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Thanks!
GREAT Job!

Nelson Scott

Improve Retention, Boost Morale
and Increase Engagement with
High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition

Thanks! *GREAT Job!*

Improve Retention, Boost Morale and Increase Engagement
with High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition

Nelson Scott

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Dedication

To our children Pam and Graham, whose early employment experiences taught me much about the importance of recognizing staff and expressing appreciation.

In Memory

Kojak
(the dog)
1998–2010

A portion from the sale of each book will be donated to The Rotary Foundation, the mission of which is to advance world understanding, goodwill, and peace through the improvement of health, the support of education, and the alleviation of poverty.

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Introduction

It All Started With A Single Question

One unexpected question prompted this book. I was just wrapping up a day-long workshop called *Interview Right to Hire Right* when a participant in my audience in Grande Prairie, Alberta, lobbed it at me:

“You told us how to hire the right people, but how do we keep them? It seems like a lot of work if they just turn around and leave and we have to find someone else.”

A murmur of agreement spread across the room. Others had had the same thought. Keeping people was a bigger challenge than finding them. Turnover rates were high. People were leaving so quickly—in some cases after a few days, or even hours!—that identifying the right people to hire seemed beside the point.

If they were going to invest the time to hire as I was advocating, what could be done to stop these new hires from leaving?

I don't know what my questioner expected me to say in response. Terrific pay? Extended health-care coverage? Flexible hours? On-site daycare? While all these benefits are important, I didn't refer to them in my response.



RECOGNITION

Recognition is an after-the-fact display of appreciation or acknowledgement of an individual's or team's desired behavior, effort, or business result that supports the organization's goals and values.

— **Recognition Professionals International**



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“Let them know that they are appreciated,” I said. “Recognize them for what they achieve and how they help your organization succeed.”

But what did that mean? What could managers and supervisors do to recognize staff more effectively? How could I help them do a better job?

My first step was to introduce a small section on staff recognition and retention to *Interview Right to Hire Right*. I explained the importance of keeping staff, and the financial, productivity and customer-satisfaction costs associated with high turnover. During the short time devoted to this topic, I provided a few suggestions on how to recognize staff and let them know that they are valued for who they are and what they do.

In research first conducted by Lawrence Lindahl in 1949 and replicated several times since, supervisors and workers were asked to rank 10 aspects of their jobs in order of relative importance (with 1 being high). Note the difference between what the workers and supervisors identified as most and least important in terms of on-the-job motivation.

	Supervisor's Ranking	Worker's Ranking
<i>Good working conditions</i>	4	9
<i>Feeling "in" on things</i>	10	2
<i>Tactful disciplining</i>	7	10
<i>Appreciation for work done</i>	8	1
<i>Management loyalty to workers</i>	6	8
<i>Good wages</i>	1	5
<i>Promotion and growth opportunities</i>	3	7
<i>Understanding of personal problems</i>	9	3
<i>Job security</i>	2	4
<i>Interesting work</i>	5	6

When *Briefly Noted*, the newsletter that I circulate to clients and other subscribers, first appeared in 2002, I began to write articles on staff recognition. In each issue there have always been a few high-value, low-cost staff recognition tips. I also developed a presentation on staff recognition and retention, which was followed by a second and then a third. Eventually people began to ask, “So, where’s the book?”

Well, here it is!

Something that I do not write about very often—nor ever advocate—is staff recognition programs. I feel that formal programs such as service awards, employee-of-the-month programs and attendance awards are ineffective. They can be cumbersome, time consuming and expensive and they touch too few people. They do little to boost morale, increase engagement or improve retention. I will have more to say about staff recognition programs in the next chapter.

What I do advocate, for reasons that will become obvious as you read this book, is to redirect the energy and money currently consumed by ineffective programs. Let’s give managers and supervisors the skills and tools they need to provide more informal, day-to-day recognition. This is the type of recognition that staff members crave most and find most meaningful.

