

Briefly Noted

by Nelson Scott



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Service Stars ★★★★★

Nothing says "tourist" like some guy wearing shorts, sunglasses and a floppy hat, with a map in his hand and a puzzled look on his sunburned face. You kind of stand out on an island in the Caribbean.

Officials in Port of Spain seem to understand. After we picked up a map and other literature at the cruise port tourist office, we asked for directions to one of the points of interest we had read about.

The woman we were speaking to stepped from behind the counter to stand next to us. She unfolded our map and traced a route to a few of the attractions of interest to tourists.

Before sending us out to explore the city, she had one last piece of advice. "Watch for the people wearing red shirts like mine. They can help you find what you are looking for."

Leaving the port area, we began down one of the broad streets of Trinidad and Tobago's capital city. Within a couple of blocks, we came upon the first of the red-shirted women we would encounter.

"Can I help you find something?" she asked. "Let me show you where you are on the map."

Having received confirmation we were on the right track, we continued down Wrightson Road. Shortly afterwards, we were greeted by two more guides. They were stationed at a key intersection where visitors needed to turn to reach the main attractions.

We crossed the street and began to walk up Brian Lara Promenade. Situated at various points along this broad pedestrian boulevard situated between two busy streets, there were more red shirts, each willing to offer advice and directions to tourists who passed.

Everyone who we met wearing a red shirt seemed committed to ensuring we made the most of our limited time in their city. It was also comforting to know that those red-shirted guides were there to prevent us from wandering off in the wrong direction. As nice as Port of Spain is, we wanted to be back on board by the time our cruise ship sailed.

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Nelson's Point of View

Avoid punishing top performers for being successful

On the day when Canadian women won Olympic hockey gold in Vancouver, Canwest newspapers reported that International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge had mused about the future of the sport in the Games.

Noting that the sport has been dominated by the U.S. and Canada since it was admitted to the games in 1998, Rogge suggested that unless other countries are able to ice teams that are more competitive, the sport may be dropped from the Games in the future.

"I would personally give them more time to grow, but there must be a period of improvement," Rogge said. "We cannot continue without improvement."

The reaction was fast and furious. Sports fans and commentators complained about the unfairness of what Rogge was contemplating.

For me, one phrase stood out in the discourse. The Canadian women were being "punished for success." The reward for consistent success was the possibility of removal from the world stage that only the Olympic Games provide.

Being punished for success is something I write about in my forthcoming book on staff recognition. Everyday, in workplaces everywhere, top performers are receiving negative recognition for their success.

They are being denied promotions and transfers because they do their jobs so well. They may have everything that the organization says new managers should possess, but they are too valuable to be taken from their current positions.

"We could never promote him," an executive once told me, referring to a top performer. "He does such a good job. Our customers would never forgive us."

Another reward for those who have a reputation for completing difficult tasks successfully is another tough job.

"Whenever we have a really tough job, you are my go-to guy," the boss explains before assigning yet another thorny problem that is going to require extra time and effort to resolve. For a while, knowing that the boss is confident in one's ability to handle the really difficult jobs is good for one's self-esteem. But the lustre soon begins to fade.

Eventually, top performers tire of receiving only the most challenging assignments, while all around them, others are given easier tasks. They watch co-workers leave at the end of the day while they remain behind to work on their special projects.

Just this once, couldn't the top performer be given a simple task? Isn't it about time that her colleagues were asked to devote extra time and effort to completing one of those projects that seem to be reserved for top performers?

While no organization would purposely do anything that would cause its top performers to leave, the practice of always assigning tough tasks to them may actually be having that effect.

When the only recognition top performers receive is more of the same, the biggest loser may be the employer. Denied opportunities for promotion, top performers will begin to look elsewhere for opportunities to advance their careers or achieve a better work-life balance.

For the sake of the female hockey players in Canada and the US, let's hope that the quality of hockey in countries such as Finland (winners of the bronze medal in 2010), Sweden, Russia, China and others continue to improve.

And in workplaces everywhere—schools, hospitals, offices and retail businesses—let's hope the managers will stop punishing, albeit unintentionally, top performers for their successes.

How to Avoid Punishing Top Performers for Their Success

- Make top performers aware of future projects and invite them to choose their next assignments
- Don't block promotions that involve transfers to another department because you don't want to lose a top performer. Your department's loss may be another department's gain, but the whole organization will continue to benefit from the top performer's efforts and you may be perceived within the organization as a developer of top talent.
- Monitor staff members' workloads. If you notice that what someone is doing is affecting her work-life balance negatively, discuss it with her.
- Restrain yourself from always assigning the most difficult tasks to the same few top performers, just because you know they will do it right.

Quote of the Month

"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

— Nelson Mandela

Recognition Calendar

April is International Customer Loyalty Month – a time to celebrate the customer service champions in your organization, the people who do what needs to be done to create loyal customers.

Thursday, April 1: International Fun at Work Day (www.playfair.com/fun.htm)

April 1-7: Laugh at Work Week (www.laughat-workweek.com): Acknowledge those who bring humour into the workplace.

