

The Power of Positive Recognition

Creating a Sense of Value in Our Employees

—Angel Geohagan, Ph D.

Dr. Angel Geohagan is the Standards & Compliance Manager for the Hamilton County Emergency Communications District in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

You'll notice even though my bio says Doctor Geohagan, Doctor does not appear in this paper. The reason being is that I'm not an academic sent from on high to grace you with some form of knowledge that I think you MUST use. That's not who I am. I'm not an academic who happens to study public safety. In fact, I'm not an academic at all, I'm a practitioner who happens to have a degree.

I've spent over 20 years in public safety, first as a police officer for the City of Chattanooga Tennessee and for the last 7 years as the Standards and Compliance Manager for Hamilton County 911. The major portion of my job deals with Human Resources, employee records, grievances, complaints, and the like. Quite simply, my job is dealing with people, specifically employees and employee issues.

I am also responsible for accreditation in my agency and I serve as an assessor both regionally and on the national level. I have over 15 years experience working in accreditation and in conducting CALEA assessments. As a result of that time I've assessed nearly 100 agencies throughout the country. Now don't worry, this is not about accreditation and it is not about CALEA. But I mention the experience here for a few very important reasons:

In all my travels I have NEVER met an employee who was 100% satisfied with work—NEVER. I have had a lot of "but" conversations; "It's wonderful here, BUT we could use better equipment." Or "thank you for the million dollars, BUT I don't like the denomination you provided." It seems that every conversation I have has a big ol' BUT in the middle.

&

In all my travels I have NEVER been in an agency where there wasn't at least a little bit of a morale problem. Morale is one of those tough to define words, but we all know good morale when we see it and we certainly know what bad morale looks like.

&

In all my travels I have NEVER been in an agency where there wasn't an "US vs. THEM" mentality, a belief there is an "EMPLOYEE vs. MANAGEMENT" battle being waged.

So, being the curious sort, I began to wonder why these 3 things are consistently accurate. Is it that public safety

simply attracts employees that are disgruntled and miserable? I suppose that could be possible. I have not done the research on it, but I can guess that attracting such people is not the real reason we have such issues.

OR

The better explanation might be that there is a supervision, management, and leadership issue within our agencies. Here's the deal everyone, it could be....US! Think about this, is it possible that WE as supervisors, managers and leaders within our own agencies are part of the problem we have unhappy employees? And if we can agree that we might be at least part of the problem, what do we do about it?

I ran across a statement recently that speaks to this very issue. The author is not named, but he is a former employee at a Health Department and this is from a letter he wrote to the editor of his local newspaper. He wrote, "A bad manager can take a good staff and destroy it, causing the best employees to flee and remainder to lose all motivation." That's a pretty powerful statement don't you think? So what do we do about it?

Well the title of this paper is "The Power of Positive Reinforcement" and I've added on "Creating a Sense of **Value** in Our Employees." I've underlined and bolded VALUE because it is a theme we will be returning to time and again. These two ideas, positive reinforcement and creating value, are intertwined and that is what we are going to discuss today.

Now Laszlo Bock, who is the Head of People Operations at Google (that's "google-speak" for Head of Human resources) wrote about the American work culture in a book titled Work Rules. He stated, "we spend more time working than doing anything else in life. It's not right that the experience of work should be so demotivating and dehumanizing."

Demotivating and dehumanizingsounds a lot like the previous statement about the effect of bad managers. Part of bad management and certainly part of what Laszlo Bock discusses is the concept of under-communication and its effect on the work force.

In the description of this paper we mentioned the concept of under-communication. So what do we mean by



under-communication? Quite simply under-communication is not communicating enough. A more detailed definition is that we do not communicate enough on the things we should be communicating about.

We make the claim, in the paper's description, that under-appreciation is a direct result in of under-communication. What we mean by that is we as supervisors, managers, and leaders often fail to show that we appreciate our employees. In fact, a chief complaint I hear constantly is "I never hear anything from my supervisor unless I've screwed something up."

Do me a favor and think about your agency for a moment. How much time do you spend positively recognizing your employees versus negatively disciplining them? The truth is as supervisors, managers, and leaders we spend 90% of our time dealing with less than 10% of the employees in our organizations. And typically that time is spent negatively disciplining our local problem employee (or employees as the case may be). This is time we don't spend with our golden employee.

What do I mean when I talk about the problem employee and the golden employee? Now I may define a golden employee a little different here, but stay tuned and you'll get a clear picture of why I do so.

