

The Power of Applause

Ghostwritten for Tom Ferguson, President, Ferguson Recognition Works

In the 1999 film *Topsy Turvy*, about the lives of comic opera composers Gilbert and Sullivan, Gilbert's wife tells him that she would have loved to be an actor. Impressed by the thunderous applause from the audience after each performance, she says to Gilbert, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if ordinary people gave themselves a round of applause at the end of the day?"

Everyone needs to know that what they do has value and creates a meaningful contribution. Applause is a powerful motivator, which is why people work harder when they know someone else is watching. A marathon runner reaches deep down and finds a sudden burst of energy as he or she approaches the finish line. In the final game of the playoffs, the place kicker puts it through the goalposts from 50 yards out. The craving to feel significant is universal.

Although the idea of applauding desired behavior is common sense, it is far from common business practice today. Many managers do not even consider appreciating others to be a major function of their job. Yet there has never been a more critical need for applause in the workplace. Nor has the lack of applause ever been so directly, in dollars and cents, costly. To succeed in today's marketplace, companies must obtain extraordinary results from every employee, not just the star performers.

Big Results, Little Expense

It is ironic that the easiest way to motivate employees takes relatively little effort to do – recognizing and applauding effort. All it takes is a sincere word of thanks from the right person at the right time. Heartfelt acknowledgement for human endeavors is timeless. It never goes out of style. It is simple to give and employees never get tired of receiving it.

Part of the power of such rewards comes from the knowledge that someone took the time to notice the achievement, seek out the employee responsible, and personally deliver praise in a timely manner. Honoring the daily dignity of human endeavor is that simple.

At the core of an energized workforce is the quality of the one-on-one relationships that individual workers have with their managers. And in turn the trust, respect, and consideration that their managers show toward them on a daily basis. Simply put - applause renews energy. Criticism depletes it.

Give It First

Many managers withhold praise due to the assumption that it leads to complacency, which is a notion that simply is not true. To disprove it, all someone has to do is to recall a time in life when a supervisor, friend, coach, or teacher genuinely applauded their performance or stood by them following a mistake. This type of loyalty is rare in the business world. As a result, anyone who has experienced this type of support would readily walk through hot coals to reciprocate. Whatever managers want from their employees, they should give it first.

Some business owners question why salary alone is not enough to motivate employees. This line of thinking is shortsighted at best. Imagine if Luciano Pavarotti finished performing and the audience did not applaud because they all thought “he has already been paid, hasn’t he?” Paychecks are an even exchange for effort. Enticing extraordinary performance, however, is more a function of how employees are treated rather than how they are compensated. Compensation is a right, but applause is a privilege that everyone wants to attain.

What Everyone Wants

In a recent study of more than 1,500 employees in dozens of work settings by Dr. Gerald H. Graham, professor of management at Wichita State University, the most powerful motivator was personalized, instant recognition from their managers. Graham's study determined the top five motivating techniques as being:

1. Personal thanks from manager
2. Written thanks from manager
3. Promotion for performance
4. Public praise
5. Morale building meetings to celebrate success

Dr. Gerald Graham's study also reported that the employees polled seldom if ever received personal incentives.

- 58% seldom if ever received personal thanks from their manager
- 76% seldom if ever received written thanks from their manager
- 81% seldom if ever received public praise in the workplace

So if recognition is the key to unlocking an employee’s discretionary effort, how can organizations create an environment that provides the applause employees so crave? Start by introducing techniques that honor both performance as well as human spirit.

Honor Performance and Spirit

Most companies understand they should honor outstanding performance in sales, quality, innovation, and safety because each has a direct benefit to a company’s bottom line. However companies should also honor behaviors that can indirectly influence an organization’s reputation in the marketplace such as customer focus, dedication to organizational values, and embodiment of company vision. Recognition should be administered companywide, across all skill levels and job functions, and consider recognizing the team instead of just the individual. Applauding the group applies positive peer pressure.

Just Do It

Managers who are new to the concept of specific applause may hold back simply because they do not know what to say. The recipe is a simple one.

- Make eye contact.
- Say thank you.

- Be specific in what action earned the praise.
- Explain how the employee's positive behavior provided value to the organization.
- Thank the employee again by name.

Acknowledgement is a slippery slope. If it is not done at all, employees will feel taken for granted; but if it is poorly delivered they will also recognize it as a motivational gimmick. For applause to be effective, it must be sincere, specific, and immediate.

A Never Ending Circle

When companies truly applaud employee efforts, it inspires a gratefulness that translates into trust, dedication, and greater productivity. Inspired employees do not withhold their energy by doing only what is required. They develop new ideas. They handle complex problems quickly. They re-enchant themselves with the company. This is the type of performance the marketplace rewards.

Companies fueled by employees who feel valued are industry leaders. They understand that creating a culture of gratitude by reinforcing positive behaviors will drive success. Employees who know they will be applauded take actions that are in the best interest of the company. It is a positive circle of reinforcement that all starts with a simple "thank you."

That, my friends, is the power of applause.