

Catch Them Doing Good

By David B. Burns

Praise is one of the most powerful employee motivators a manager can use. Like any tool, however, it needs to be used correctly, and at the right time. Here are a few dos and don'ts for using it well.

Be specific. Vague praise, like “You’re doing a fantastic job,” has less impact than detailed comments, like “I like the way you de-escalated that irate customer by really listening to his complaints.” By being specific, you let the employee know you were actually paying attention, and, if done in front of other workers, it serves as under-the-radar training. Everyone hears that listening well is valued in your workplace. They are then more likely to replicate the desired behavior themselves.

Be timely. Minimize the time between noticing the behavior and recognizing the employee for doing it. The shorter the gap, the more impact the praise has, because the action (along with all the details) is still fresh in everyone’s mind. The longer the gap, the less impact the praise has. And if you wait too long, you are more likely to fall back on some vague blather like “Way to go.”

Don’t overuse the “PCP technique.” A method of praise that was all the rage a few years back is known as Praise-Correct-Praise. With this method, you sandwich some praise around a filling of criticism. This is OK if used SPARINGLY, but if overdone your employees will hear your praise as insincere. Their perception will be that the praise was only used to make your negative shot easier for them to take.

Don’t neglect your “dependables.” We all have employees on whom we depend, who always step up and give the extra effort needed on tough projects. Most of us couldn’t run our businesses without them. Just don’t neglect them. Don’t let them feel taken for granted. Too often we give our attention to the squeaky wheels, the ones that give a half-hearted effort, trying to keep them motivated to do good work. The dependables work hard without prompting and without praise – for a time. Lack of recognition eventually leads to resentment. Your dependables will start thinking, “Why bother. Nobody even appreciates all I do here.” Don’t let it go that far. Let them know regularly how you feel about the great work they do.