Briefly Noted by Nelson Scott

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Service Stars

Both encounters with Jill were brief but pleasant. She was behind the desk at Calgary's Hyatt Regency Hotel when I approached to request an extension of my check out time.

"Of course," she responded with a smile, before even asking my room number and checking her computer screen.

Later, when it was time to check out, I chose to use the hotel's self check out kiosk to avoid the lineup, even though it wasn't really necessary, as there was only one person ahead of me – I just like to experiment with something new.

Having finished serving another guest, Jill stepped from behind the desk to stand near the kiosk – just in case I encountered problems. When my receipt did not appear immediately, she assured me that it would momentarily, which it did.

I had placed the receipt in my pocket and was about to leave when Jill extended her hand.

"Thank you for staying at the Hyatt Regency," she said, smiling and shaking my hand.

I have no idea how often I have checked out of hotels over the years. Certainly it would be measured in hundreds, if not more than a thousand occasions. In all those times, I can't recall a staff member ever coming out from behind the desk or shaking my hand to thank me for my business.

I left the hotel feeling good about the experience. It seemed that Jill – and the Hyatt Regency – really did appreciate my business.

I am looking forward to my next visit.

Quote of the Month

"Kindness is a language which the deaf can hear and the blind can read."

– Mark Twain

Nelson's Point of View:

Knowing Why They Volunteer Helps You Know How to Recognize Them

This spring, in both Canada and the US, April 19 – 25 is designated as National Volunteer Appreciation Week. What this means is that organizations across both countries that depend on volunteers will be spending time and money to acknowledge volunteers for their contributions.

Organizations will purchase tens of thousands of certificates, logo-emblazoned trinkets, bouquets of flowers, boxes of chocolates, gift cards, and other expressions of appreciation to present to volunteers.

While the sentiment behind such acts may be genuine, the form of recognition may not be appropriate for all the recipients. While some may treasure the certificates they receive for years, others will soon deposit these tokens of appreciation in recycle bins. Just because an organization likes to see its logo everywhere doesn't mean that volunteers want – or need – a travel mug bearing its logo.

For recognition to be most valued by recipients, it must be appropriate, and that is something that will vary from volunteer to volunteer. Understanding the different reasons why people volunteer can provide clues to how to make recognition appropriate.

Ideally, recognition should be matched to the reasons why people volunteer. Here are a few reasons for volunteering, along with implications for making assignments and suggestions for recognition:

To fill a social need. To meet others. Often, newcomers want to get involved in their new community. Assigning these people to solitary tasks would be a mistake. They should work with others. Volunteer coordinators should introduce them to others. Social events with other volunteers are a great way to thank those for whom volunteering helps fill a social need.

To gain experience that will prepare them for the world of work. For parents preparing to return to the workplace after spending time away raising children, volunteering may be their first step in this transition. Education students are encouraged to augment their studies by volunteering in classrooms. What these volunteers want – and need – is a variety of experiences. One way to let them know that their contributions are valued is to write letters of reference for them that include specific examples of how they contributed.

To find out what is going on. Parents want to understand what is happening in their children's schools. Residents want to know what is happening in their community. Demonstrate your appreciation and trust by keeping them in the communication loop. Share as much as possible without revealing confidential or proprietary information. Invite and then answer their questions.

To be seen as worthwhile people. Get to know these volunteers. What are their strengths? How can these be used so that volunteers can see that what they have to offer is important to the organization? Assign tasks from which they can experience success. Regularly let these volunteers know that what they do is valued by the organization and essential to its success. If they weren't doing these tasks, who would be?

To learn and grow. Some lifelong learners are looking for new challenges that will add to their knowledge and skills. Assign tasks that provide them with these opportunities. Express appreciation by providing opportunities for them to attend workshops or to participate in other learning opportunities.

Whatever you do to say thank you during National Volunteer Appreciation Week, remember that it is just one week out of 52. The need of volunteers to know that they are valued will not end when the week ends. Those who work with volunteers can fulfill this ongoing need by using simple, inexpensive recognition techniques such as a few words of appreciation delivered regularly and occasional thank-you notes throughout the year.

Many years ago, when I was principal of Thickwood Heights Elementary School in Fort McMurray, our staff decided to thank our volunteers by inviting them to lunch. Nothing unusual about that. Hosting a volunteer luncheon is a common way to show appreciation.

What made it special was the teachers' decision not to order food from a local caterer. Instead they *volunteered* to prepare the food themselves. We each prepared a favourite dish and treated our volunteers to a great potluck lunch.

If parents were volunteering their time to help, it seemed appropriate that we use some of our time to say thank you. Sure beat giving everyone another mug.

High-Value, Low-Cost Recognition

This month's collection of recognition tips comes courtesy of two teachers who attended my **Staff Recognition: One Piece at a Time** presentation at February's Palliser District Teachers' Convention, held in Calgary. While what is described occurred in school settings, the ideas could easily work in any work environment.

Robert Cowie, the AISI (Alberta Initiative for School Improvement) Team Leader in the Palliser Regional School Division, reports he has had success with an idea he got from Hal Urban (www.halurban.com) called a "Statement of Affirmation". He writes letters to people with whom he works that answer the question, "Do you know what I like best about you?" He says the response has been "amazing".