A phrase that you will encounter repeatedly is “high-value, low-cost staff recognition.” That is, high-value for recipients, but low-cost for you, in terms of the resources you have to invest: time, money and effort. The book is filled with suggestions for delivering high-value, low-cost recognition.

As you read these tips and techniques, you will find some that you are already using successfully and others that you wish to try. Some will need to be modified to fit your organization, your budget or your personality.

A few may cause you to scratch your head. How could they possibly work? Don’t feel that this reaction reflects a deficit in your understanding of staff recognition. I share your sense of bewilderment about some of these techniques. I have included ideas that I couldn’t imagine using myself, but which have worked for others.

“Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is... to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated.”

—Stephen Covey,
**The Seven Habits of
Highly Effective People**

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“

“Recognition is acknowledgement, appreciation and achievement.”

— **Sue Glasscock & Kimberly Gram, Workplace Recognition**

”

The primary target audience for this book is managers and supervisors who work with front-line staff. I feel this responds to how most front-line staff—nurses, secretaries, teachers, labourers and sales associates—view the hierarchy of their organizations.

Unless they are part of the hierarchy, employees don't spend much time thinking about the CEO and her direct reports. They know they are there, but they are irrelevant to the front-line staff's day-to-day work lives. On the other hand, their direct supervisor may be the most important person in their work lives. The relationship between a supervisor, and his staff is critical to an organization's success. During exit interviews, departing employees frequently cite their relationship with their supervisor and the lack of recognition from that person, among their top reasons for leaving. Surprisingly to some, money is seldom mentioned as an important factor in the decision to leave. More people would prefer to work for a good boss for less pay than for better pay with a boss who is difficult. Staff are more likely to trust and respect managers and supervisors who are good at recognizing staff, and perceive them as effective in their jobs

Not a supervisor or manager?

Different organizations label leadership positions differently—principal, foreman, team leader, department head, superintendent, boss, owner, head nurse and so on. To keep things simple and to make the suggestions accessible to people in different industries, I have chosen to use two terms—supervisor and manager—as generic labels for all leadership roles. The only exception is when I am illustrating a point with a specific example.

Recognition and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

When a pipeline in North America ruptures and fuel begins to leak, people run away. In some developing countries, impoverished people rush toward the leaking pipeline. They want to capture a few litres that they can sell.

Sounds dangerous, doesn't it? It is. Every year there are reports of explosions killing people who were filling containers. Most know the dangerous consequences of their actions, but they still collect spills from the pipelines. People in developed countries wonder why.

An examination of psychologist Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs"—represented by the pyramid at the bottom of this page—helps us understand what would motivate people to risk their lives for a few litres of fuel.

Maslow said that humans have an inborn order of needs that we pass through in stages. We progress to the later stages—the higher levels of the pyramid—only after our more basic needs are satisfied.

When people live in such extreme poverty that just surviving from one day to the next is a challenge, they will risk all just to survive. When satisfying their most basic needs is the priority, they don't look beyond the physiological needs to consider their own security and safety—the second level of Maslow's pyramid. Desperately poor people will take great risks to meet the basic need for food, clothing and shelter.

Certainly Canada and other developed countries have people who are living in poverty. Some are unemployed. Some are homeless or don't get enough to eat. That this occurs amidst affluence is shameful, and efforts to address their needs should be encouraged and supported.



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In reality, most of the people with whom you work do not face these challenges. Having a job and receiving a regular paycheque enables them to buy food, pay the rent and clothe themselves and their families.

With a job, the need for security and safety is also addressed. They are protected from unexpected medical expenses by government health care and company benefits. Most people who have a job with a regular paycheque and benefits give little thought to their physiological and safety needs. They can begin thinking about satisfying needs higher up the pyramid.

While supervisors usually do not control pay rates and benefits, they are in a position to create work environments in which staff members can satisfy their social, esteem and self-actualization needs. After physiological and safety needs are met, the next need to be satisfied is social, which relates to belonging and being accepted. Supervisors can welcome newcomers, introduce them to co-workers and encourage interaction.

