food and imported cheese,” an uppity poodle says.

“Wow,” the Dalmatian exclaims. “Your owner sure treats you well.”

Then a cocker spaniel shifts the topic with his inquiry: “What type of treats do they give you?”

I worried how Kojak might respond to this question. Would he regale others with memories of a variety of treats...or complain that that no matter what he does, it is always the “same old, same old?”

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Wanting to avoid being known throughout the dog world as the owner who gives boring treats, I decided to enhance my reputation by purchasing a variety of treats. Price was not a consideration as I searched for variety and treat quality. My dog would get more than those bone-shaped cookies that I had been purchasing in five-kg buckets.

I bought packages of special treats to take on our walks. The label on one said they were “100 per cent meat.” A dog would love those! Another box contained cookies shaped like cats and mailmen, that tasted like peanut butter—something about which I was content to take the manufacturer’s word. With these treats in my pocket, I was confident that Kojak would excitedly do whatever I asked of him.

It did not work that way. Sometimes, he would take one of the premium treats when offered. Other times he would take it, and then after a moment, let it fall to the ground. Or he would simply sniff at it and turn away. On the other hand, whenever he was offered what I perceived to be common treats—the inexpensive bone-shaped one, he accepted them and crunched away happily.

This final lesson had been an expensive one:

Lesson #5: The value of rewards and recognition is determined by the recipient, not the giver.

A whole industry has grown up across North America supplying staff recognition merchandise. I regularly receive catalogues filled with trinkets that the suppliers claim will make it easier for supervisors to recognize staff—certificates, pins, plaques, trophies, T-shirts, jackets, travel mugs and so on.

Just as my money was wasted on expensive dog treats, most of what is spent on staff recognition trinkets is wasted. What it purchases misses the mark. For every person who values and displays a certificate she receives, there is another for whom the certificate has little value. It will never be displayed. After lying around for a few years, the certificate becomes the victim of an aggressive spring cleanup. Other certificates will hit the recycling bin within hours of being received.

When it becomes time for the person who proudly displays her certificate to recognize others, she will be inclined to express appreciation in the way she values—more certificates. Just because a supervisor values certificates—or plaques, trophies, or caps—does not mean her staff will feel the same way. Before purchasing a lifetime supply of certificates, be sure that your staff values them as much as you do. Chances are they won’t.



DIY RECOGNITION RESEARCH: When the Boss Said, "Well done!"

What you will need for this research project:

A pen and paper

Research Process:

1. List at least five times in the past year when your boss acknowledged you for doing your job well.
2. Ask yourself:
 - Were there other times when you did something well and your boss knew about what you did, but didn't say anything?
 - Do you feel that you are getting enough recognition for your contributions to the organization's success? Or do you feel that you receive too much **Genuine** praise and recognition?

Implications for the Workplace:

Were you able to come up with five examples of having been recognized in the last year? How do you think your staff would respond to this question? Would your staff be able to list five times when they received recognition from you?

*Hint: There is always room for more recognition. No one ever feels they are receiving too much **Genuine** recognition.*