

## Recognition as an Engagement Driver

by Greg Butterfield  
Senior Partner, Terryberry Company

Let's face it; in this day and age, the deluge of negativity can be overwhelming. At times, even "uncertainty" seems a step in the right direction as compared to downright despair. But it is our nature to look for the silver lining, and history suggests there is reason to be confident because we have successfully overcome adversity time and time again.

My career in the recognition industry spans almost three decades now. During that time, I, like many others, have seen both ends of the philosophical spectrum and most of what's in between. It's easy to get caught up in the numbers and story lines and sometimes lose sight of what's important and the areas where we can make a difference. What over 10,000 days given to any industry will bring more than anything is a sense of perspective. So, what's to be done in the face of overwhelming instability, mounting debt and seemingly endless layoffs? During this economic downturn, businesses could do themselves a world of good by revitalizing their recognition practices since it is their people who will carry the business through this difficult period; and they will be the drivers of tomorrow's success stories.

So, it will come as no surprise when I say, "Pay attention to your people!" Hard working, committed employees are the lifeblood of your organization now and going forward. As you well know, business is about the people who make it happen, not the product or the technology or the marketing. As Peter Drucker wrote, "Management is about human beings...to make their strengths effective and their weaknesses irrelevant."

You know the value of your employees, and yet offering meaningful raises, improved benefits or stock options in this economy is "challenging" if not impossible. Not so with your recognition efforts. Often for an investment that is a fraction of the cost of other measures normally used to show appreciation for a job well done, a properly designed recognition system can bring a tremendous return. Acknowledging the efforts of your people will help to ensure that your best and brightest stay the course through the hard times.

On one hand, we know there is benefit when we reaffirm and strengthen our relationships with the people with whom we work. However, these times require us to prove the

results of recognition, as all programs will come under greater scrutiny and be held to a higher standard when it comes to ROI. Recognition is a primary driver of engagement, and employees who are fully engaged in your organization today will not only help you ride out the storm, but will ultimately carry your group forward.

So how can we fight the good fight when it comes to maximizing our human resources? IMHO...Understand that emotion is an undeniable part of the formula, determine what steps you feel would make a difference where you work, and then immediately begin the process of building a team of likeminded managers to energize and engage your people.

What follows are eight recommendations that can be employed to ensure that both the soft and hard benefits of recognition resonate in your organization.

Step1: RECONNECT...To start with; how well do you know your co-workers, the people you manage and those who manage you? Are you aware of the successes they've had and hurdles they face both on the job and off? If so, this knowledge will make you a more effective leader and contributor. Some of the people who work with you may have been a part of the organization for a long time and perhaps even a part of your team. Others, through reorganization or acquisition, may be new to your group. Regardless, times have changed and likely so have your people. They are bombarded with news of the dire economy everyday just as you are, and this can surely dampen enthusiasm and productivity. Put simply, your employees are likely stressed and feeling vulnerable. They're questioning whether the time and effort they've put into their careers will produce the returns they expected.

But savvy managers will recognize that challenging times tend to unite people – especially when faced with a common concern as we are today. Connecting with your people, knowing how they react to stress, listening to their concerns, and creating a shared plan for moving forward underscores your respect and appreciation for them and their work.

In light of this historic downturn, every employer wants and needs the lifeblood of their organization to operate at peak performance, and can ill afford to give an engaged employee a reason to look for greener pastures. Remember, no matter the state of the economy, companies are always looking for good people. Today's mantra: Retain the best - engage the rest! Take the time to reconnect with those you work with and your team will be better prepared to deal with adversity and celebrate success.



Step 2: REALIGN...this term perfectly describes one of the eight key elements required for success. I'm referring to the critical importance and value of aligning or, in most cases, realigning the day-to-day activities of your business with your corporate mission.

Your corporate mission should outline the company's aspirations and purpose, and provide an emotional tie to employees. A meaningful, clearly articulated mission is your company's moral compass.

When the waters get murky, as they have over the last twelve months, your mission statement helps your company plot its course through rough times by providing a solid foundation that reminds everyone of the organization's purpose. This is what we believe in as a group, and all of what we do going forward is based on this premise.