Next is the need to be valued and have a sense of contributing to the organization. By acknowledging staff members regularly for their contributions and achievements, both as individuals and members of the team, supervisors can help staff members meet their needs for self-esteem.

Finding themselves in an oppressive work environment, where criticism and negativism is common, people will shift their focus from meeting social and self-esteem needs to question whether this is the best location in which to meet physiological and safety needs. Is it time to update the resume and begin to search the help-wanted ads?

The final need—self-actualization—is related to achieving one's potential and self-fulfilment, becoming everything one is capable of becoming. Supervisors can support staff members in this pursuit by providing training and coaching to reach their potential, and challenges that require them to perform at the high level that corresponds to their capability. And they can praise them when they achieve success.

““
*“Praise works with only three types of people—
men, women, and children.”*
— **Anonymous** ””

How the Book is Organized

This book is divided into four sections:

- Why formal staff recognition programs are frequently ineffective and unnecessary
- 5 ingredients of **GREAT** staff recognition: **Genuine, Relevant, Explicit, Appropriate** and **Timely**
- Lessons—many from unlikely sources—that have shaped my thinking on staff recognition
- Tools and techniques for meaningful staff recognition that will increase engagement and productivity, boost morale and improve staff and customer retention

Throughout this book you will encounter stories of staff recognition successes and failures. Some of the stories are mine, others were told to me by others. In some cases, I have modified the details to preserve privacy.

To support my message that recognition is important, I enlisted the assistance of a variety of experts and authorities, whose words appear throughout the book. They are actually quite a diverse group: ancient philosophers, historical figures, contemporary and classical authors, business gurus, poets, cartoon characters, literary figures, religious leaders and film stars.



“Ladies and gentlemen: the story you are about to hear is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent.”

— **Dragnet radio series, 1949 – 1957**



Puhutko suomea?*

Writing this book in Finnish would have simplified it, a bit. I'm not joking. In Finnish, there is no distinction between male and female. Both “he” and “she” are covered by “hän” and “his/her” by “hänen.” No clumsy constructions of “he or she” or “his/her” and “they or their” are necessary.

Alas, I can't speak, read or write Finnish. Likely, you can't either. So, I've come up with a compromise. To maintain gender neutrality I have consciously varied references to managers and employees as men or women...or should that be, “female or male?” Hopefully, I have achieved a good gender balance.

* *Do you speak Finnish?*

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When some managers and supervisors are asked about staff recognition at my seminars, they respond with reasons for not recognizing staff. When I ask, “Why is recognition so scarce in many workplaces?” they quickly round up the usual suspects—the most common reasons for not acknowledging staff for their contributions.

Many of these “reasons” are listed in this book, under a label that exposes them for what they truly are—excuses, rationalizations and cop-outs. They are no more valid than justifications for not exercising, for continuing to smoke, or for not following a healthy diet.

“People will accept your idea much more readily if you tell them Benjamin Franklin said it first.”
— **David H. Comins**, author

What’s Up...and Down...with Staff Recognition

When we acknowledge staff and recognize them for their efforts, contributions and successes, good things happen:



The reason for recognizing staff regularly in meaningful ways is so much more compelling: It works!

Some of the conclusions in this book are based on my research and observations, as well as those of experts in the field. But don't just take our word for it. Become a do-it-yourself recognition researcher. Throughout the book, you will find suggestions for DIY Recognition Research projects. Conducting this research will add to your understanding of staff recognition and the impact it can have.

There is one last truth about a book that had a 10-year gestation period. There is much that could have been included that isn't. There just weren't enough pages. Some of the missing pieces—including recognition tips and techniques, resources and quotations—are available at www.GREATstaffrecognition.com. I invite you to visit, and while you are there, leave your own stories of staff recognition—both successes and failures.