We all have them in our agencies; the golden employee, who can do no wrong and the problem employee who can do no right. We want more of the former and less of the latter, but we spend more time dealing with the problem employees in our organizations than we ever do with our golden employees. We all know we don't spend so much time dealing with our problem employees because we want to; we also don't fail to spend time with our golden employees because we don't want to deal with them.

So here's the question: How well do you document the issues caused by your problem employee? How well do you actually write down or as I heard a supervisor say "put paper" on an employee that has messed up in some way? You most likely document problems fairly well, either through written counseling, remedial training, suspensions, all leading up to termination if needed. Your agency probably has a thick file on a few of your employees. Why do you document? You document because you need a paper trail and, if you are like me, you follow the belief that if it isn't documented, it didn't happen. It is how you communicate your dissatisfaction with your problem employee.

Now turn that around and think about your golden employee for a moment. How well do you document the many great things done by your golden employee? How well do you actually write down or "put paper" on an employee that has performed in some way to make you and your agency proud? You most likely DON'T document positive performance very well. Please know that I'm not downing any agency, truth is very few of us document positive performance very well. Your agency probably has a small file on a few of your employees. So I ask the same question I asked before—why do

"As supervisors, managers, and leaders, we spend 90% of our time dealing with less than 10% of the employees in our organizations."

you document? You should document positive performance for the same reasons you document negative performance—because you AS WELL AS YOUR GOLDEN EMPLOYEE need a POSITIVE paper trail. Remember, if it isn't documented, it didn't happen. It is how you communicate your satisfaction with your golden employee. More importantly for our purposes, documenting positive performance is how you communicate your satisfaction with your entire agency.

I use the term "golden" to describe a top tier employee for a specific reason. Gold is a precious metal, valuable and treasured. Gold is something we pay good money for, gold is something sought after, we want it. But here is the problem with gold, as valuable as it is, it is also a soft metal, it is easily malleable, easily damaged. For those of you wearing gold jewelry, take a look at it. Can you see scratches and dings? Is it bent out of shape a bit? Because gold is so soft if you don't take very good care it will end up in a shape we don't recognize.

The same can be said of the Golden Employee. What happens if we fail to take care of them, we fail to recognize their value to us and our organizations? What happens? We damage them, we lose them—one way or another—WE LOSE THEM. By that, I mean is WE, as supervisors, as managers, and as leaders, damage our golden employees to a point that they leave us. They either leave us by physically leaving for another job or they leave us by changing their behavior; in effect they "retire in place," they stop the behavior that made them the golden employee in our organizations, and they revert to behavior closer to those problem employees. If we fail to show that we value them, they end up regressing into just another employee or worse, they regress into a problem employee.

Why do we pay more attention to the problem employee? It isn't because we want to! The easiest answer can be found in the old saying "the

squeaky wheel gets the oil" - meaning the most noticeable (or loudest) problems (or people) are the ones most likely to get attention.

As a general rule, we readily communicate disapproval and we under-communicate praise. But the real problem with under-communicating is that it is seen by our employees as under-appreciation; it is seen as us ignoring the good; it is seen as failing to value the gold among us.

How do we know under-communication and under-appreciation are issues? Easy, we know because we asked. We asked in the form of exit interviews because we were having turnover issues or what I like to call the BIG T.

Turnover rates in emergency communications hovers just under 20% nationwide. This turnover is compared to around a 12% turnover rate for Law Enforcement (this number varies between 10 and 14% depending on where you get your information). And with turnover comes real costs, both financial and personal:

1. Recruitment and hiring costs (advertising, testing, interviewing, salaries)
2. Training costs (costs of course materials, equipment and uniforms, salaries of trainers and CTOs)
3. Overtime costs to cover for shortages
4. Increased stress due to increased workload

So there are real costs to high turnover. Depending on your training program it could cost your agency upwards of \$100,000 per person to get a fully trained employee. For some of you that number will be decidedly less, but the overall point is that it isn't cheap to replace employees so it might be advisable to find out why they leave and fix what you can.

Which brings me to this question, how many of your agencies conduct exit interviews when people voluntarily leave (they resign)? If your turnover rate is anywhere near the national average, and even if it's not, given the replacement costs don't you want to know why employees leave? In other words, if you have a turnover problem and don't ask why how can you come up with a solution?

Several years ago when someone would resign from our agency we would (not always) ask, usually in passing, "hey, why you leaving?" Please don't think we actually cared about the answer from a management perspective, heck we typically didn't even listen to the answer anyway. We called that the "exit interview." But a funny thing happened about five years ago. When we asked the obligatory question, the person we asked actually wrote a lengthy professionally sounding response detailing the many ways WE FAILED THEM.

