

Appreciation and Employee Satisfaction

For years, the business world has acknowledged that employee satisfaction is a key component of employee retention. Lower turnover means less money spent on recruitment, less time lost on training and development, and a higher retention of job knowledge and expertise. It is estimated that the cost of replacing an employee is roughly 20% of that employee's annual salary, and up to two times the annual salary for highly paid employees (Center for American Progress, 2012). In 2014 the average total for turnover in American businesses was 15.7%. That adds up to quite a sum.

Feeling appreciated at work is the most important quality employees give for staying with an employer. Money, location, hours, type of work...all these are important too, but in the end it is the feeling of being truly appreciated at work that makes most people feel loyal and able to produce their best work.

Why, then, do so many companies struggle to implement effective appreciation programs? The explanation may lie in the idea that appreciation is different from recognition and awards. Many companies have programs that recognize employees for years of service, quality of work, goal achievement, etc. While these kinds of programs have their benefits, they can miss the mark when it comes to the true nature of appreciation. True appreciation cannot be mass-marketed or generated by numbers. It is individual, personal, and sincere in quality and complexion.

Recognition vs. Appreciation

Most company recognition programs are structured to reflect business objectives. Employees are recognized for achievements that support the company's annual goals, profit margins, etc. Typically, a recognition program will include base-line awards in the form of cash bonuses or items an employee can choose from a select list such as a catalog. The recognition expressed by these programs is general in nature.



Appreciation, on the other hand, is focused on the individual's needs and performance instead of business goals. While typically supportive of overall company goals, an individual's performance may not fall into a pre-dictated recognition category and yet be very impactful to the company's environment as a whole. For example, missing a sales goal by a minimal percentage may eliminate an employee from a recognition level, but their achievements are nonetheless worthy of appreciation.

Speaking the Language of Appreciation

Gary Chapman and Paul White, authors of the book "The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace," have defined five primary methods (or "languages") that communicate appreciation most effectively based on how a person interprets appreciation best.

Words of Affirmation – Employees in this category feel most appreciated when they are recognized in words – either written or verbal – for their performance. Some prefer verbal praise in front of others, while some prefer less public methods. Regardless, the act of *telling* someone that you appreciate their work (specifically something they have done) is more valuable than gold to this type of employee.

Quality Time – Employees in this category take to personal attention like flowers do to sunlight. The quantity of the time does not make an impact as much as the quality of the time. Time spent meeting face-to-face, a lunch together, or just a quick chat in the hallway makes this group of people feel valued and noticed.

Acts of Service – For people in this category actions speak louder than words. Jumping in to help finish a task, offering to grab something for them, or just offering to help even if that offer is declined is what makes them feel like they are understood and appreciated.

Tangible Gifts – Unlike reward programs with structured gifts, this language is about individual effort. Although the item given is appreciated (say a gift card, movie tickets, parking voucher, etc.), it is the thought and action *behind* giving the gift that lets the recipient know how much you appreciate them as individuals.



Appropriate Physical Touch – While this language is rarely the primary language of appreciation for people, it can definitely have a supporting role. Actions like a handshake, pat on the back, or high-five can serve to let the individual know that they are respected, valued and part of the team.

Finding out what languages people speak is key to making the appreciation you express valid and worthwhile. For example, giving tangible gifts to someone whose primary appreciation language is quality time is a waste of your time and money. Verbally praising someone who could really just use a hand with the copier is also missing the mark. Giving the right feedback to the right person takes effort and observation, but the benefits of low turnover and a high quality work environment make it very worthwhile.

For more information, check out the book *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace; Empowering Organizations by Encouraging People* (2012) by Gary Chapman and Paul White.

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Everyone wants to be appreciated, so if you appreciate someone, don't keep it a secret.

~ Mary Kay Ash