

Briefly Noted

by
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Service Stars ★★★★★

What I do could never be described as dangerous. There is little risk of death or injury. The most serious work-related injury I ever suffered in nearly 15 years as a consultant and speaker came from my decision to move a table. The skirting was held in place with straight pins. I had to complete the presentation with a napkin wrapped around my wounded finger.

Another time, I foolishly attempted to break in new shoes during four consecutive days of training. Severe blisters, but hardly life-threatening.

Despite the relatively risk-free nature of my work as a speaker, trainer and consultant, clients occasionally require that I have workers' compensation coverage. This happens so infrequently that earlier this year I allowed my coverage to lapse. Shortly thereafter, a municipal government invited me to examine its staff recognition efforts. When the contract arrived, the final clause stood out: "Contractor/consultant shall, during the term of the Agreement, maintain Alberta Workers' Compensation coverage . . ."

As a result, I contacted the WCB and spoke with a very efficient and pleasant customer representative, who made me feel that I was being treated as an individual, not just another routine call. Roxanne explained what I would need to do to reinstate my coverage and offered to guide me through the process. But before doing this, she reviewed my file to ensure everything was correct. To my surprise, we discovered it wasn't. While I had changed my address after moving to Edmonton three years ago, I hadn't informed the WCB of my new phone number.

Roxanne suggested that we should also add my cell and fax numbers, and e-mail address to the file before calculating the cost to reinstate my coverage. Reinstatement, she explained, could happen immediately if I paid by credit card, rather than by cheque.

At that point I thought we were finished, but Roxanne made one more suggestion. Knowing that my request to be reinstated was prompted by a client's request, she offered to prepare a clearance certificate—proof that the client required of my WCB coverage.

Realizing this would save me from contacting the WCB again, I accepted her offer. In less than five minutes, the clearance certificate appeared in my inbox, ready to be included in the envelope when I mailed the signed contract to the client.

Nelson's Point of View

People with "perfect" attendance may be costing you money

As the world prepares for a new wave of the H1N1 flu pandemic, now would not be a good time to create a program to reward staff for perfect attendance. Likely there never was nor will there ever be the right time to exhort employees to avoid taking sick time.

The rationale for encouraging perfect attendance is to save on the costs associated with absenteeism. According to that reasoning, money is saved when the need to hire substitute workers is reduced or eliminated; workers whose perfect attendance contributes to these savings should be rewarded.

Such thinking may seem logical, but it is flawed. It may encourage people who are sick to come to work, rather than stay in bed. The term for the resulting phenomenon is "presenteeism"—being physically present, but not functioning well.

Establishing a program that recognizes staff for perfect attendance may also be seen as a positive approach to improving the attendance records of the chronically absent. Unfortunately, this approach

is unlikely to be effective. No incentive will be significant enough to change the behaviour of those with attendance problems. In those cases, a stick may be a more effective tool than a carrot. Individual attendance problems should be addressed directly, with disciplinary action taken when necessary.

A recent study by the Cornell University Institute for Health and Productivity suggests that sick people should stay away from work. In fact, they should be encouraged to stay away. Doing so can save employers money.

The researchers estimate that people who come to work sick with headaches, arthritis, asthma, allergies and mental health-related problems such as depression cost employers in lost productivity—an estimated \$180 billion each year across the United States.

Sick people are less productive. When people come to work while they are sick, they have trouble concentrating and take longer to complete tasks. In addition, they can infect co-workers, which can lead to further productivity loss.

Offer input before a new book on staff recognition is published

I need your help. I would like to know what you think of something that I have written. Would you be willing to read a few chapters of a book on staff recognition and provide feedback?

After a decade of thinking, researching and procrastinating, I believe that I am actually reaching a point where I will complete a book on staff recognition.

Its working title is, *Fire the Employee of the Month: Using high-value, low-cost staff recognition to retain your top performers*. The premise is that most recognition programs are expensive, cumbersome and don't work. Most do little to make staff feel valued for who they are and what they do. To improve morale, reduce turnover and increase productivity, those in leadership

roles—no matter the title they hold—need to provide more informal, day-to-day recognition.

I have completed several chapters and expect to publish the book in early 2010. Before finalizing the manuscript, I would like to hear from potential readers. What do you think of what I have written? Does the book's content add to your understanding of staff recognition? Do my suggestions on how to improve how staff is recognized make sense?

If you are willing to provide feedback, please let me know. I will e-mail you a few chapters (no more than 10,000 words total). After reading them, please let me know what you think. What you say will influence the final changes to the text before it is prepared for the printer.

This Newsletter is prepared by Nelson Scott of SEA Consulting to maintain contact with clients and other readers.

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Quote of the Month

"Without credible communication, and a lot of it, employee hearts and minds are never captured."