Whether you use the term alignment, linkage, or connectivity does not matter. Corporate culture spawns the mission...from the mission come long-term goals...and then short-term objectives are identified.

Unless your recognition initiative is aligned with the company's mission and culture, you will struggle to build a case or develop metrics for a new or ongoing system. You must be certain your recognition efforts are directed toward those who embody the mission through their understanding and willingness to meet or exceed the aligned goals and objectives. In other words, make sure you are paying attention to those who are paying attention!

I'm not naïve enough to think that your employees have your corporate mission pinned to their shirts as they search for daily inspiration. The truth is, the best way to spread the sense of mission where you work is when dynamic leaders communicate this spirit. They walk the walk, and talk the talk...and there is no better vehicle for this than recognition.

In this challenging environment, make sure there is a clear line of sight between your corporate mission and what happens on the job day-in and day-out.

Step 3: REFOCUS...your recognition efforts on the ABCs (Attitudes, Behaviors, and Contributions.) Recognition is the best way to underscore the Attitudes, Behaviors and Contributions your organization values most.

Perhaps Plato said it best when he wrote, "What is honored is cultivated;" or for our purposes, what gets recognized, gets reinforced and will resonate throughout your organization.

Think about the incredible success of long-distance runners from Kenya. How is it that athletes from this small African nation dominate running competitions at every distance from 1000 meters to the marathon? Put simply, running is Kenya's national pastime. The best and the brightest young Kenyan athletes see how runners are revered and honored in their homeland and are drawn to the sport their countrymen support like no other. Success begets recognition and recognition begets success. "What is honored is cultivated." (Plato) What gets recognized gets reinforced and remembered.

We have already determined the importance of alignment between your corporate mission, long-term goals and day-to-day activities. But, what are the things that people do where you work that make a difference? What are your expectations? Are the attitudes, behaviors, and contributions that add value the same regardless of the company type, product or service? Staying late to finish a special project, helping a fellow employee meet a deadline, going the extra mile to make sure a customer is taken care of are examples of the ABCs that all organizations and managers would endorse. But at the end of the day, identifying or labeling the attitudes, behaviors, and contributions that add value and personify engagement may be a bit difficult to put into words. It's kind of like Justice Potter Stewart's now famous quote in which he tried to define the term "obscenity." His paraphrased response was, "I can't put it into words, but I know what it is when I see it," which perfectly summarizes the irony and difficulty in defining nebulous concepts. Applied here, it may be difficult to define engagement, but every manager knows what it is when he/she sees it.

In the corporate world, remember your ABCs: recognition is the best way to underscore the Attitudes, Behaviors and Contributions your organization values most. Recognition is how you communicate your mission and culture, and will ultimately lead to engagement.

Step 4: REESTABLISH...the importance of a multi-faceted recognition approach. According to the Recognition Professionals International (RPI), your recognition initiative should encompass three equally important components – Day to Day, Informal and Formal Recognition segments. If you think of a three-legged stool with each leg representing one of these key elements, you'll quickly realize the need for all three components to be in place in order for the stool to remain upright.

Let's break this down a bit. Day to Day (D2D) recognition can be as simple as "Good Morning," according to Barbara Ruddy, a lifelong recognition champion and principal with Stars Staff Training and Recognition Services. This form of appreciation is almost

always verbal – “thank you,” “nice job,” or “you make a difference” – heartfelt appreciation for a job well done. This low-cost, highly effective approach can involve everyone in your organization, works up and down the management chain, and can be employed every day as the name suggests. Let me make this recommendation: When the thought to recognize crosses your mind, do something about it.

Informal recognition shares many of the attributes of your day-to-day efforts except this recognition usually comes in written form. It may be a letter, an email, a certificate, a hand-written thank you, or a proclamation on company letterhead. What’s important here is that there is a paper trail documenting the person’s great work and how this particular individual made a difference. Both the Day-to-Day and Informal legs of the stool are typically about attitudes and behaviors. When used properly, D2D and informal recognition will resonate with up to eight of every ten employees on a very regular basis, highlighting the people and activities the organization wants to hold up as models.

Formal recognition programs, while no doubt rooted in the attitudes and behaviors each deserving employee brings to the table, are designed to highlight significant contributions and accomplishments.

