

Recognizing Good Performance

Discipline Without Punishment
by Dick Grote

To create a well-disciplined organization, the manager has two primary responsibilities:

1. To recognize and reinforce good performance.
2. To confront and correct poor performance.

Time spent on recognizing the good performance generated daily by the great majority of organization members will result in far less time spent on problem solving.

Behavior is a function of its consequences. The things that a person does and says are influenced to a great extent by what happens to that person as a result.

In virtually every organization the level of performance provided by organization members forms the familiar bell-shaped curve.

1. At one end of the curve there will be a small number of people whose performance is outstanding or distinguished.
2. At the other end will be another small number whose performance is unacceptable.
3. In the middle will be the great majority of individuals, some of whom will be performing better than others, all of whom will fall between the two extremes of distinguished and unacceptable.

Most managers allocate their time as follows:

1. The greatest amount of time is spent with poor performers.
2. The second group that commands the manager's attention is the exceptional performers.
3. The great majority of people somewhere in the middle are ignored.

Employees whose performance is somewhere in the middle form the backbone of the organization. When we ignore them, we eliminate the incentive for them to improve.

The overall performance of any organization or subunit cannot be significantly influenced by action of those at the high end or the low end of the performance scale because the population in each is too small to make a critical difference.

It is with the solid, competent performer that the greatest opportunity for increasing overall organizational performance lies. If each individual in the huge population of middle-ground performers increases his/her contribution by just 10%, the impact on the entire organization is enormous.

When is Recognition Appropriate?

Three situations where recognition of good performance is appropriate:

1. When an individual has done something “above and beyond the call of duty.”
2. When an employee has significantly improved performance either after a coaching or disciplinary transaction or by his/her own efforts.
3. When an employee hasn't done anything particularly special or outstanding. The individual has simply met all the organization's expectations over a long period of time.

Since those in the third group are doing exactly what we expect, it is easy to overlook the need for recognition.

The manager's challenge is to find examples of good performance to recognize.

Identifying Specific Behaviors to Recognize

It is as important to be specific when recognizing good performance as it is when trying to bring about a performance correction. If we cannot tell employees exactly what it is that causes us to feel good about their performance, the odds are slim that they will be able to continue that good performance.

The test for determining whether your description of an individual's performance is specific is to consider whether you can make a snapshot or movie or tape recording of it. If you can, it's specific. If you cannot, it isn't.

Example: You can't take a snapshot of a good attitude.
You could make a tape recording of someone saying, “Here, let me help you with that.”

When managers narrow their description of an individual's performance to actions and behaviors that are specific and precise, they often feel that the behavior they are describing seems somewhat small-even insignificant.

But superior job performance is not a matter of doing a few things heroically. It is a matter of doing a great many small things well.

If a manager provides recognition for small stuff, the big deals will take care of themselves.

When good performance is recognized and appreciated by the organization, the great majority of employees won't care how disciplinary cases are handled.

Guidelines for Effective Recognition

1. Recognize good performance often.
2. Recognition is most influential when it rapidly follows the behavior being reinforced.
3. Recognition is most effective when it is directed to specific individuals rather than to teams or groups of employees.
4. Recognition is most effective when it is tailored to the preferences of the individual. For example, some employees like to have their contributions made known to the group directly. Others prefer that their achievements be acknowledged privately.
5. Recognition needs to be proportionate to the performance. The sincerity and good sense of a manager who praises a minor contribution lavishly is questioned by the recipient and by others.
6. Don't wait until a person has performed perfectly to provide recognition. Acknowledge the minor achievements that produce the ultimate result.

Recognition Tools

Our words are the most important tool we have to influence the performance of others. Simply telling someone that we have noticed and appreciate his/her good performance in one area of his/her job increases the probability that the good performance will continue.

Other tools for recognizing performance:

1. Write a memo to the employee and put a copy in his/her personnel file.
2. Write a quick thank you on a Post-It note and leave it on the employee's desk.
3. Write your boss a memo about what the employee is accomplishing and send a copy to the employee.
4. Ask the employee's advice about a business-related matter, such as how to reduce waste, how to improve customer service, how to reorganize the work flow when someone is out, etc.
5. Buy the employee a coke or a cup of coffee.
6. Clip an article of interest from the newspaper and pass it along to the employee.
7. Assign the employee to work on a desirable project.
8. Introduce the employee to a visitor and explain to the visitor how the employee's work contributes to the success of the department.

Of all of these, the most important are the sincere and genuine words that come out of our mouths:

- Good job.
- Well done.
- Thanks.
- I really appreciate that.

Reasons managers say they don't recognize good performance often enough:

1. We're too busy.
2. I expect good performance.
3. Nobody recognizes me for good performance.
4. I feel awkward telling employees they are doing a good job.

The most authentic reason many managers don't use recognition to motivate improved performance is that recognizing good performance forces managers to discriminate among their people – to separate those who are performing well from those who are not.

To use positive reinforcement effectively, we must not only provide it actively to those whose performance justifies our providing it, but we must also consciously withhold it from those whose performance does not justify receiving managerial applause.

The Treat-Everybody-Alike Manager

Managers who say they treat everyone alike are actually saying that they treat the people who contribute the least to the organization the same way that they treat those who contribute the most. No special rewards are provided to those who carry more than their load.

1. People who want to work for that type of manager are those at the lower end of the performance curve.
2. Star performers don't enjoy working for that type of manager because they discover that their exemplary performance provides no benefit. Do well, do poorly-you are all treated the same. Most star performers move either down to the above-average performance level or to another organization where exemplary performance is rewarded.

When poor performers complain about favoritism, the manager acknowledges that they are correct.

You are right. I wish I could do for you what I have done for them, but you haven't given me any justification. The instant that your performance is at the same level as theirs, you can be sure that I will give the same rewards to you that I have given to them.

Assignment

1. Once a day, find one employee who is doing exactly what he/she is supposed to be doing – nothing special, nothing above and beyond the call of duty, just doing what he/she is paid to do.
2. Tell that person that you noticed that he/she was doing the job right, say thank you, and go back to your office.
3. Do this every day and see what happens.