

John Schaefer – America’s Employee Recognition Expert

Interview Questions and Answers

Q1) John, I thought we could begin with discussion of some examples of problems in the workplace and continue with your ideas and solutions for improvement.

Can you tell us more about your background and why you decided to write this book?

Answer

Sure Dan. I spent the first 5 years of my career as an Industrial Engineer. While this became a frustrating time for me as an employee, it led to all of the characters in my book *The Vocational Shrink and the Ten Levels of Workplace Disillusionment* came from this experience. For the past 21 years, I’ve worked as a recognition consultant helping clients optimize their use of recognition and incentives with a training-based approach. My team introduces an Umbrella Strategy that allows our clients to minimize existing costs, enhance results and prove it. It’s a very timely approach during this challenging economy.

Q2) What are some of the most common reasons people become disillusioned with their jobs?

Answer

Depends on who you ask, and that’s part of the problem. Research overwhelmingly points to employees being engaged initially by emotional factors; primarily being Loved and Respected. However, employee surveys and focus groups always come up with Cash as the prime motivator. This leads to management giving employees cash, gift cards and gift certificates, thinking they are doing a good thing. What they’re actually doing is insulting and “buying off” employees, so they get a subtle resentment and minimal performance improvement.

It’s like asking a group of 3rd graders what they want for lunch expecting to get a balance meal. Kids want candy and employees want cash. It’s the wrong question and always gets the wrong answer.

Q3) From your research, what do employees want most from their companies?

Answer

If you ask employees "off the record" they work for money, but are motivated and energized by genuine appreciation and autonomy. You see, money is a Level One need in Maslow's Hierarchy, so while it's important, it's not motivating. Self Esteem (Level Four) is where most employees reside today, so feeling valued and kept informed is what gets them engaged. Then, they immediately become interested in doing things to help "their" company, because they feel better about the place and the people they work with.

Q4) Is company loyalty a thing of the past? And when is time to move on?

Answer

Back in 1993 when IBM had their first layoffs in history, loyalty began to be questioned. As is usually the case, the pendulum swung too far, so companies treat employees as if they're not loyal and they respond in kind. My findings are that the majority of employees (about 80%) do not want to run the company or become entrepreneurs. Most want to trade a fair day's work for a fair day's pay and feel good about themselves in the process. Then, they want to go home and participate in other aspects of life that are equally important, like running a Boy Scout Troop, coaching a Little League team, teach a Yoga Class or taking part in other activities that are personally rewarding. Loyalty is definitely alive and well and that's what we help our clients tap into.

Q5) What are some simple steps supervisors can take to improve morale in their departments?

Answer

The first step is to "Make it Real". What we mean by that is to be open, vulnerable, genuine and believable with their people. The key to this is in training them to both understand and appreciate Recognition as a tool that is personally beneficial; in other words, see what's in it for them. By appealing to their own self-interest, supervisors will automatically be more enthusiastic and interested in using proper recognition and incentive tools often and effectively.

Q6) Is it all up to the employer? Shouldn't an employee be responsible for his/her own attitude and performance?

Answer

The old-school approaches use carrots and sticks to threaten employees into performing. This goes hand in hand with autocratic management style that says, "Hey, I'm paying them, then should show up and do their job without sniveling!" This is based on a theory that employees are basically lazy and you need to crack the whip. Today's employees tend towards being more engaged from the start and will respond quickly to being trusted, respected and not micromanaged. The reality is, about 20% of a company's employees are self-motivated. Another 20% will never be high achievers. The secret is for the company to work with the middle 60% to help them improve their attitude, morale and performance. That not only drives high productivity, but will generate significant ROI; we're seeing as much as 23 to 1 with some of our clients.

Q7) Has the workplace changed over the years, or do the same basic principals apply when it comes to job satisfaction?

Answer

The biggest change is that today we have four distinct generations in the workplace. Each is different in how they perceive their work, but they have one thing in common – they all want to be honestly appreciated, respected and challenged by competent managers. That's the main thing we discuss in our training; how to get managers to use genuine, honest, relaxed and positive communication to let every employee be all they can be, not out of fear, but because they feel like it.

Q8) How does high turnover impact a companies bottom line and, in turn, the economy?

Answer

Depending on recruiting and training costs, it can cost as much as 400% of annual salary to replace an employee. Reducing turnover impacts the bottom line significantly and quickly, but there are additional benefits that are harder to measure quantitatively. Lower turnover yields a higher overall level of experience, less mistakes, higher levels of cooperation and creativity. From the manager's standpoint, it makes their staff easier to manage, so they can concentrate on higher value activities, as they should.

Q9) Can you provide an example of a situation where your group turned employee morale around?

Answer

I had one client who was so frustrated with employee interest in their recognition program that they were considering discontinuing it all together. Personally, in their case, it would have better to drop it than do their other considered alternative – give cash. We were able to train their manager team to make recognition more meaningful, which took the pressure off the awards to carry the total message. This saved them money, got far better employee reaction and improved the culture overall. This is not uncommon, as employees are very quick to decide whether you are using recognition to show appreciation or to manipulate them to do more work.

Q10) Closing remarks. What's the No. 1 message you would like to leave with our listeners?

Answer

There is an old theory called The Peter Principle that says managers tend to get promoted to one level beyond their highest level of capability. What this means is that most managers are stressed out and doing everything they can to just get through the day. With a little bit of training, however, we can help them use recognition and improved communication to make their job easier while attracting and keeping highly productive employees at the same time. It's the true Win-Win-Win scenario that everybody is looking for, and in this economy. It's the most important way to survive in business today.