The acronym **GREAT** reminds us of the five ingredients that make staff recognition work—recognition that improves increases engagement, boosts morale and improves retention—and most importantly, makes recognition meaningful for the recipients. For recognition to work, it must be **Genuine**. It should also be **Relevant, Explicit, Appropriate** and **Timely**.

I have devoted Section Two to these five ingredients, but for now, I will leave you with this thought:

Not all five ingredients need to be used when recognizing staff, but the presence of one is essential. Recognition must be **Genuine**. If it's not, it becomes an empty exercise. Once recognition is **Genuine**, the addition of one or more of the other components strengthens the message of appreciation.

Top 7 Reasons to Recognize Employees NOW!

1. Reduce turnover
2. Increase profitability
3. Increase productivity
4. Retain top performers
5. Create a positive work environment
6. Elevate customer service, sales and satisfaction
7. Attract a better recruiting pool

Source: Recognition Professionals International, October 29, 2008

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At Least 4 Ways to Use This Book

1. This is not a whodunit. You can begin anywhere. Thumb through the book, stopping wherever something catches your eye. Jump around from chapter to chapter.
2. Abuse this book. You have my permission. Even I don't think this is great literature, or a piece of art. And it's not a textbook that you will hand on to another student for the next term. Write in it. Highlight passages. Make notes in the margins. Circle ideas you like. Cross out those you don't. Fill the book with sticky notes. If someday you would like a "clean" copy of the book, send your marked-up book back and I will replace it. No charge. Not even shipping.
3. Don't read it all at once. Look at some parts now; save other parts for later. Select a few high-value, low-cost recognition techniques to try. If they work, that's great— but you will still need to find different ways to recognize staff. As I conclude in Chapter 24, "This fat lady will never sing." Return to the book regularly or visit www.GREATstaffrecognition.com to find fresh ideas.
4. Share your book with others. Better yet (at least, from my point of view), buy them their own copies (Check out www.GREATstaffrecognition.com for quantity discounts). Discuss what you read, so that more people are focused on staff recognition. What ideas can we implement? When?



"There are two things people want more than sex and money... recognition and praise."

**— Mary Kay Ash,
businesswoman & author**



Excuses, Rationalizations and Cop-outs (Part I)

“I don’t have time to recognize staff. I already have too much to do.”

Granted, managers and supervisors are busy people. But we can always find time to do what we feel is important. It’s a matter of setting priorities. People don’t have time to acknowledge the contributions of others because they have decided that other tasks are more important than recognizing staff.

In my view, few tasks are more important than encouraging and motivating staff by acknowledging them for doing their jobs well. Staff that’s well and frequently recognized will be more motivated, more productive and more focused on doing what is important. By what you recognize them for, you demonstrate which tasks and actions are **Relevant** to meeting your organization’s goals successfully.

Instead of spending time with top and average performers, supervisors focus much of their time on underperformers. Instead of catching people doing good work and praising them, supervisors watch for things that go wrong that they can correct. They closely supervise these employees to ensure things don’t go wrong and reprimand people when they do. When supervisors spend their days looking for what’s wrong, it’s hardly surprising that they don’t see what’s right, nor take the time to let staff know that doing what’s right is appreciated.

Recognizing staff regularly will actually save you time. People who feel appreciated are less likely to look for jobs elsewhere. Low turnover means you will spend less time recruiting replacements—hours spent preparing advertising, reviewing applications, scheduling and conducting interviews, checking references, completing new-hire paperwork and orienting and training new employees.

“

“It’s been about two months since I’ve worked out. I just don’t have the time. Which is odd, because I have the time to go out to dinner. And watch TV. And get a bone-density test. And try to figure out what my phone number spells out in words.”

**— Ellen DeGeneres,
TV host & actor.**

”

“I’m not good at recognizing people. I don’t know how.”

If you can say, “Thank you,” you already have what it takes to provide meaningful staff recognition. All we need to do is to thank people for **Relevant** contributions or achievements that assist the organization to achieve its goals. Meaningful staff recognition is no more complicated than that.

