

A Dose of **positive**

Reinforcement Can Go a Long Way

By Bob Nelson



Get the most out of training by recognizing employees before, during, and after a learning event.

The principle of recognition that “You get what you reward” is a universal yet often underused principle in day-to-day management—and the training and development function is no exception. There are many ways that recognition can be used to make the training function more efficient, learning more effective, and the training staff more appreciated. By doing so, you can get the most out of the training investment that’s made in your organization.

How to Give an Effective Praising

In the workplace, praise is priceless, yet it costs nothing. In one recent poll, workers identified a personal praising from their managers for doing a good job as the number one most motivating incentive. However, almost 60 percent of employees say they seldom if ever receive such a praising from their managers.

Although giving an effective praise may seem like common sense, many people have never learned how to do it. I suggest an acronym—ASAP-cubed—to remember the essential elements of a good praising. That is, praise should be as soon, as sincere, as specific, as personal, as positive, and as proactive as possible.

As soon—Timing is important when using positive reinforcement, according to extensive research on the topic. You need to give others praise as soon as the achievement is complete or the desired behavior is displayed. Even interrupt someone who's in a meeting to provide a quick word of praise until you are able to discuss the achievement with her at greater length.

As sincere—Words alone can fall flat if you are not sincere in why you are praising. You need to praise because you are truly appreciative and excited about the other person's success, otherwise it may come across as a manipulative tactic—something you are doing only when you want an employee to work late, for example.

As specific—Avoid generalities in favor of details of the achievement. "You really turned that angry customer around—you let him unload all his emotions and then focused on what you could do for him, not what you could not do for him." Specifics give credibility to your praising and also serve a practical purpose of stating exactly what was good about an employee's behavior or achievement.

As personal—A key to conveying your message is praising in person, face-to-face. This shows the activity is important enough to you to put aside everything else you have to do and just focus on the other person. Since we all have limited time, those actions you do personally indicate they have a higher value to you.

As positive—Too many managers undercut praise with a concluding note of criticism. When you say something such as "You did a great job on this report, but there were quite a few typos," the "but" becomes a verbal erasure of all that came before. Save the corrective feedback for the next similar assignment.

As proactive—Most of us need to work on taking the time and effort to praise more frequently. Look for opportunities to praise whenever there is positive news such as in staff meetings. Use praising tools such as thank you notes, voicemail, or notations on your planning calendar. Lead with the positive and "catch" people doing things right—or else you will tend to be reactive and primarily focus on mistakes in your interactions with others.

Before training

All performance starts with clear goals and this is true for the training activity as well. Adult learning requires any training to be highly relevant to the learners' needs. To me, the most effective training pulls an attendee's job—with its challenges, opportunities, and applications—into the classroom as much as possible.

Why are employees sent to a specific training session? What are they supposed to gain from the experience? How will this help them in their jobs? What questions do they have prior to the program that they would like to get answered in the training session? All managers should be urged to take some time with every employee to answer these questions before they are sent to a training activity.

This simple discussion with their managers prior to training is itself a form of recognition for most employees. It provides dedicated time and attention with the most important person in any employee's job. The conversation is focused on the employee's learning and development and the employee becomes involved in the goal-setting process for the training event.

Increasingly, the most powerful forms of recognition as reported by today's employees are exactly these types of intangible, interpersonal forms of management support. The more that individuals are involved with establishing learning goals for training, the more they are apt to learn and the more they will value the learning activity.

During training

Recognition can be a powerful tool within the classroom as well. The more the training environment can be a positive, nurturing experience, the more—and faster—attendees are apt to learn. From complimenting a question that is asked to thanking a volunteer who has offered to share a perspective, recognition is fundamental for helping to get trainees to lower their defenses and to participate and learn something new.

You also can have more fun and be more explicit in creating rewards that can be used in the classroom. For example, toss miniature candy bars to students who answer a question correctly, or ask participants to applaud after someone reports out from a group activity.

Here are other examples of recognition that can be used in a training setting.

- Use an in-class pass-around trophy, such as a water gun, for certain positive classroom behaviors (suggested by Peg Murray, trainer, SkillPath Seminars).



- Create an on-the-spot award, such as a flexible straw or piece of crumpled paper, and ask participants to make the award meaningful in reinforcing the use of newly learned behaviors back on the job (suggested by Amelia Armitage, principal, Performance System Associates).
- Provide certificates for participants to complete about something they have learned in the training session; the certificate can be presented to the person by a partner (suggested by Toni LaMotta, author of *Recognition: The Quality Way*).

Every training session should include some discussion and brainstorming by attendees as to how what's taught in the session can be reinforced back on the job and ways attendees can hold themselves accountable to their commitment to apply what they've learned back at work.

After training

For the skills and knowledge to become used and ingrained, they need to be reinforced back on the job. The more the learning from the training can be discussed, shared, and practiced, the greater the chance learning transfer will take place.

Ideally, each attendee should have a post-training meeting with her manager to discuss how the training event went, if the employee got all her questions answered, and ways the training will be implemented in the person's job. This simple discussion with one's manager does not have to take much time, but is important to highlight the importance of the training and the expectation by the manager that the learning from the training event be used.

