

# Briefly Noted

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## Service Stars

I have no one to highlight as a service star this month. For the first time since October 2002, when the concept of service stars was introduced with the second issue of *Briefly Noted*, I am without an example of good service to share with you.

I don't think it is because I have become less observant or that my standards have suddenly risen—especially as the deadline for filling this space has loomed before me. It merely reflects a reality that many customers know too well.

Without an example of good service, I thought about previous service stars and how readers had responded to their stories.

There was the principal who shared the tale of a gas company employee with her teachers as they prepared to meet with parents to discuss their children's progress. This man understood that what was routine for him could be unfamiliar to his customers. There is a need to provide explanations and answer to even the most basic of questions. The principal felt that this article would help teachers understand how parents might feel.

Another time, within minutes of having pushed the send button for an issue, I received a phone call from the receptionist whose ability to create a positive first impression had been described. She explained that her boss had shown her the article after a friend had forwarded *Briefly Noted* to him immediately after reading it.

Some of the service stars that I have featured didn't even belong to me. Knowing that I always want to share stories of quality service—and perhaps sensing I occasionally have trouble finding them myself—readers have sent me their own stories of being on the receiving end of good service. I appreciate their input and the opportunity to tell their stories.

There have been times when readers have disputed my selections for service stars. "After all, they were just doing their jobs," they say. They are right. Providing good service should be an expectation of anyone who deals with the public, whether a waiter, a teacher or a sales clerk. Unfortunately, the service we frequently receive is indifferent and barely adequate. That's why when people just do their job well, in a way that makes customers feel valued, they become service stars.

It's too bad that I didn't encounter even one such person during the month of March.



## On this week ignore the 3 Fs of staff recognition

It's time to think outside the take-'em-for-lunch box when it comes to deciding how to acknowledge the contributions of support staff during this year's Administrative Professionals Week (April 24 – 30) and on Administrative Professionals Day (Wednesday, April 27).

Don't be one of those managers and supervisors who rely on the 3 Fs of staff recognition—food, flowers and fudge (and other fattening treats).

While these traditional ways of expressing appreciation are easy to do—I suspect some bosses actually have their administrative assistants make dining reservations or order their own flowers—they may not be the most appropriate way to mark this once-a-year celebration of support staff and their contributions.

Administrative Professionals Week (known as Professional Secretaries Week prior to 2000) has been sponsored by the International Association of Administrative Professionals since 1952 as a way to honour office workers. On its website ([www.iaap-hq.org](http://www.iaap-hq.org)), the association states that Administrative Professionals Week "has become one of the largest workplace celebrations [and that it is] celebrated world wide."

As an alternative to lunch and flowers to mark the week, the association suggests other, perhaps more appropriate ways to celebrate.

"According to IAAP members, administrative support personnel prefer observances that recognize and provide opportunities for learning and growth." Employers could support professional development by paying tuition for staff members who attend college or online courses, membership in professional associations, or registration for conferences or workshops.

The association also makes some gift suggestions, including "business-related items, such as personalized business cards, desktop name-plates, gift certificates, ergonomically correct accessories, computer hardware/software upgrades, or monetary bonuses for exemplary performance."

What the organization doesn't say is that there is no one best way to say thank you. Each staff member will have unique recognition preferences. For some, lunch with the boss would be the best way to be recognized. Others would like to receive flowers or candy. Still others would like to attend a course or receive a small work-related gift. Successful staff recognition requires managers and supervisors to know their staff well enough to be able to recognize each individual appropriately during Administrative Professionals Week, and throughout the year.

No matter which way you choose to celebrate the week, keep in mind that people's needs to be valued for who they are and appreciated for what they do cannot be satisfied by a few gestures once a year during a specific week, despite how appropriate the recognition may be. The need to be recognized is ongoing. People need to be recognized frequently.

When recognition is frequent, people feel reassured that they are valued and their contributions appreciated. Frequent recognition builds trust, teamwork, engagement and relationships.

Frequent recognition leads to a culture of recognition. There are workplaces where recognition occurs naturally. Recognition is part of the fabric of the organization—part of everyday life, not a ritual reserved for special occasions.

## Customer service should not be the top priority

Some people seem to have difficulty understanding the difference between something being important and it being a priority.

Recently, I had to phone a medical clinic to reschedule an appointment for my mother. While I was waiting for a human to rescue me from the automated answering system, I was entertained by a series of announcements about the services offered by the specialists in the clinic.

But what really caught my attention was a message that proclaimed that, "Customer service is our top priority."

While I believe customer service is important, I hope that what had been stated on the recording wasn't true. Surely the priority of these medical professionals is to provide quality medical care in a clean, germ-free environment. Of course the patients should be treated with respect and courtesy, but that shouldn't be the clinic's priority.

## Quote of the Month

*"And it's that hunger for recognition that drives them to leave for other jobs—searching for greener pastures where they will feel needed and appreciated."*

—Adrian Gostick & Chester Elton,  
*The 24-Carrot Manager*

## High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition

In February, I had the opportunity to present sessions on staff recognition at three teachers' conventions—North Central (held in Edmonton), Central Alberta (Red Deer) and Southeast Alberta (Medicine Hat). Then in March, I was in Bonnyville, Alberta for a workshop for local business owners and managers entitled *Improving Staff Retention Without Spending Buckets of Money*. Following these sessions, some of those who attended emailed me descriptions of staff recognition techniques they use. They have permitted me to share them with you.