To be meaningful, recognition does not have to be formal or structured, with a series of awards reflecting different levels of achievement. Formal recognition may have a place, but the recognition that most of your staff and co-workers want is to hear a simple thank you from time to time.

At first, you may feel nervous and uncomfortable when recognizing others. This is natural, especially if recognition is new to you and your workplace. To overcome this awkwardness, begin with small steps. Pick a few simple techniques from this or another book on staff recognition that will work for you and your staff. With practice, you will become more comfortable letting others know that you appreciate what they do. You will grow your own repertoire of staff recognition techniques, which will make it easier for you to provide meaningful and **Appropriate** recognition.

“

“The problem today is that it’s a rare company, and an exceptional leader, who dares to devote the time and make the effort to form the human relationship with co-workers that lead to the commitment and to the unleashing of human potential we all say we’re looking for. . . We must make unleashing the potential of people a strategic imperative.”

— **Gary Heil, Tom Parker and Deborah C. Stephens,**
One Size Fits One

”

“Recognition is bad for morale. Others will resent my recognizing one of their co-workers.”

This could be true, if the recognition is seen as undeserved or unfair. If one worker or a team is recognized frequently while the contributions and achievements of others are consistently ignored, others may be resentful. Justifiably so—it looks like favouritism.

It's not that everyone should receive an equal quantity of recognition. Some supervisors feel that treating everyone the same would be easier. It could be, but it would also be dishonest. Recognition should be based on performance. Top performers who see underachievers receiving the same recognition as they do may view this as unfair, which may cause them to consider leaving—either physically, or just by switching to cruise control.

If recognition is bestowed regularly on all staff for specific contributions and achievements, those not being recognized today will celebrate the success of their co-workers, knowing that their turn will come. They understand that good performance is appreciated and will be praised.

“No one ever recognized me and look how well I've done. I can't see why it needs to be different for the people who work for me.”

Recognition—or the lack of it—isn't about you. It is about the people who you supervise and those with whom you work. Obviously, you were a good worker and self-motivated. It also appears that you were cheated out of the recognition you deserved. This was wrong, just as it would be wrong for you to withhold recognition from deserving individuals when they perform well. It is dangerous to assume that your staff is made up of people who are as self-motivated as you are. Some will be, but others will need your praise and encouragement to remain engaged and productive.

Before reading further, ask yourself these questions: What would have happened if you had received more positive feedback along the way? Would you have reached your potential sooner? Might you have achieved even more if your supervisors had expressed appreciation more often?

“

“Tenderness and kindness are not signs of weakness and despair, but manifestations of strength and resolution.”

**— Kahlil Gibran,
poet & writer**

”

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“If I recognize them for doing something well, what happens when they don’t do well? Won’t they use the fact that I recognized them previously against me if I criticize their work?”

Recognizing people for doing their jobs well does not mean that they should not be corrected or reprimanded for failing to perform satisfactorily.

Part of a manager or supervisor’s role is to provide both positive and negative feedback as required. They should reinforce good performances and confront and correct poor performances.

The best way to avoid having employees use previous positive comments to defend themselves from negative feedback is to ensure that all feedback is specific. Focus on a single action or event. Avoid generalizations about the individual’s performance (“You always do a wonderful job,” or “You never get anything right the first time.”) Whether praising or reprimanding, it is important to focus on the person’s actions and not his personality. Focus your feedback on the quality of the performance and not the quality of the person performing the task.

Generally, supervisors and managers seem better at—or at least, more focused on—noting what has gone poorly, rather than letting people know when they have done well. This is despite the fact that most staff members are dedicated, committed and doing their jobs well.

Not only would more positive feedback be the right thing to do, it may also reduce the need to provide as much negative feedback. Any type of meaningful feedback helps staff know what is expected of them. Positive feedback leads them to repeat these desirable behaviours for which they are recognized.



“We found that the most exciting environments, that treated people very well, are also tough as nails. There is no bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo... excellent companies provide two things simultaneously: tough environments and very supportive environments.”

— Tom Peters, author