Length of service milestones, attaining a sales goal, retirement, performance achievements, and meeting safety thresholds all fall into this formal category. Again, these are significant contributions, most often commemorated with significant awards. Properly conceived formal recognition programs should impact 10 to 20% of your employee population annually. Not everyone in your organization will earn this type of recognition, but everyone should have the opportunity.

As Jack Welch wrote in [The Welch Way](#), as quoted in *Business Week*, March 2009, “Your human resources matter enormously in good times. They define you in the bad”.

Step 5: RESOLVE to earn the necessary support and resources from the C-Suite to systematically recognize the contributions of your people.

Management buy-in is a critical component in the approval and ultimate success of your recognition system.

In order to reach this required level of support, those charged with recognition responsibilities must understand the benefits of the concept they’re selling and the audience they’re appealing to, in this case their company leadership.

Understanding the leadership style of those in your organization is key to developing a strategy to earn their support. According to Lee Ellis with RightPath Associates, those who aspire to lead must exhibit both trust and emotional intelligence. These are the foundations of leadership.

The RightPath model suggests that, in addition to the building blocks of trust and emotional intelligence, leaders are either primarily relationship-oriented or results-oriented. Results-oriented leaders are all about goal-setting, keeping score, and as the name suggests, getting results. Relationship-oriented leaders rely on respect, coaching, and encouragement to motivate. Great leaders often embody some of each, but the reality is that most leaders are held to financial and performance standards that push them towards the results-oriented side.

Many of the folks charged with recognition responsibilities are in human resources, and though not an absolute, it is likely these professionals lean more toward the relationship side of leadership. The result is that these two sides often speak different languages and rely on different criteria when making decisions. To earn the respect and support of a results-oriented leader, you must provide hard data that shows bottom line impact and ROI. It is not enough to promote the soft benefits of recognition. You must build your case with numbers and proven results. Resolve to use all the tools necessary to garner support for your recognition initiatives, and target your efforts toward the decision makers in your organization

Step 6: RETRAIN...those charged with recognition responsibilities about the appropriate timing, message, delivery, and follow up that will maximize your recognition efforts. Managers must understand and embrace the ABCs, the three-legged recognition stool, and how best to communicate with each of his/her charges.

Let's face it; some managers are simply gifted when it comes to effectively using recognition to drive engagement and productivity. These are your recognition super users. However, a manager, by definition, is not necessarily skilled or experienced when it comes to acknowledging the contributions of those he/she oversees. Training is a critical component in any organization's strategy, and according to a study done at Northwestern University, "successful companies spend ten times more on employee training than other companies." A well thought out training regimen will teach and empower your managers to consistently recognize achievement in your organization in a timely and effective manner.

Recognition training should include:

- An overview of the importance and value of recognition
- What recognition means to the company, employees, customers, & the bottom line
- Understanding individual versus team recognition
- Understanding cultural, gender, and generational differences
- Ways of improving feedback and the quality of interaction with employees
- Appropriate and actionable takeaways
- Practical applications, case studies, best practices
- Interactive, solution-oriented exercises
- Pre and post training metrics
- Additional training follow-up and opportunities

Unless a training program exists simply for the sake of training, results should be measured. Look at metrics such as: sales, customer satisfaction, attendance, employee retention rates, workplace safety, productivity, etc. Measurements that consider performance improvements can provide a benchmark for training effectiveness.

“The most important task you have as a manager is to encourage the best performance from your employees,” writes Dr. Gerald Graham of Wichita State University. Training offers managers a roadmap to maximize their ability to engage.

Step 7: REKINDLE...your message by effectively communicating your expectations and those of your organization. Communication is perhaps the most overlooked of all the steps presented herein, but without it, how will your people know your expectations or when they have met them?

Consider this. Many organizations today offer open enrollment when it comes to the benefits offered by the company. Ask any HR person as to how they communicate these benefit options to employees and you'll get a list that includes posters, email, company newsletter, webinars, snail mail, intranet, paycheck stuffers, face-to-face meetings, and on and on. The rationale, of course, is that we all have different learning styles and strengths, so when decisions of a critical nature must be made, most organizations use every tool at their disposal to make sure all the different personalities and preferences in the workplace have been served. This approach is both brilliant and effective. Of course, this begs the question as to why we don't adopt this same strategy when we're communicating our performance expectations and recognition strategy?