– John Kotter,
author of *Leading Change*

High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition

- Over the years, researchers have found that one of the things employees want most from their jobs is to be "in on things." To meet this need and make them feel included, provide regular "State of the Union" reports that let them know what's happening and what it means for them, and which are filled with acknowledgements of contributions by individuals and teams.
- Set aside a spot to display memos, photographs and other items that demonstrate the progress your staff is making on a major project. Be sure to include words of appreciation and encouragement.
- Recognize a staff member for great ideas by presenting her with a shiny new penny, with a message that "you deserve much more than a penny for your thoughts."
- Acknowledge the contributions of individuals or teams when preparing status reports by using their names when describing progress.
- Give a deserving staff member a mug filled with his favourite treats.
- Give a small jigsaw puzzle to someone who is good at finding solutions to difficult problems.
- Make top performers aware of future projects and invite them to choose their next assignments
- When a promotion is not an option, find ways to enrich the staff member's job without increasing his workload. Provide variety. Offer more autonomy or control over the work. Allow the staff member to make more work-related decisions. Give the staff member responsibility for managing a small budget. Make training opportunities available. Focus on ways for the staff member to grow professionally.
- While not real cash, a few foil-wrapped chocolate coins are a fun way to convey a message of appreciation
- Bring lunch to the staff and stay to share the meal with them. Talk to them about their work, especially what they do well. Listen to their ideas.
- Purchase cups of gourmet coffee and personally deliver it to staff members' workstations. Meet them in the staff room for a pot of gourmet coffee and offer to pour.
- Bake cookies or muffins and serve them to staff during the morning coffee break.

Parents have a lesson for schools... and all other organizations

Something happens this time of year that is a reminder to all of us who serve customers, which all of us do in some way or other.

When classes resume in the fall, it reminds adults of their school-related experiences. Despite some teachers believing that they aren't in the customer service business, there is a customer service theme to most of these memories.

Parents, former students and non-teaching professionals who deal with schools regularly recall encounters with school staff and how those experiences made them feel—the essence of serving customers. As a former educational administrator, I am often the recipient of these tales.

A father recently told me what happened after his son had registered at a new school for Grade 11. In August, still more than a week before the beginning of the school year, the father received a phone call one evening. The caller identified himself as the son's teacher-advisor at the new school.

"What can you tell me about your son?" asked the caller. "What are his interests? In what subject does he do best? Where does he have difficulty? We want him to have a good year. Please call me if he is having any difficulty or you have any questions."

It was the only time that the father had ever received a call from one of his children's teachers. And the call had been made on the teacher's own time! He felt that the school cared about his son.

A mother of two children still in primary school says that she made a point of visiting her children's school

before the year began to talk about her expectations. "I don't want my children to have the same bad school experience as I had."

She remembers feeling so much stress before entering one teacher's classroom that she was nearly physically sick every day. Today, nearly a decade and a half later, she experiences the same discomfort at just the mention of the teacher's name.

A therapist who visits different schools throughout the year has a simple way by which she judges the school: the greeting she receives from the school secretary. If it is a warm welcome, it sets up an expectation that this will be a facility where she will enjoy working. When her arrival seems to be a regarded as an interruption to the important business of running of the school, that is usually a precursor to a more difficult working relationship.

In all three cases, and in others I have heard, the perception of the school is based on a brief, initial contact or interaction with a single staff member. Despite all of us having heard that we should not judge a book by its cover, that is exactly what happens. We make judgments about schools, and other organizations, based on limited evidence.

First impressions count. Customer service is important. People base their assessments of organizations on how they are treated and how they are made to feel—the very first time they visit. In schools, and everywhere else, everyone has a customer service role.

Special days to prompt recognition

Recognition shouldn't be tied to the calendar. Recognition should be part of our daily routines. But there are times when the calendar can guide our efforts to express appreciation to people for what they do. The year is filled with days, weeks and months designated to honour specific groups. Here are some that can serve as reminders to recognize others for their contributions and achievements:

Monday, October 5 – World Teacher's Day (Designated by the United Nations): If you work in a school, the need to recognize teachers is obvious. If not, take time to thank a teacher—either the one who teaches your child or a teacher who, years ago, made a difference to your life.

Friday, October 9 – World Post Day (United Nations): Remember to express appreciation to the person who delivers your mail ("Neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers

from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." – Herodotus). Then, you could create more work for the post office by writing and mailing a few thank-you notes.

Monday, October 12 – Canadian Thanksgiving: More things to be thankful for are the efforts of your staff. Let them know they are appreciated.

Friday, October 16 – National Boss Day: Everyone, including your boss, needs to know he or she is appreciated.

Tuesday, October 20 – Peer Recognition Day: A monthly reminder to all staff to celebrate the efforts of their co-workers. The recognition of co-workers may be most powerful recognition of all.

Sunday, November 1 – Daylight Savings Time Ends: Don't waste that extra hour. Spend it writing notes to thank staff for their commitment and effort.



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