

The Forgotten 90%—Motivating Your Steady Eddies

The Leader’s Role in Creating a Caring Culture

Note: What follows is a highlight summary of the workshop, "The Forgotten 90%—Motivating Your Steady Eddies," presented by Rosalind (Roz) Jeffries and Gina Guaraldi at the Treasury Executive Institute, February 26, 2004.

The Accidental Manager

“Most of us don’t graduate from college with the specific goal of becoming a manager,” Roz Jeffries told her audience. “More often than not, it just happens.” And it typically happens, Roz continued, because we are technically competent – not because we are particularly good at dealing with people. Unfortunately, the skills that are required to effectively manage people do not automatically convey with the title of manager. And of these skills, *recognition* – the ability to make employees feel valued for their contributions – is one of the most critical in fostering a loyal and productive workforce. Fortunately, it is a skill that can be learned – but first it must be taught.

Steady Eddies: Who They Are and Why They Matter

Most organizations have some type of formal recognition "program," but these activities generally acknowledge the contributions of only the top producers, the 5% who are the “super stars” of the organization. The 90% of the workforce who come to work every day and “just do their job” typically go unnoticed. But it is this group of workers – the “Steady Eddies,” as Roz calls them – that is critical to the stability of an organization, and where the greatest opportunity for increased productivity lies.

Who are these Steady Eddies? They are the employees who come to work on time – and go home on time; who focus on getting the work done – not on internal politics; who have been with the organization long enough to know and appreciate its history, and in their jobs long enough to know every obscure detail of them. They are the competent, seasoned performers who provide stability during times of change or turmoil – and who are often invisible to leaders who are blinded by the brilliance of their super stars.

“Steady Eddies are frequently every bit as intelligent and competent as your Super Stars,” Gina told the participants. “They are simply motivated by a different set of values.” Steady Eddies are less likely to be interested in being in the limelight or climbing the corporate ladder. Instead, they are more likely to be focused on maintaining a good balance between home and work-life, to enjoy the camaraderie of their immediate work group, and to believe that doing their current job well is more satisfying than worrying about where it will take them within the organization.

So what can you praise about Steady Eddies who “just do their jobs?” The Treasury executives, themselves, provided the answer. When asked about the most valuable contribution their Steady Eddies provide to their organization, these leaders consistently came up with the same answers: They do most of the work; they are accurate, reliable and dependable; they understand the workings of the organization and their jobs; and, they make sure the customer’s needs are met. In other words, “just” doing their job is reason enough to praise them.

Manager Training: The Key to a Caring Culture

“The problem with seeing recognition as only a program,” Roz explained, “is not only that it just impacts a small portion of your workforce, but also that it shifts the responsibility of recognizing employees from the manager to the organization. But it’s only the *manager* who can provide that day-to-day recognition that makes employees want to go the extra mile. Impersonal corporate programs simply can’t do that.”

To illustrate this point, Roz asked participants to think of the best boss they ever had – the one they would go the extra *five* miles for without complaint. The answers, such as those listed below, were revealing--and typical of what employees at all levels will tell you.

- They involved me in decision making processes
- They really listened to me and valued my opinions
- They gave me “stretch” assignments
- They said, “Thank You!”

“Not one of these things costs money,” Roz pointed out. “Not one of them is out of your control as a manager. And none of them can be done by a program--because all of them require caring managers who understand what is important to each of their employees.”

The problem is that managers frequently don’t know where to begin with their recognition efforts. Roz explained that she has asked thousands of managers what they want to know most about recognition; the answers typically fall into four categories:

- ***Whom*** should you recognize?
- ***What*** deserves recognition?
- ***When*** should you recognize someone?
- ***How*** do you know what to do?

With the question of “Who” already answered, Roz proceeded to demonstrate how she teaches managers to find answers to the other three questions. In a nutshell: ask your employees! By using Roz’ technique of asking individual employees what deserves recognition and how they want to be recognized, managers not only find the answers they seek--they also create buy-in among their employees.

Getting Ready for the Future

“Recognition is not just a nice thing to do,” Roz concluded. “It’s a key management competency that will become more critical in the coming years as projected labor shortages continue to accelerate. Even Steady Eddies have their limits, and if they are not recognized for their day-to-day contributions, they will go somewhere they are made to feel valued. It is an organization’s *managers* who are responsible for providing that day-to-day recognition. But it is an organization’s *leaders* who are responsible for making sure the managers have the skills and training they need to be able to do so.”

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