

by Joanne L. Smikle

the Power of PRAISE & THANKS GIVING

- Thanks to my Colleagues
- Thanks to my Staff
- Thanks to my Peers
- Thanks to my Superiors
- Thanks for Cooperation
- Thanks for Building Commitment
- Thanks for Higher Quality
- Thanks for Greater Revenue
- Thank You!
- Thank You!
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- Thank You!

No, this is not an exhortation to religious praise and worship. Nor is it a mindless attempt at motivation or inspiration. This article is about a simple premise: that giving thanks to colleagues — staff, peers, and superiors — guarantees cooperation. Cooperation builds commitment. Commitment leads to higher quality. Higher quality leads to greater revenue, which is an integral building block of shareholder value. Two little words, "Thank You," can accomplish all of that for the enterprise!

Let me tell you what happened in the ladies room at Baltimore Washington International Airport. I arrived after a long flight from Phoenix. As is often the case with cross-country travelers, once off the plane I made a beeline for the restroom. The line was way too long at the first available ladies room so I scurried across the airport to one that was hidden from all but the very seasoned traveler. As I entered, a uniformed cleaning woman was leaving. On her way out she said, “Carol you’re my best worker. Thank You! You make it easier for me and everybody else.” Carol was cleaning a toilet. I saw her stop swishing and smile. I’ll bet you that Carol’s toilets are the cleanest at BWI...all because of those two little words, “Thank You.”

We are going to focus on two essential elements of thanks giving:

1. Thanks as an element of the coaching commitment.
2. The praise connection to commitment and alignment.

Thanks, an Element of the Coaching Commitment

Coaching is the leadership activity that creates climate, environment, and the context for growth and development. Skillful coaches build relationships, formal and informal, that enable people to contribute fully, proficiently, and with enthusiasm. Coaches create learning organizations that are wedded to continuous improvement. The quest to be the best raises the level of service. Enhanced service comes from the quality of communication between coaches and the coached.

Since coaching is a method for validating and acknowledging both accomplishments and breakdowns as opportunities for growth, gratitude is a necessary component of that equation. Consider this: validation and acknowledgement both rely on observation. When a coach is truly being observant, the coach is witnessing activities worthy of thanks, praise, and recognition.

Making a conscious effort to thank a staff member for sincere effort, whether it results in the desired outcomes or not, guarantees even more of that same positive energy. It is this repeated reinforcement that eventually

builds staff commitment. This is not to say that a coaching leader ignores mistakes and missteps, rather he or she is conscious of the energy that went into the effort.

So, how does a coach say thanks in meaningful ways? The obvious is to simply say “Thank You” when witnessing something noteworthy. Your statement of gratitude should be very specific. For instance, one of your staff displays skill when handling a particularly difficult research project for a client. That staff member made some mistakes along the way but managed to get results and satisfy the client. This presents an excellent opening for coaching. An alert coach will seize this as a chance to thank the staff member for specific aspects of their effort, coach them on ways to approach the task the next time, and reinforce the value that the staff member brings to the organization.

There are other ways to incorporate gratitude into your leadership modus operandi. Raising the level of senior leadership awareness about the work of a person or team is not only an act of gratitude, it is also a potential career boost. Here’s an example: Marsha is the director of a large call center. She has seven managers that report to her. Ed, who manages training for all call center personnel, did an outstanding job designing and piloting a new employee orientation protocol designed to help with retention. The feedback from hiring managers and frontline supervisors was laudatory. Marsha made sure that she discussed it in her director’s meetings and when she met with the vice president. By giving Ed this visible praise he was asked to present his orientation program to the senior leadership team. He was selected to lead a team that revamped the entire company’s new employee orientation program. Marsha’s act of gratitude gave Ed visibility he may not have had before. It also gave him new avenues to further his career.

A final way of using gratitude in the coaching process is to provide gifts and other rewards. Not just money or gift certificates, but more meaningful gifts. One of my favorites is to select the hardest workers to represent your company at industry conferences. This gives them exposure to the larger industry and the chance to build a strong professional network. It also offers them new prospects for learning.

Praise, Commitment, and Alignment

Beginning with a clear definition of alignment, another popular business buzz word...alignment is the intentional congruence between people, policies, practices, service, and systems. Alignment builds a consistent, service-focused culture because all roads lead to excellence in product development and delivery. Every single activity in the enterprise is linked by strategic intent. That intent drives the entire enterprise to not only create shareholder value, but to also create customer value.

