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Accentuate the positive - it works

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Since it's a truism that people respond best to positive feedback, why does our culture focus on criticism and negativity when assessing performance?

Perhaps it's the way we live. A cursory glance at the stuff that passes for entertainment - sitcoms and dramas, both real and fictional - and you'll see someone always pushing someone else's buttons. In our life stories, achievement is about elbowing other people aside. Conflict is the way to get what you want.

Trouble is, always hearing what you're doing wrong is unlikely to improve your performance.

Getting better at your work has much more to do with recognition because, says training and development coach Stephen Goldberg, every human being needs it.

That's because there are three centres of intelligence: the head, dealing with mental faculties; the heart, that perceives the world through the filter of emotional intelligence; and the gut, that filters through gut instinct.

"We tend to focus a lot on the logical brain and strategies," Goldberg said, which is why concern with the bottom line and treating employees as commodities seems to be the way many companies operate.

But, Goldberg, whose company Optimus Performance trains in the areas of leadership and team development, points out, "everyone has a heart and needs to be touched and told what they're doing well."

As it turns out, not only is this something every leader can learn to do, it's probably the biggest motivator for any employee.

There are, however, ways of recognizing employee performance that will bring optimum results. When you recognize properly, you offer positive rewards for good performance and can even give negative feedback with good results.

"Negative feedback is a form of training," Goldberg said, "but it should be done in a certain way so it's not taken as criticism but as a learning tool."

How to do this? First, you've got to know the difference between positive recognition and negative feedback, he said.

"It's like a bank account. When you give someone positive recognition, you're making a deposit into their emotional bank account. When you're giving negative feedback, you're withdrawing it. If we're aware of that, we can make an effort to balance the two."

For instance, someone who delivers a project on time and below budget warrants recognition. A good way to give feedback is to look at the person and note the qualities they used to produce those results.

"Talk about how you didn't let obstacles stand in your way, how you got others to help solve any problems you had," Goldberg said. "You can do that in public to really reinforce the qualities the person exhibited."

When you recognize someone's qualities, it touches them, he said. They can see how they used their own strengths, and will become more confident. "That's very, very powerful."

Another approach is needed, however, when you're giving negative feedback.

"In this situation, we do the opposite," he said. "Rather than looking at what the person did to screw up, we focus on the result. We point out what didn't happen and then say, 'Let's figure out why and let's make a plan to correct it and not let it happen again.' "

Often, this involves making an agreement with the person to correct things for the future. It might also include what the leader, manager or team member needs to do for that person. Because, in fact, recognition needn't come just from a leader, Goldberg said.

"People who work well in a team are able to grow to a point where team members can give recognition and negative feedback," he said. "Evolved teams have a strong sense of purpose, and when someone is not carrying the load, any member of the team can step in and remind the person about their place in the team."

In order to do this, of course, team members need to be confident and to trust each other. Which is what positive feedback boils down to in the end, Goldberg points out.

"To give positive recognition is the best method to recognize the qualities that the person used to produce the work that deserves recognition. In order to be positive rather than negative and to look for the good in others requires a certain amount of self esteem and self confidence."

It takes confidence to actually help others to grow with confidence.

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