

The Economy is Starting to Turn Around – Is Your Recognition Culture Ready?

For the past year we've been sharing some surprising statistics about employee morale, recognition and how a poor economy has made it easy to take employees for granted. Now those unintended bad habits could start to cost you, but it's not difficult to identify and fix.

Walker Information studies show that 66% of employees are disloyal and could be looking for a better workplace environment as the economy recovers – and I'll bet it's not the group you'd like to see leave. Is it too late to do something about it? Not necessarily, but a fresh, energized and educated approach to recognition and incentives can sure help. Here are five simple steps you can take right now to make sure your employees know you care and think twice before looking for greener pastures:

1. Evaluate your current recognition and incentive programs and determine which are truly engaging people and which are just seen as entitlements. Be careful in using surveys and focus groups to determine this, however, because no employee is ever going to tell you to stop handing out cash, even though they may feel like you're just throwing them a bone. Effective programs engage people emotionally and help them feel valued, so they want to bring their best performance and attitude to work. That's why so many cash and gift card programs have such short term results and can lead employees to feel "bought off" rather than recognized.
2. Invest in training managers to both understand and appreciate recognition tools as something that has personal value, as well as benefiting the recipient's. If managers are just going through the motions employees will see it a mile away and feel manipulated rather than appreciated. Some simple changes in management communication style and perception will go a long way in making your recognition effective and allowing you to get a lot more for your money. Good communications training is quick, inexpensive and works well with your overstressed managers who are dying for help in making their jobs easier and more rewarding.

Making sure they know you care as much as you really do.

3. Integrate all of your programs into a single strategy focused on your current company goals and mission. Try this exercise – make a list of all of your current recognition and incentive programs along with their costs and logistics. If you're like many companies, you will be surprised and the number of disjointed programs, and how independent they are in application. This makes them hard for managers to use consistently and even more difficult to evaluate in terms of their return on investment. You'll probably also be amazed at how much more you're spending than you think. A single strategy will allow you to minimize costs, by changing or eliminating overlap, while making it easier for managers to understand and utilize them properly. It will also make it possible to track, monitor and evaluate the benefits of your strategy, so you can show positive financial results to your CFO.
4. Utilize today's high technology to implement web-based solutions. This is not only environmentally friendly, as you eliminate paper and the distribution costs of catalog materials, but makes it easy to keep things fresh and programs relevant to your changing goals. Platforms exist that will handle all of the program details, training, communications, award choices and management reporting, so you can use your recognition and incentives as a Performance Management Tool, not just a bunch of unrelated bonuses. By demonstrating how easy it is to drill down by location, division, department, manager and employee, you subtly hold everyone's feet to the fire, so they know that you're serious about using awards as constructive tools to improve your organization. Tied with appropriate training to engage your managers, you'll make much better use of your budget, and you'll be able to prove it.
5. Get and keep upper management involved in your recognition programs. We can't stress this one enough, as employee's are always looking for an ulterior motive and when they sense that you're using recognition more for your benefit than theirs, they emotionally disengage and do just enough to stay under the radar; and with considerable resentment along for the ride. The best way to assure continued upper management support is to show quantitative, positive results such as reduced hard costs, improved profits, reduced turnover and higher morale.

The discussions about employer/employee loyalty rage on, but our experience shows that about 80% of your people will respond positively to genuine, honest and vulnerable communication from supervisors and managers, as long as they know your motives are sound. The missing ingredient has been time and training, but once your management team has a simple, well-structured plan in place, they are much more likely to embrace recognition as part of an overall culture of appreciation and trust. Employees want to bring their "A" Game to work for a company that shows they care and is working together as a team towards positive, realistic and exciting goals. With competition what it is today, don't let this easily obtainable advantage pass you buy.



John Schaefer is a Consultant with more than 20 years of experience helping companies realize and react to what he calls the *Employer/Employee Disconnect*. "Your people have the capacity and desire to become far more involved and productive than they are today. The resources required are freely available, if you simply choose to use them," says Schaefer. "The key is to get your managers and supervisors to embrace this challenge by seeing what's financially in it for them." John is the author of *The Vocational Shrink – An Analysis of the Ten Levels of Workplace Disillusionment*, as well as *The Vocational Shrink The Game* and Manager Training Program "Why Should Supervisors Care?" which gets to the bottom of what they're *really* thinking, "what's in it for me?" www.VocationalShrink.com