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# THE APPRECIATION QUOTIENT: MOTIVATE AND RETAIN YOUR EMPLOYEES WITHOUT BREAKING THE BANK



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By Noelle C. Nelson

Most new hires come to a firm brimming with enthusiasm. Almost no one begins work expecting to fail. When that enthusiasm fades, the problem usually is not the new hire; it is the experiences at work that transform a highly motivated employee into an “it’s just a job” employee.

It doesn’t take long. Somewhere during the first four to six months, the desire to do good work can lose its luster. It could be for any number of reasons: lack of training to do a job well, the subdued partner who conducted the final job interview becomes a “yeller” or ignores the employee altogether, hours of overtime is not compensated or is ignored. Soon, “I want to go to work” becomes “I have to go to work.”

Employees give what they get—or, more accurately, what they are not getting—namely, appreciation. Appreciation is the most precious of workplace intangibles—being recognized as a person who matters, having one’s contributions to the firm valued.

If you think appreciation is just another HR buzzword, try these facts on for size: A large-scale study of companies of varying sizes conducted by the Jackson Organization found that companies that effectively value and appreciate their employees more than triple the return on investment of companies that do not. Appreciation is not only great for your employees’ morale; it’s a terrific profit and productivity builder.

However, in this economy, the first thing that comes to mind is “How do I appreciate my people with no budget for raises, promotions, or any other monetary incentives?” The good news is that appreciation takes effort, but very little money.

Here are four simple methods to improve employee motivation and morale without straining your firm’s finances.

## **Employees’ Work Matters— Tell Them How**

It is hard to feel your work matters if you do not know how or why. Let employees know how their job fits with the firm’s overall goals and purpose.

Part of every new hire’s training should be a tour of the firm and introductions not just to immediate subordinates or supervisors, but also to associates and partners—at least the associates and partners the new hire will be working with. New hires should learn about the firm’s corporate culture, its mission statement, practice areas, key clients and cases and, most importantly, how the new hire’s job fits in with the firm’s purpose.

## **Build Employee Success Potential**

Staff cannot perform well in a vacuum. Legal administrators who fail to let staff, from legal secretaries to associates, know what is expected by assigning tasks without sufficient explanation are setting their employees up for failure. Nothing demoralizes staff faster.

Value employees by giving clearly stated tasks and objectives. If job duties and goals change, let employees involved know what the changes are and why they are necessary. Workers are remarkably accepting of change when they understand their necessity, and remarkably resistant when they do not.

When new tasks are given, make sure staff is on the same page. Just saying, “Finish the revisions on the complaint by 5 P.M.”

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does not mean an employee knows what is meant by “finished” (submitted for a partner’s review? Filing the complaint with the court?).

Don’t assume employees know what you expect. New employees may have held similar jobs at other firms, but each firm has its own expectations. Failing to give staff proper guidance is a demonstration of indifference. It is as if you were saying, “I can’t be bothered helping you out. If you figure it out, fine, if you don’t, in this job market, I can always hire someone else.”

When you truly value your people, you will ensure that they have the tools, training, and sufficient time to accomplish their tasks and meet firm goals. Check with staff to make sure they are on track. If they are not, it is your responsibility to work with them or with the supervising partner so they have what they need to successfully do their job.

#### **Give Appreciative Feedback**

Far too often, the only time employees know anyone is paying attention to them is when they have done something wrong. Psychology has long proven that people respond far better to positive feedback than to negative. When you consistently let employees know what they are doing right, you accomplish several goals:

- you keep employees on the right track since they are likely to repeat behaviors they have been praised for;
- you increase employees’ sense of competence, which in turn, leads to their increased competence on the job; and
- you reinforce their pride in contributing to the success of the firm.

Consider giving frequent, specific and targeted feedback on work done right. Point out the value of what the employee has accomplished and how the employee’s effort contributes to the project, case or firm’s success.

The key to effective appreciative feedback is that it must be immediate as well as specific and sincere. For example, “The way you summarized the Smith deposition was very concise, very helpful. Thank you.” Such specificity lets the employee know what is valued and why. Appreciative feedback is not something to be

put on your monthly calendar (“say something nice to John today”). Rather, “Thanks for getting the expedited transcripts out yesterday. I know you stayed late to do so, and I appreciate it” demonstrates your appreciation and is therefore more effective than, “You’re doing a good job,” said two weeks after the fact and prompted by nothing in particular other than remembering, “Oh,

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yeah, I need to appreciate staff.” Whenever a piece of work is properly done or a valiant effort is made, appreciation should be quickly forthcoming.

Personal expressions, such as “You’re such a nice worker” are not effective. Personal expressions do not address what was appreciated or of value in the work, and thus are often embarrassing to the employee. They are not appropriate in the workplace. It may take you more effort to think of a specific comment, but saying “Thank you for helping Sarah get the Brown matter out on time,” is far more appropriate and motivating than saying “You’re such a nice employee.”

#### **Take On Poor Performance With Appreciation**

Obviously, employees do not always perform well. Poor performance or productivity must be addressed. Responding with “This work is terrible, do it again,” or “Can’t you do anything right?” devalues the employee who will respond with an equally devalued or defensive response. Devaluing comments contribute nothing to the employee’s morale or motivation.

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Instead of jumping in with negatives, think about the employee's value, whatever you can genuinely and legitimately value, and start with that. For example,

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in dealing with a secretary who is consistently late for work, begin by saying: "You've been showing a lot of progress lately. I really appreciate the effort you've been making, especially in learning the new software." Only then do you address the area that is not working, "Now, let's take a look at your time management. It's not where it needs to be yet. Let's talk about it."

When you start by appreciating and valuing what employees are doing right, they are much more able to listen appreciatively to your corrections and act on them.

Problems are much more difficult to solve when management or attorneys blame or get angry with staff—they are, again, devaluing behaviors. These

actions create resistance to problem solving. If you have just called an employee "stupid," how can you expect the employee to value your next request? Like attracts like. Partners can be particularly guilty of making things personal.

Asking "What do you need here?" "How can I help?" "Tell me how you see what's going on?" are all more effective than "Why can't you get it done?" Ask "what, where, when and how" questions rather than "why" questions. Asking why tends to put people on the spot, and once again, creates resistance. Some partners may have difficulty adopting the "what, where, when, and how" approach. However, suggest that they make the effort. It could mean a change in a negative employee's behavior. When it comes to associates, it could have a positive impact on the firm's future partners.

Legal administrators have the ability to improve employee morale and motivation within a firm by simply incorporating an appreciation philosophy into the workplace. Partners must also buy into the idea. While the appreciation concept may be easy to grasp, consistently implementing practical, specific appreciation and valuing techniques is the key to its success.

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