

Recognition on a Budget:
Low-Cost Solutions for Boosting Employee Morale



At about 10:00am the e-mail announcement is sent to all staff: "Cake will be served in the kitchen at 1:00." At 12:50 the first anxious employees can be heard scurrying down the hall. By the top of the hour the kitchen is packed with chattering staff members. Suddenly the gathering becomes much more than an excuse to enjoy a sugary, frosted treat, but rather it serves as a proverbial "workday booster," allowing employees to take a short break from the stress of their workload and to catch-up with co-workers that they don't usually see.

The importance of such "morale-boosting" events is paramount. In fact, only 49%, less than half, of all participants answered favorably when asked if they were satisfied with their organization's commitment to retaining its employees, according to HR Solutions' national normative data. Only an additional ten percent (59%) felt that employees at their organization receive recognition for a job well done.

Most managers would be quick to organize and promote morale-boosting activities, if they only knew the profound affect that it could have on the success of their business. Organizations forced to make tough decisions due to the recent economic downturn are particularly susceptible to workplace Disengagement. Saying goodbye to a laid-off co-worker or having to take a pay-cut can be particularly difficult for employees. Managers should take steps to balance any feelings of negativity by outwardly recognizing staff for their on-going commitment and hard work.

Boosting employee morale needn't require excessive planning or investment.

There are many ways to recognize staff that involve little or no cost, but go a long way in showing that the organization cares. The following are a just few simple suggestions:

1) Plan a pot-luck lunch

Pot-luck lunches are not only a cost-effective way to please the staff, they also provide an impetus for interaction among groups that might not usually mix during regular working hours. Have members of the staff each bring a different course or beverage. A surprise treat dessert is a great way for senior management to show appreciation to the team.

2) Write a personal 'thank-you' letter

In the whirlwind of day-to-day correspondence, managers rarely have time to write personalized "thank-you" notes to their staff. Taking the time every month or so to personally thank a team member for outstanding work will go a long way in the eyes of that individual. If at all possible, slip a handwritten "thank-you" into the employee's inbox. If time does not permit, send an email that is longer than the usual acknowledgement. Copy additional staff members on the correspondence so that others are able to recognize and congratulate that employee on their accomplishment.

3) Feature select employees in the company newsletter

Whether choosing to incorporate a regular section that recognizes outstanding associates or to write a personalized acknowledgment of a job well done, mentioning employees in an organizational newsletter is not only a morale-booster, it also serves as a great message to send to clients. Clients that receive the newsletter will be impressed to hear about the extra effort that staff members put into their work. Promoting 'gold star' accomplishments of employees is a great way to position the company as a top-notch organization.

4) Host an 'Awards Ceremony'

It needn't be a fancy affair – a simple and light-hearted afternoon ceremony in the company conference room will still pay dividends in boosting morale. Managers may present printed certificates that recognize employees in areas such as "Best Customer Service" or "Most Innovative Idea." Recipients will later be able to display these tokens of appreciation at their desk as a reminder that the organization recognizes their hard work and on-going commitment to excellence.

5) Plan a "Theme Day" at the Office

The majority of grown adults can easily recall the joy of participating in "theme days" during elementary school. In the spirit of the old adage that says "you're never too old to have fun," a theme day can be a great way to boost employee morale, without ever having to spend a dime. A "Sports Day" theme might encourage staff members to wear a favorite team's jersey, while ESPN could be played in the conference room during lunch. Employees may be encouraged to bring in sports-related snacks, such as chili or mini hot dogs.

6) Field Day

If you have the opportunity to host an outdoors event, take advantage of the traditional "Field Day" company outing. Schedule the event for a weekend, if possible, so that staff can invite their family members to participate. This allows managers to get to know the spouses and children of their employees. It's a great way to build a positive rapport among the staff and for management to show that they care.

7) Establish a "Brown Bag Lunch Club"

It may meet once a week, or maybe just once a month, but this cost-free way of bringing your employees together is an ideal way to boost morale and foster a feeling of unity among members of an organization. The topic of these scheduled lunches could vary from watching a TV program, to discussing a book, or even hosting a seminar on a topic such as retirement-planning. Allowing attendees an extra half-hour for their lunch break would encourage participation among companies that choose to schedule them on a monthly or quarterly basis.

8) Develop a local "discount card"

Work with local vendors to establish a small discount that could be afforded to members of your organization. Create a “discount card” that displays the logos of all businesses that have agreed to the discount and provide this card to your employees. Vendors will appreciate the customer loyalty, while associates will enjoy the reduced price of their lunch!

9) Implement a system for earning additional time off

One of the best ways to recognize the long hours that an employee invests producing exceptional work is to grant a few additional hours of paid time off in appreciation of their efforts. Not only does it boost the morale of those recognized, it also encourages others to strive for a similar level of achievement. For example, every other month the employee with the most innovative cost-savings idea could be granted an additional day of vacation; or perhaps the employee that generates the most revenue each quarter.

While it is both difficult and unrealistic to expect management to constantly recognize employees for their hard work, an exceptional manager will be sure to take the time to appreciate his or her staff on a regular basis. Most importantly, individuals that go ‘above and beyond’ in their efforts for the organization should be lauded, and even rewarded, for their commitment. Happy, Engaged employees not only are more likely to stay with the organization, they are also more likely to increase client satisfaction and quality results.