Shareholder value is the connection between revenue generation and stock prices. This value focuses on the economic worth of the enterprise. Customer value is somewhat different. This is the worth that the customer determines for the enterprise. When an enterprise is valuable to the customer, be they large institutional clients or individual customers, repeat business and referrals are the norm. When there is little or no customer value, customers will always be shopping around looking for other suppliers. Low customer value is a constant reminder that there is always competition in the marketplace. It is also a reminder that you have not earned customer loyalty.

With that explanation of alignment and value, it is obvious that praise must reflect the principles supportive of the guiding corporate strategy. That strategy comes to life through alignment. Every bit of praise must support and reinforce behaviors consistent with your company's core ideals. In order to have clarity on those behaviors, dissect your mission statement or any other accepted document that describes the heart of the company. *A word of caution, this technique only works in organizations that have aligned values to action. When hypocrisy reigns, this technique will not help.*

Here's an example of a healthy organization that is using this approach: Tampa-based Opus Management Resources' mission describes a long-term care company "dedicated to providing the highest quality of care to elders...in a warm, respectful, dignified environment." Being a mission-driven organization, Opus' leadership team has taken each element of the statement and identified very specific behaviors supportive of that piece of the mission.

Because the highest quality of care entails on-going learning, education is an Opus must-do. Behaviors that reflect the emphasis on dedication to high quality care include participating in continuing education, requiring staff development, and using management meetings as

educational forums. Those critical, behavioral pieces of the mission are also assessed in the performance management process. Performance appraisals are based on how well employees, management, and non-management fulfill the mandates of the mission in their daily work. Just as Opus is a mission-driven company, it is also a service-focused company. As such, almost every behavioral component reflects this service focus. The continuing education and training mentioned above offer education that helps employees provide higher levels of care to the elderly.

As is probably obvious, Opus' rewards and praises based on the individual's fulfillment of the mandates of the mission. Each instance of praise reinforces the desired behaviors, furthers alignment, and creates an attitude of gratitude. It is that gratitude that sparks on-going commitment to the enterprise.

Commitment is dedication, self-imposed obligation, and loyalty to an ideal, a person, or an organization. While much of commitment, like motivation, is intrinsic. Commitment can be sparked or engendered by keenly aware leaders. One of the ways that leaders engender commitment is by looking for occasions to praise and to stress the positive. Not only do they praise their direct reports, they recognize exemplary effort and outputs throughout the enterprise. How many times have you made it a point to pat someone else's staff member on the back? Positive encouragement, no matter where it comes from, keeps employee's feeling good about their individual contributions and their role in the organization.

Commitment is also engendered when staff are recognized not just for effort and outcome, but also for working well collaboratively. Since none of us are as smart as all of us, it is important that everyone be able to work well together. Take the time to observe team dynamics. Compliment individual members when appropriate, but also be certain to compliment the entire team on their work. Again, this is another time when it is important to acknowledge effort, as well as outcomes. So what if people don't hit a homerun every time? Be grateful for the team that practices, shows up for the game, and plays with heart.

Second chances also increase commitment. Giving employees the opportunity to repair, fix errors, or try again is a vote of confidence. In these instances, solid coaching skills are necessary. Each time you create a second chance, you are responsible for providing sufficient guidance and tools to increase the chances of success. In this instance,

the coaching should not focus on the negative, but rather on the growth possibilities emerging from the error. This type of coaching identifies potential and possibilities. It is through this identification that successes can eventually be realized. The three questions for consideration in this type of coaching are as follows:

1. What are the specific possibilities for correction, improvement, or change?
2. How can those possibilities be realized?
3. What, specifically, will it take to take act in a more efficient, productive or constructive way?

By using these questions to guide the coaching intervention, there is a great possibility that untapped talent will emerge. Remember, the coaching process is just that, a process. It is far more than a corrective conversation or a congratulatory remark. It is this long-term investment that promotes retention and fosters commitment.

Summary

Praise and thanks giving, not from a spirited Sunday morning worship service, but from a sincere leader invested in growing people...this is the demonstrable gratitude that builds the commitment and loyalty required to increase shareholder and customer value. It is an important element of a leader's coaching responsibility. Coaching, that on-going conversation, guides the alignment of action to values. It provides acceptable parameters of work, behavior, and the like. Coaching also presents endless openings for saying thanks.

The leader's job does not end with consistent coaching, it continues with using praise to support actionable alignment to the company's core values. This clearly discernable alignment eventually builds commitment. Commitment is a component that determines shareholder and customer value, the true worth of an enterprise. That commitment, like so many other factors that determine corporate success, is made stronger through savvy coaching.



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