Assistance principal Andrea Craigie describes five techniques used at RJ Hawkey Elementary School in Airdrie, AB, some of which were already in place when she arrived at the school in August 2008:

- Every staff meeting begins with "bouquets" – staff members thank and recognize colleagues for different things they have been doing that month.
- During Staff Appreciation Week, the administration circulated a catalogue with four different low-cost gifts. Each person was able to select an item, which would be most useful or meaningful to that staff member.
- On the first day of the school year, or whenever someone new joins the staff, the administration provides each person with coupons that can be redeemed anytime during the year for things such as an administrator taking over the teacher's playground supervision duty or providing an extra preparation period.
- On one occasion, administrators left small slips of paper and markers in staff members' mailboxes and encouraged them to write fun, kind notes to other staff members and tape these to their colleagues' mailboxes. By the end of the day, every staff member had a personal note, written anonymously by someone else. Andrea writes that, "The overall visual effect of all these notes hanging there was [powerful]."
- For each staff member's birthday Andrea writes a card containing a personal note describing something she appreciates about what the individual does for the school. She also includes a one-dollar scratch-and-win lottery ticket. If the birthdays occur in July or August, Andrea gives them cards on their "half birthdays", in January or February.

*I invite you to share examples of high-value, low-cost staff recognition that you have experienced . . . either as recipient or deliverer. E-mail your recognition tips to **nmscott@telus.net.***

You Asked . . .

Isn't BDI Unfair to Recent Grads?

Question: While behaviour description interviewing (BDI) may work for experienced people, what about those who have just graduated from university and are looking for their first jobs? Aren't they at a disadvantage? After all, they don't have any work experience to draw upon to answer questions about what they have done on the job in the past.

Answer: This is a valid concern. It is reminiscent of the contradiction faced by first-time jobseekers forever: "Without experience you can't get a job, but you can't get any experience without a job."

That view may be too simplistic in today's world. What I have found – and have had confirmed by others who ask BDI questions – is that recent grads do, in fact, have experiences upon which to base their responses.

Most university and college programs have a significant practicum component. By the time students reach the end of their training, they will have experienced most of what they will encounter within your organization. While they may not have as much experience as others, most recent grads will have enough to respond to your questions.

Even if they can't think of relevant examples from their practicum experience, most will be able provide examples from part-time jobs they held while attending university or college, or even while still in high school. Examples may not even be limited to paid employment. Many candidates may be able to cite appropriate situations that they encountered as volunteers.

While often not industry-specific, these part-time employment and volunteer examples can still illustrate how candidates have dealt with those universal, work-related circumstances that are encountered while working with others, such as teamwork, conflict with a co-worker, dealing with customers, learning and using new skills, and time management.

While interviewers may be tempted to resort to "what if…" questions when interviewing those just beginning their careers, this should only be done as a last resort and with great caution. Remember that an answer that focuses on what candidates think they would do is much less reliable as a tool for you to predict how they will perform than a description of how they did respond under circumstances similar to what you are describing. If they don't have enough experience to describe what they did do, it's likely they won't have enough experience to respond with what they might do either.

*Do you have questions about interviewing, staff recognition, or customer service that I might be able to answer in a future issue of **Briefly Noted**? E-mail your questions to **nmscott@telus.net.***

A Lesson in Complaint Resolution from Canada's Banks

I'm not experiencing any problems with the banks with which I deal. Oh sure, I would like their charges to be lower, but who wouldn't? And it would be nice if I never heard from their call centres or received mailings offering me products or services I don't need or want.

But these are minor irritants. Nothing major. No bank has ever misplaced my money or appeared careless with my personal information.

However, should anything like this happen, I would know what to do. Like most businesses, banks anticipate that there will be occasions when customers experience problems and the institutions have procedures in place to deal with them. What separates banks from most other organizations is that they make this information available in brochures on display in their branches.

Before going further – and giving banks more credit than they deserve – I should point out that the banks' motivation is not totally altruistic. As RBC states in its brochure, "financial institutions are required by law to provide consumers with information about their fees, interest rates and *complaint-handling procedures* (italics are the author's)."

Research has shown that quick resolution of complaints can change complainers into loyal customers. Unfortunately, most customers choose to take their business elsewhere rather than complaining. Why is this the case? For some customers, it is because they are unsure of how and to whom to complain.

In their brochures, TD Canada Trust, RBC, and the Bank of Montreal all suggest a series of steps for dealing with complaints, beginning at branch level. RBC states that, "If a problem occurs, it is generally easier to check the facts and come to a resolution at the point where the problem originated." If necessary, the customer can escalate the complaint to more senior bank officials, the bank's ombudsman, and eventually to the Ombudsman for Banking Services and Investments. Relevant contact information is provided for each step of the process.

All organizations would be well-advised to emulate the banks' practices as a means of safeguarding customer loyalty. Schools, government agencies, and retail businesses could inform their customers of the processes for resolving problems. They could suggest steps to be followed, prehaps even following RBC's example of listing "relevant information" the customer should assemble before making initial contact.

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