BIZCOMMUNITY

Appreciation is its own reward

Issued by icandi CQ

7 May 2019

Brace yourselves. Recognition and reward programmes are heading for the divorce courts, having realised they are poorly suited to ensuring employee wellbeing and its intended offspring - high performance. Luckily a new company-employee relationship is on the rise, and it's something all employees can really and truly, well "appreciate".

Every company wants to keep their employees happy, healthy and making a meaningful contribution, at least to the bottom line. Some companies believe employee wellness programmes are the answer. Others see recognition and reward programmes as mission critical. The successful ones understand that engaging employees is a demanding relationship that requires constant attention and a holistic approach that differs from employee to employee.

Sound complicated and time-consuming? It’s quite simple when you whittle employee wellbeing down to its most essential ingredient – appreciation – probably the most under-appreciated item on the business agenda.

Reward is not the only form of recognition

Let’s evaluate the situation. Most companies have a recognition and reward programme in place that seeks to reward their top performing employees and incentivise others to perform better. That’s the theory, right? In theory this means more companies should be high-performing and benefitting from the other fruits of this rewarded behaviour – high morale, low employee absenteeism and the innovation and creativity that flows from employees feeling “appreciated”.

And yet... well? The trouble is that providing recognition and reward to employees is not the same as employees actually feeling “appreciated”. It’s like companies and employees aren’t even speaking the same language. Which is exactly the point that respected psychologist and author, Dr Paul White, makes in his book, *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*.

According to White, the problem with recognition and reward programmes is that they are designed to:

- **Reward high-level performers and performance** and not help employees feel valued as a person or individual.
- **Only reward the top 50%** and assume that it will motivate the rest when in fact it is demoralising employees who are working hard but don’t make the grade.
- **Recognise star performance annually**, not appreciate employee contribution daily.
- **Assume that all employees like to be recognised and rewarded in the same way**, when in actual fact some people prefer praise over big gifts while others value time over money.

Do you speak employee appreciation?

What *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace* does well is acknowledge that companies and employees are in a relationship and that, much like any relationship of importance, both parties have different ways of needing and feeling appreciation.

According to White, people feel appreciated in five different ways:

1. **Words** – some people need to hear words of praise.
2. **Time** – some people value quality time, usually spent with friends and family, more than anything else.
3. **Acts of service** – many people appreciate when someone helps them alleviate a burden, like a pressing deadline. This could be as simple as taking your colleague's calls while they are busy or bringing them a coffee while they get through the work.
4. **Gifts** – a lot of people appreciate the value of tangible gifts like giftcards, flowers, chocolate and the like.
5. **Touch** – a trickier one to identify and incorporate, touch is seen as a mostly spontaneous celebration, like a hug, high five, fist bump or congratulatory handshake. Even a simple pat on the back is accepted and coveted by many cultures and individuals.

Even Walmart founder, Sam Walton, agrees that appreciation trumps reward: *"Appreciate everything your associates do for the business. Nothing else can quite substitute for a few well-chosen, well-timed, sincere words of praise. They're absolutely free and worth a fortune."* That's probably why the US celebrates "Employee Appreciation Day" and not Recognition and Reward Day on 6 March every year.

This is not to say that recognition and rewards programmes don't have an important place or role to play in employee wellbeing. They do. They just can't do it alone. This begs the question, does your company know how and when their employees feel valued? And do they know how to communicate that value to their employees?

This is where internal communications plays a vital role in unpacking and mapping out the employee wellbeing experience. And it starts with something as simple as asking your employees how they feel appreciated. A crazy idea? Schneider Electric doesn't think so.

Can employees crowdfund your wellbeing strategy?

Schneider Electric, a multinational energy management company, boasting global revenues in excess of €24bn, is a progressive company that is making waves in the market. It recently spent four months asking its 142,000 employees the right questions which led to the company's wellbeing strategy covering not just the physical but mental, emotional and social aspects of wellbeing too. *"For us, wellbeing is a broader picture of everyone being able to make the most of their energy, not only at work, but also at home,"* says Diana Bacanu, the Barcelona-based global wellbeing leader involved in the project. Not surprisingly, the programme offers a 90-minute induction training session, covering topics including sleep, nutrition and mindfulness, delivered face-to-face in local languages by a team of 150 trainers. The programme also enables employees to take ownership of their own wellbeing through the Wellbeing Labs, which encourages employees to experiment with ideas – big or small – that might generate change to the wellbeing. Workplace yoga or mindfulness mediation sessions would be a good example of what might come out of the Labs and into the workplace.

Three years on and the groundbreaking programme has received 13 global awards for its "bottom up" approach to employee wellbeing.

The programme covers five 'pillars' of wellbeing:

- Healthier behaviours
- Workplace flexibility
- Physical workplace
- Company culture
- A pillar designed specifically for leaders

Internal communication speaks to the heart of the matter

While the Schneider Electric approach might not be available to all companies and budgets, the principle behind it is. Every company has within it the power to offer and communicate appreciation that is authentic and sensitive to the many ways that people feel appreciated. The modern-day company can no longer afford to rely on annual rewards and quarterly incentives as a means to recognise and reward employees, especially not “meaning driven” millennials. Instead they should recognise that recognition and reward is a daily practice that starts and ends with consistent, effective communication that is fluent in the many languages of employee appreciation. The wellbeing of the company, as much as the employee, is at stake.

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