

Quiet Compensation

Contributed by John F. Macek LCSW

"Rules is rules." Right? Yes, but don't let this mentality interfere with how you manage personnel in your exempt categories. If you wish to keep these high performing individuals, you must occasionally break the rules.

Exempt personnel are paid to get a job done. Sometimes that means working many additional hours to meet project deadlines. They know to expect that to meet deadlines or special needs. The risk is that when fatigue sets in, proficiency can dramatically drop. It takes more effort to get less done. It's wise to watch for excess fatigue and offer breaks when respite is needed.

Early in my career, I learned that occasional "rule breaking" pays big dividends. What I mean by this is that most exempt personnel do not work for bread alone. They want psychic rewards such as job satisfaction. It's most effective to offer psychic reward in real time. If recognition is delayed until the annual evaluation, the opportunity for effective positive reinforcement is greatly diminished.

In order to provide rewards for outstanding performance closer to real-time, it can be done in a number of ways, some of which may slightly bend the rules. Think of it as "quiet compensation." Here are some methods that provide appropriate recognition without violating a company's policy of "fairness."

1. Express thanks and appreciation verbally at every opportunity, thanking the person for their extra effort and quality of their work. You need make no inferences or promises of later reward. It's straight Blanchard One Minute Manager fare.
2. Send quick emails acknowledging good team performance. It is not only more convenient but is more immediate. It requires no hunting down of individuals, more room for effusiveness that is equally accorded to all parties. Speaking to the parties individually can lead to comparisons of words used and some feeling less recognized than others.
3. If the team was interdepartmental, copy each department head. That encourages continued interdepartmental collaboration.
4. Some managers like putting the email in the employee's personnel file. That's a good play, making the recognition more durable.
5. Praise should always focus on accomplishments. That simply reinforces what the employment relationship is all about: getting a job done.
6. When seeing a high performing employee exhausted from overwork, it's in the company's interest to address that issue. It's not out of line to drop by mid day on a Thursday and tell an individual "Finish off what you have to for today, but your assignment for tomorrow is to start an early start on the week-end." Doing this allows the super-performer to formulate special plans for a three-day week-end which adds to the meaningfulness of the break. This is not bad management. It recognizes that every human being has physical and emotional limits. Fatigue can greatly reduce efficiency, so showing up for work on Friday would not lead to a productive day. You are simply taking initiative to restore that employee's efficiency.
7. Random recognition is particularly effective. It uses what B.F. Skinner, father of operant conditioning, called "intermittent ratio reinforcement." Skinner's studies proved that random reinforcement creates by far the most powerful reinforcement. When an overworked employee gets a pat on the back by getting needed reprieve, the company gets a fresher and more efficient mind on Monday.

Random acts of kindness foster employee loyalty, credibility, trust, and work engagement. It results in better morale, increased productivity, better customer service, and a healthy bottom line.

Good rules must always make room for random exceptions like "quiet compensation."

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