Among many things this now former employee told us:

1. Supervisors were quick to punish and were often overly harsh without reason
2. Administrators were out of touch with floor operations (didn't know anything about dispatch)
3. Supervisors and managers were largely absent and rarely communicated agency goals
4. Employees were only spoken to when they did something wrong
5. Employees felt as though they didn't matter, that they were unimportant

Think about that last one there for a minute (Employees felt as though they didn't matter, that they were unimportant)...does it sound like work might be demotivating and dehumanizing to you?

Perhaps the most important thing they told us was that they were going someplace where they would be treated like something more than "an interchangeable part" - they felt like nothing more than a cog in the 911 machine - they were going someplace they would feel valued. There's that word again....VALUE.

This former employee called the agency "rudderless" and lacking in leadership. We got hammered and it stung, but a good thing came out of it because that written response to an off-handed question changed the way we did things. We instituted a more in-depth, documented exit interview questionnaire asking nearly 20 questions in an attempt to get a more precise answer to the question "why are you leaving."

Over the last 4 years, by using our documented exit interview, we discovered a few themes in the reasons employees leave, which resulted in us making changes in our behavior as supervisors, managers, and leaders. What do you think we learned? What do you all believe are some of the reasons people leave?

You might think money and benefits, stress, and a career change were among the top answers to the question of why people leave. To a certain extent, all those appear in our exit interviews, but those answers are not the most prominent ones—not stress, not money, not benefits, not for a career change. In truth, that's actually good news because we can't do much, if anything, about those responses anyway. We are going to come back to why this is really good news later.

Our exit interviews show:

1. Lack of communication or under-communication
2. Lack of appreciation and undervaluing of employees
3. Disrespect for employee performance (failing to



- praise while over-disciplining)
4. Don't feel as if they are important

What's interesting is our exit interviews are similar to exit interviews conducted across, not just public safety, but across the work world. The number one reason people leave their employer has nothing to do with money or benefits, it has to do with being valued or feeling as if they matter to the organization.

That being the case, how do you create a sense of value in your employees? So glad you asked.

What I am about to show you is very important. If you remember nothing else from this paper I want you to remember this: **Demonstrating that you Appreciate your employees Creates a sense of Value in your employees.... Demonstrating Appreciation Creates Value. Plain and simple.**

We've talked thus far about how we spend a lot of time punishing and not enough time praising. But why do we do this? It's not easier to punish, it's not more productive to punish, it's not even more beneficial for us to punish. Punishment takes time, energy, and sometimes actually costs us money (just think about how much overtime you pay to cover for an employee you've suspended or terminated).

Notice above that our exit interviews did not reflect complaints about their job duties. Not a single complaint about job duties. Stress is high in emergency dispatch and yet no one said the job duties were overly stressful either. Sure stress was mentioned, but it wasn't a factor.

So here is a universal truth for you—when employees complain about their jobs, they are typically complaining about the work environment, not the actual work. By work environment I mean they are complaining that they don't hear anything from supervisors unless they screw up; they are complaining that supervisors and managers are out of touch; they are complaining that the organization does not value them; and they are complaining that they don't get the recognition they feel they deserve.

Employees in today's workforce consistently rate RECOGNITION as the main factor in job satisfaction, not A factor THE MAIN FACTOR; it's not money and not benefits, it's RECOGNITION. And as we mentioned that's actually pretty good news since, as government agencies, we can't do much about money and benefits anyway, HOWEVER we can do something about recognition.

And there is an important thing to remember about today's worker. A vast majority of our workforce is under the age of 40. We are talking about generation Y, the millennials. Today's worker has spent a lifetime getting ribbons for 27th place, they've gotten trophies for participation, and they've gotten plaques for simply showing up. Today's worker not only WANTS to be positively recognized, they EXPECT to be positively recognized. But don't think the millennials are alone in wanting recognition. ALL employees like being praised. Your older employees may not know how to handle it, but they enjoy praise nonetheless.

But here's the really cool part of that, not only is that just ok, that's

“Recognition is THE main factor in job satisfaction...”

fantastic for us as supervisors, managers, and leaders because positive reinforcement simply WORKS BETTER. Positive reinforcement works better to enhance the behavior you want and reduce the behavior you don't want and none of us needs the research to understand that concept.

So what to do? Well because we can't have a public safety white paper without an acronym, we created an acronym! We need to R.A.V.E. about our employees! We need to Recognize Appreciate Value and Exalt the many wonderfully positive things our employees do. Aside from the fact that it works, it is also incredibly easy to do.