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Bev Dickau, a counsellor at Ermineskin Junior/Senior High School in Hobbema, Alberta, suggested a way that administrators could use the gift of time to acknowledge staff for their contributions: "A principal or vice principal could say, 'Hey, I will do your DT (detention) or lunch supervision today.'"

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Michelle Westers from the Medicine Hat School District, encourages peer recognition by asking staff of her department to "write specific statements about each individual" on sheets she prepares for each member of the department:

*Our department consists of an incredibly unique group of people with "diverse skills and talents." As we work together, support one another, and inspire each other to ultimately help students be as successful as possible, it's worthwhile to recognize the contribution that each person makes. And so, please think about each person and identify:*

1. *their skills and strengths that are an asset to our department*
2. *the qualities of their character you appreciate*

Once she has collected and typed the comments on good quality paper, she laminates them and presents them to the individual.

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At Tellier's Value Drug Mart in Bonnyville, they "give our employees a bouquet of flowers or candy (we are predominantly a female staff), along with a lunch date on the anniversary of their employment, to let them know how much we value having them as a part of our team," writes Twila Campeau, the front store manager.

## Why do they dismiss words of praise?

Why can't people just accept praise and recognition when they receive it? Why do they dismiss recognition or even argue that it's not deserved?

These questions came to mind when I came across an interview with actor James McAvoy in *Metro*, the free tabloid distributed on the streets of Edmonton and several other cities.

*Metro* is something I read most frequently when on public transit, usually just picking up a copy left behind by a previous rider. The Feb 4 to 6, 2011 issue was open to a page of entertainment news, so that's where I began to read.

The interviewer asked McAvoy about his experience providing the voice for a character in the then soon-to-be released *Gnomeo and Juliet*.

"Actually, it's been really rewarding, artistically speaking," McAvoy said. "You get to go in and give it everything. And they don't ever really tell you no, and they never tell you whether it's bad or good. Well, they do say 'It's great' a lot, but you kind of go, 'You say it's great to everything. I'm not sure it can be true because I was pretty crummy in that last one.'"

Why didn't he just accept what the director said? Just trust him to know what's "great" and what isn't? It is unlikely that a director would allow a not-so-great scene to remain in the movie just because he didn't want the actor to feel bad.

McAvoy's response to the director's praise is similar to how some staff members tend to respond when recognized by a supervisor or manager.

"Ah, it was nothing. I was just doing my job."

"Anyone would have done the same thing."

"Really, I didn't do anything."

"It was the guys on my team."

When I am the person providing the recognition, I sometimes become frustrated with these types of responses. I have been tempted to—and actually have on occasion—responded, "No, what you did is worthy of recognition. You can trust me on that. I know when someone has done something well, and you did something well."

I understand why those being recognized might respond as they do, but these protestations should not be interpreted as evidence that the recipients don't want to be recognized. More likely, it shows that because recognition can be so rare, some people are unsure how to respond. A simple "thank you" is all that is needed:

"Thank you for noticing."

"I appreciate hearing that."

"It is good to hear your comments."

"Wow! That makes me feel good about what I did."

## Free advice and information on finding and keeping staff available from the Alberta government

I had just set up the room at the Bonnyville and District Chamber of Commerce office for a workshop and was waiting for the first participants to arrive when I noticed, at the back of the room, the literature display from Alberta Employment and Immigration.

Two titles caught my attention right away, due to their relevance to what I was about to present:

*Improving Staff Retention Without Spending*

*Buckets of Money*. Both booklets provide good information and advice on recruiting, selecting and retaining staff and are worth adding to your professional library. Both booklets are available at no cost to Alberta employers (and for a minimal fee for non-Albertans) from Employment and Immigration service centres throughout Alberta ([www.employment.alberta.ca/offices](http://www.employment.alberta.ca/offices)) or can be ordered (hardcopy) or downloaded from the Alberta Learning Information Service website ([www.alis.alberta.ca](http://www.alis.alberta.ca)). While there, check out other print and online resources for employers.

*Finders & Keepers* guides the reader through the recruitment process, from creating a workplace where current and potential employees would want to work, to actually finding and selecting new staff. A large part of

the book is devoted to keeping "valued employees."

Its 60-plus pages include useful information and forms for calculating the cost of turnover, assessing the effectiveness of different recruitment strategies, tracking recruitment results and rating applicants. There is also a checklist for new staff orientation and tips on observing human rights laws, recruitment and interview practices, and simple, easy-to-use staff recognition.

*Beyond Pay and Benefits* focuses on what Alberta employers have done to cope with labour shortages. The first few pages provide tips on staff recognition, maintaining a work-life balance and employment engagement. The remaining pages profile nine Alberta employers, describing their experiences with recruiting and retaining staff.

These organizations, representing a good cross-section of the economy, include Athabasca University, Calgary Winter Club, Capital Health, Executive Royal Inn Hotel and Conference Centre, K-Bro Linen and Real Canadian Superstore.

Both books provide lists of other resources for employers.

"High wages will attract people but will not keep them for long if other factors in the work environment are not favourable."

—Finders & Keepers  
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