The method, frequency, creativity, and message are the key components to your communication plan; but don't overlook the opportunity to report successes. As mentioned, there are two components in the communication plan – the delivery of

expectations and the delivery of results. Sharing success is an incredibly powerful way to get buy-in for your recognition system, and utilizing a broad spectrum of communication vehicles will assure your message hits home with even the most diverse workforce.

Step 8: REINFORCE...your culture, mission, goals and objectives through your award presentations. This is the most logical step to follow the communication segment as they go hand in hand. To begin with, no matter what form of recognition - D2D, Informal or Formal - there is a presentation of sorts. There are three key components when it comes to the presentation side of things. Let's look at the presenter, the recipient, and the presentation methodology.

First...who is the best person to make an award presentation? While there are some exceptions, the award recipient's immediate supervisor or manager is almost always the best person for the job. I touched on this topic earlier when I wrote about importance of knowing those you work with on a personal level or, at minimum, their personal preferences.

Secondly, as mentioned, the immediate supervisor is best positioned to know if this deserving employee is shy and retiring, prompting that manager to approach the recipient privately on a one-on-one basis. Or, this employee might be the type to embrace a public presentation with family, management, and co-workers in attendance. Whatever the platform for the presentation, the immediate supervisor is clearly the one to judge the value and merit of the accomplishment, and what made that action award-worthy.

Finally, award presentations commemorating these significant contributions should be well planned and thought out, often with upper management present. The presentation should appropriately communicate the success specifics: what this particular individual did to earn this recognition and how this impacted the organization. In doing so, not only is that person's contribution recognized in a meaningful and memorable way, but all those in attendance should have a clearer picture of what they will need to do if they are to earn this type of public praise and appreciation going forward.

“When an awards banquet, luncheon or other event goes well, everyone involved benefits. If the presentation is heartfelt and genuine, everybody in the room will come away feeling positive and uplifted,” *The WOW Workplace*.

Done properly, recognition that appropriately acknowledges the accomplishment and honors the individual as they would want to be recognized creates a clear line of sight between the accomplishment and the culture of the organization.



Yes, times are tough and you are being asked to do more with less, but what's the alternative? A favorite new quote of mine comes from business coach Sieg Weber: "The greatest stumbling block to achieving anything of importance in our life seems to be our willingness to surrender to circumstance." Don't let your organization surrender. When employees achieve in areas that have been identified as key goals and objectives, they should be recognized. When they don't, they should be coached.

In review, RECONNECT with your people; REALIGN with your corporate mission; REFOCUS on the attitudes, behaviors and contributions (ABCs) your organization values most; REESTABLISH the three legs of the recognition stool (D2D, Informal, and Formal) in your employee engagement strategy; RESOLVE to earn the support of upper management; RETRAIN your front line managers to maximize the recognition experience; REKINDLE your communication efforts to provide for diversity; and REINFORCE your culture, mission, goals, and objectives through your award presentations.

Creating a systematic approach to recognition will bring results. From the Harvard Business Review in an article entitled *Manage Your Human Sigma*, "Energized and committed employees engage customers and work more productively. Customers who feel strongly connected to your company spend more and stay loyal. When employees and customers are happy, your profits can soar."

Recognizing your people is not just a good idea, it is a business imperative.

**Greg Butterfield** is a Senior Partner with the Terryberry Company, an international firm that specializes in employee recognition systems. He brings 28 years of experience in the field, oversees Southeastern operations and heads up Terryberry's Recognition University division.

Greg has a Master's degree in Educational Psychology, and has earned the Certified Recognition Professional designation from Recognition Professionals International. In addition to speaking extensively on the topic to groups around North America, he has consulted with hundreds of organizations ranging from small businesses to Fortune 500 companies on developing and implementing recognition programs for talent retention and performance improvement.

[www.terryberry.com](http://www.terryberry.com)  
[g.butterfield@terryberry.com](mailto:g.butterfield@terryberry.com)