Do you have an awards programs where you recognize positive performance of your employees? If so, how effective is it? Do you recognize positive performance once a year at an awards ceremony of sorts or do you continually recognize positive performance throughout the year? Which do you think is more effective? Given this paper thus far, that's a trick question. Consistent positive reinforcement of your employees is the most effective way, both in cost and in ease: to demonstrate appreciation, to increase agency morale, and to increase job satisfaction.

When I talk about our positive recognition award program at our agency I want to make it clear that this is something that works for us. There is no one-size fits all, no silver bullet. You should find something that works for you and your agency; I am simply providing you an example. That said, a good positive recognition program should praise outstanding performance of course, but it should also:

- Ensure greater sense of connection between the agency and the employee
- Create greater employee satisfaction
- Increase productivity
- Make your employees feel valued and that they are integral to your overall success

- Enhance overall agency morale
- Make disciplinary action easier

That last one, make disciplinary action easier, that statement may need further explanation. When I say showing appreciation creates value while simultaneously making disciplining an employee easier I get a lot of “you’ve lost your mind” statements. And I do not disagree that the statement may seem idiotic on its face, but think about it this way, if I praise you for the many great things you do and do so on a consistent basis (positive reinforcement) doesn’t that make the occasional disciplinary action a little bit easier to take? In other words, if I recognize you consistently for being a golden employee, is a write-up for being late really that big of a deal? Recognizing the positive makes accepting the negative easier because it’s the spoon full of sugar that helps the medicine go down.

But above all, and this is something we’ve talked about, a good recognition program needs to be documented! Because remember, if it isn’t documented it didn’t happen. So does your positive recognition award program accomplish those things? If not, perhaps an enhancement is in order.

I asked a question earlier of how well you document the many great things done by your golden employees. How well do you actually write down or “put paper” on an employee that has performed in some way to make you and your agency proud? I bring this up again because positive recognition is most effective if it’s known and if it’s documented. Vince Lombardi, famous football coach and a leader by any definition, said - “Praise in public criticize in private.” In order to make positive recognition truly work for you it needs to be public and it needs to be documented.

We’ve discussed WHY we should recognize our employees. But what do we look for? What do we praise? Opportunities to recognize our employees come in all forms, so what qualifies as something that should be documented? The best answer to that question I’ve ever heard is - Did it make you turn your head? If something an employee did made you stop and look, then that’s something that you should probably document.

Here’s how we document positive recognition at our agency: We have a series of outstanding performance awards we use to recognize our employees. If we have an employee that, for example, assists in the delivery of a baby that employee, during the next shift line-up and in front of the entire shift (public), is awarded an Outstanding Performance Award (OPA) which includes a documented write-up and a stork pin for their uniform.

We track every documented Outstanding Performance

Award in our performance management system so that when evaluations are completed on an employee a supervisor can see all aspects of their employee’s performance and provide a better evaluation. We have 11 different categories in which we can recognize an employee.

Using the example of the baby delivery I’ll explain how quick and easy it can be to recognize an employee:

1. Log in to Guardian Tracking
2. Make an entry on OPA-Baby for Biggs
3. Biggs can then view the entry as well as Biggs’ supervisor

So what have we done? We’ve RAVEd about an employee, we’ve recognized an employee’s performance publicly in front of his peers, we have recognized him personally by documenting the award in the program (an electronic personnel file of sorts), and we’ve provided his supervisor the ability to see the great work that he has done by documenting his performance in such a way that it will be reflected in his annual performance review.

How long did that take? How much did it cost? The answers to those questions are: not long and not much. But the benefits you get out of the time, effort, and money you just spent are countless. You’ve started down the road of Creating Value in your employee by Demonstrating your Appreciation. Making that employee feel as though they are a valuable member of your organization helps you retain that employee because as you remember: RECOGNITION is now the main factor in job satisfaction.

As you just read, we utilize a program called Guardian Tracking. We use it in our agency and we can’t say enough good things about it. I bring them up here as a way to sum up what you’ve just read about. They produced a short video that truly sums up the importance of positive recognition. I like to call it Kate versus Sam: guardiantracking.com

Here’s what it all comes down to. If we want to keep those top-tier employees we have in our organizations, those Golden Employees, we should make sure they know how much we want to keep them.

So we have explored the use of positive recognition and the possible use of positive recognition to improve the work environment in our agencies. I sincerely hope that the information we’ve shared today has been of some benefit to you. There was a lot of information provided in hopes that we can all help keep the golden employees we have by keying in on that MAIN factor in job satisfaction - RECOGNITION.