Managers play a significant role in reinforcing learning, both by having this discussion and systematically looking for ways to notice and thank the employee when that person uses the skills and knowledge from the training session. In fact, research indicates that the effectiveness of any training activity will increase as much as 90 percent if the participant meets with his manager prior to and then again after the training to discuss why the employee is being sent to the training session and what the manager hopes that he will learn from it. Progressive managers even will discuss the employees' preferences for how they

would like to be recognized as they apply skills they've learned in training sessions.

Another effective way to call attention to learning after training is to make it a standard practice for employees to share with the work group one or more of the skills they learned. In addition to helping those employees crystallize their skills and knowledge, this again encourages the group to value the training experience and what can be learned from it, which promotes an attitude of constant learning and improvement among staff.

Training and development staff

Last, but not least, recognition can and should be used to build the morale and pride of the training staff as they make progress toward departmental goals. A good example of this is found with Elsie Tamayo, who used recognition to turn around the morale, pride, and productivity of the training department when she was training director for the City of San Diego Department of Social Services.



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When Tamayo first started in her position, employee morale was low and the group's identity in the organization was weak. She met with the 13 employees in her department and asked how they wanted to be perceived by the organization. The group created its own identity as the Training and Development Center, designed a logo, and painted it on the outside and in the lobby of their building. Everyone also got business cards for the first time with the new department logo.

During each department meeting Tamayo solicited the help of one employee to determine a fun way to reward another employee in the group. For example, to announce one employee's promotion, the group held a parade in

the building. Other examples include presenting an Energizer Bunny to an employee "because they kept going and going and going, helping others when needed," or giving a toy roadrunner to someone who worked fast.

At the beginning of each department meeting, Tamayo read letters written to her that praised the department or people in it. At all times, she gave the group the latest information she had about developments in the organization.

Once a week, every person was given an hour to meet with her to talk about anything they wanted to discuss. Initially many of the meetings were less than 10 minutes, but over time everyone came to use the full hour. Employees would discuss results from a training session and how they could improve, problems they were having with other employees, and ways to improve their skills and career potential.

Also, data were used as recognition to increase the visibility of the group's achievements. For example, the number of employees trained each month was tracked, as were cost savings ideas, and progress was communicated throughout the organization. In the department, flipcharts were hung that publicly tracked progress toward different goals. "Masters degrees" were awarded to trainers and managers who trained 1,000 hours.

Tamayo presented extensive spontaneous rewards such as quick handwritten notes or a note on a flipchart that read "you really handled the meeting well yesterday," with specifics and why the activity was important. She then posted the flipchart on the person's door. Tamayo often let people come in late the next day after finishing a training session.

She also bartered her training services with other training companies to get training slots for her group members or facilities for an off-site retreat. In addition, she started a self-development library and positioned use of it as a reward.

Another idea Tamayo came up with is Reward and Recognition Day—a half-day per month during which the group would identify activities they wanted to do together to celebrate their successes along the way. In subsequent months they took the train to Los Angeles to visit a museum, went shopping in Tijuana, and went to the zoo. Since all rapport comes from shared experiences, this activity not only

10

Ways to Motivate Employees

Employees may not need a pay raise as much as they do a personal thanks for a job well done from their managers. Following (in priority order) is my top 10 list of motivators for employees.

- 1** Personally thank employees for doing a good job—one on one, in writing, or both. Do it timely, often, and sincerely.
- 2** Be willing to take the time to meet with and listen to employees—as much as they need or want.
- 3** Provide specific feedback about performance of the person, the department, and the organization.
- 4** Strive to create a work environment that is open, trusting, and fun. Encourage new ideas and initiative.
- 5** Provide information on how the company makes and loses money, upcoming products and strategies for competing in the marketplace, and how the person fits into the overall plan.

6 Involve employees in decisions, especially when those decisions affect them.

7 Provide employees with a sense of ownership in their work and the work environment.

8 Recognize, reward, and promote people based on their performance; deal with low and marginal performers so that they improve or leave.

9 Give people a chance to grow and learn new skills; show them how you can help them meet their goals within the context of meeting the organization's goals. Create a partnership with each employee.

10 Celebrate successes—of the company, of the department, and of individuals in it. Take time for team- and morale-building meetings and activities.

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reinforced desired performance, but helped to build a sense of group pride and cohesiveness.

All these activities were conducted with little or no budget, and throughout employees knew they still had to put in the hours needed to get their job done. Within several months, the department's morale, excitement, pride, and energy skyrocketed, and the group was viewed with greater esteem by the rest of the organization.

Recognition is what matters

Recognition is all around us every day, just waiting to be used to encourage the behavior and performance you most need from those with whom you

work. Prioritize what you most want from your group and start recognizing those things when you get them.

Don't forget to recognize and thank those managers who support individual learning and development among their staff, the training department, and the ongoing value of training and development in your organization. Make them role models who other managers can emulate to help make the overall organization more successful.

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