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The power of praise and recognition

by Geoff Mutton

The critical shortage of automotive technicians in Australia has triggered more aggressive recruiting processes, while on the other side of the coin, workshops are desperately trying to hang on to good existing staff.

Offering pay rises to existing staff may help in the immediate short term but often, the initial surge of motivation that follows, can quickly dissipate. There's no question that money is important to employees, but in the overwhelming majority of cases it's not the only factor an employee will consider if another job is being dangled in front of their nose.

The most powerful kind of motivation for team members is incredibly simple – praise and recognition for a job well done.

Why do employees need praise?

It's no secret that being praised often makes people feel good. Pride, pleasure and increased feelings of self-esteem are common reactions to being paid a compliment or receiving positive feedback. This is because being praised triggers the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that helps control the reward and pleasure centres of the brain. As well as making people feel good, dopamine can also contribute to innovative thinking and creative problem solving.

However, these positive effects are relatively short-lived, and for praise to have an enduring impact on employee engagement, it needs to be offered regularly.

This means that supervisors need to be on the lookout for good work and make the effort to praise employees for jobs well done. This is a big shift from the environment that most workshop owners experienced when they started out as employees. The only feedback they got was when they did something wrong.

The impact of praise

Psychologists have long been fascinated by the effects of praise on workplace performance and behaviour, and what this means for organisations. In 2004, the Gallup pollsters quizzed more than four million employees world-wide about the importance of praise and recognition.

Gallup concluded that employees who receive regular praise were more productive, engaged and more likely to stay with their organisation, than those who were not regularly praised. The survey also indicated that employees who are praised receive higher loyalty and satisfaction scores from customers, and even enjoy better health than employees who are not praised.

This has nothing to do with generations. It's always been this way. The problem is that our generation are more used to negative feedback through schooling. You only have to look at the devastatingly whinny and negative trends on social media to realise that.

I experience this firsthand recently. My seven-year-old daughter received an award for displaying the school values. Only one is awarded per class per term so she was pretty happy with herself. The moment she got home from school she started doing her homework without being asked. That was a first ever. I bet if she had been marched to the principal for some misdemeanor, she would have been flat and getting the homework done would have been a battle.

What about poor performance?

But all this uplifting talk doesn't mean that poor performance should go unaddressed. Of course it must be discussed and action taken. The point is that if all staff ever hear is negative feedback motivation will plummet.

As a general yardstick, staff should receive more praise for jobs well done than negative feedback for poor performance.

But don't make the mistake of mixing the two together. If you praise someone for a job well done and in the next breath chide them for doing something wrong, all they will remember from that conversation will be the negative.

Delivering praise

How praise is delivered has a significant bearing on its effectiveness. Gallup pointed out that only genuine achievements should be praised, and that empty words had little or no value. 'Unearned praise can do more harm to an individual and a workgroup than none at all,' was their conclusion. It not only prevents employees from knowing when they need to improve, but it can diminish the impact of the genuine praise that is offered at other times.

World-renowned psychologist Carol Dweck has found that children who are praised for being inherently 'good' at something are less likely to take on new challenges than those who are praised for their approach to the task. Dweck's advice is to 'focus on the processes they used - their strategies, effort or choices'. This can be applied in business – praise the effort and process more than the result.

Applying praise in your business

There's little doubt that praising and recognising the efforts and achievements of others can bring about some very positive results in the workplace. Being praised makes the recipient feel good about themselves and this can help to boost their performance. Praise provides the kind of positive experience or uplift that can increase employees' morale, motivation and engagement, and renew their commitment to the workshop.

Key points to remember:

- Make an effort to be on the lookout for genuine effort and performance.
- Only praise genuine performance.
- Praise the effort and process more than the result (very relevant for diagnostics).
- Don't give praise and then follow it up with negative feedback in the same conversation.
- Give constructive and negative feedback when it is required. However, if it's more frequent than praise then staff performance and motivation is most likely to fall.

So here's the challenge. Protect your best assets, your staff, with a little praise.

The place to start is www.tatbiz.net.au/resources

Just go for it!