April 5-10: Explore Your Career Options Week – Show your top performers that you care about their future. Ask about their career goals. How can you help them acquire the necessary knowledge and skills? How can they meet their goals within your organization?

April 18-24: Administrative Professionals Week (2010 theme: Power of Commitment). **Wednesday, April 21 is Administrative Professionals Day**

April 18-24: National Volunteer Week – Celebrate volunteers who help within your organizations and employees who volunteer within their communities (www.energizeinc.com/ideas.html).

Tuesday, April 20: Peer Recognition Day – a time to celebrate the contributions and achievements of your teammates.

Thursday, April 22: Earth Day – Recognize those staff members who are doing their part to protect the Earth, through such actions as using public transit, packing garbage-free lunches or getting involved in projects to make your organization or community "greener" places.

April 24 – 28: Recognition Professionals International 13th annual convention (www.recognition.org), Green Valley Ranch Resort, Henderson, Nevada

High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition

- Offer recognition in the form of lessons that relate to the staff member's interests, be they golf, sewing, cooking or fitness.
- Make a donation in the employee's name to the charity of her choice. When the charity sends her a thank-you note, or someone asks why her employer made the donation, it will enhance your expression of gratitude for her efforts.
- When planning a project, create a way to keep score; a means to measure your ongoing success. And when you reach these milestones, celebrate.

Meaningful recognition begins with knowing people and what they do

I must have an addiction to the Olympic Games. What else would explain why, for 17 days in February, I spent hours each day in front of my TV, clicking from CTV to Sportsnet to TSN and back again? Watching athletes who I had never heard of, from countries I would have trouble finding on a map, competing in sports I don't understand? Downloading not one, but two apps to my iPhone so I could keep track of results and medal standing?

Luckily, the Games have ended and I'm in recovery. As a consequence of watching days of Olympic coverage, I was exposed to hours of commercials. Most were annoying, forgettable or both. But one stood out for me—both for its entertainment value and what it unintentionally said about management styles and staff recognition.

During the 30-second spot, several customers stand in awe as two crew members juggle up to five eggs at a time as they prepare McDonald's breakfast sandwiches. Toward the end of the commercial, an excited manager appears. "I don't know what you guys are doing, but don't stop!" He disappears for moment, but returns briefly to give the guys a thumbs-up before continuing on with his day.

Nice words of encouragement, but I couldn't help wondering, "Where has this guy been? Why doesn't he know what's happening in his own restaurant?"

Why didn't he stop long enough to see what was going on before offering any comment?" (To view the commercial, visit <http://studio.adbeast.com/MediaViewer/?eRG=9C57F5DF-9885-4883-9258-C00BFC580E9A&index=9>)

By admitting that he doesn't, "know what you guys are doing," the manager has diminished the value of the recognition he is providing. It just doesn't sound as genuine as it could.

He sounds like a CEO who stands up at the company's annual recognition event and proclaims with all the sincerity he can muster, "I don't really know most of you or what you do, but I want you to know that whoever you and whatever you do is appreciated." It just doesn't sound genuine.

This recognition would have been more meaningful to the recipients if the manager actually understood what the "guys" were doing that was drawing customers into the restaurant. He should also know the guys' names.

"Tom and Steve, you guys are doing a great job. The customers are lovin' it. Keep up the great work!"

Sounds better, doesn't it? It shows that the manager is expressing gratitude based on knowing who's doing what.

Now, back to dealing with my addiction. After all, it's only two years and five months until London 2012.

You Asked...

What should I do if a candidate asks, "Can we come back to this questions later?"

The first response to this request should never be, "Yes." My experience is that coming back to the question later seldom helps the candidate come up with a better answer. When, at the end of the interview, we have returned to the question as the candidate requested, most candidates are still unable to provide an example that satisfies my request for information.

Agreeing to the request sets up a competition in the candidates' mind between the current questions and the one that remains unanswered. This may make it difficult for the candidate to focus on the most recently-asked question, when all thoughts should be on that question.

A better response to a request for time to think about the question is to gently push the candidate to come up with an answer now.

Here are a couple of scripts you could use: "Just tell me what comes to mind now. Talking about it might help you come up with an example. And if you wish, you can always add to something to your response later."

"Obviously, you are having difficulty coming up with an example. I can understand that. Thinking of the right example can be a challenge. Just take a moment to think about it. An example may come to mind."

After either of these statements, pause. This allows the candidate time to think of a suitable answer. If after 15 to 20 seconds the candidate still hasn't come up with a response, it's time to move on. Now is the time to agree to come back to the question later.

"Ok, let's move on to the next question. I'll make a note to come back to this question at the end of the interview if you still wish to do that. If something comes to mind before that, we can always come back to this question any time before we conclude the interview."

Do you have a question about interviewing, staff recognition, customer service or conducting effective meetings? Let Nelson know and he would be happy to answer it in a future issue of Briefly Noted.



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