

Incentives and the Art of Changing Behavior

If you want people to take on new roles, or act differently, it helps if you reward the new behavior. Here's how three companies reward the employees who made change work.

By Sarah Fister Gale

For many well-meaning managers, getting employees to change their behavior is a frustrating, challenging, confounding task. Employees often don't see the value of performing their jobs differently or taking on new roles, or they don't trust the reasons for change in the first place, says Chris Butler, president of The Performance Engineering Group. "If they don't support the change, they won't alter their behavior and the project can't succeed."

Whether it's getting people to use a new software system or changing the company's approach to knowledge-sharing, employees want to see immediate and obvious personal payoffs before embracing a new system. The quickest way to make that link is to tie a reward and recognition program to the appropriate performance. "Adults are like children. If you reward the behavior you want to see, it will get repeated," says Diane Alessi, director of training development at the American Bankers Association in Washington, D.C. For maximum benefit, the reward and the acknowledgment have to be immediate and public, she says. "By recognizing employees in front of their peers, it not only reinforces the behavior in the individuals, it telegraphs to everyone around them that this is the conduct you expect and value."

It can be a casual approach, in which managers make a point of praising those who perform the new behaviors, or a formal incentive program that rewards employees with gifts every time they perform a new task. The important thing is to send the message to everyone that they will benefit from supporting the change initiative, Butler says.

To most effectively use reward and recognition to support a change initiative, define the new behaviors in as much detail as possible, Alessi says. For example, you can't just say that service reps should be friendlier to customers. You have to identify the characteristics of that behavior, such as greeting customers warmly, asking if they have any other concerns, or addressing them by name. Once you know what the behavior looks like, translate it in detail to employees and then reward them on the spot for doing it, she says.

"Employees need clarity about what's expected of them," says Julie Bacon, vice president of marketing at Bravanta, an incentive and recognition company in San Francisco. But they also need incentives to get started. If employees know they will receive something of value when they perform a new task, they will become personally invested in the initiative. "The rewards and recognition program gets people motivated," she says.

"Once they incorporate the new behavior into their routine, they will begin to see the intrinsic value of the change," says Cindy Hubert, director of knowledge management and connected learning for the American Productivity and Quality Center in Houston. "Eventually the tangible reward becomes less important and the new behavior becomes inherent to their job performance."

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The biggest mistake managers make is rewarding the wrong behavior. They focus all of their attention on those who won't change, and ignore those who do," Butler says. "That sends the message to employees that you don't value the change, and it can cripple your project."

Butler creates computer-based training courses called QuickLearns, which include short videos of experts performing specific tasks. He was hired to videotape a group of test technicians at an aerospace company performing production-line tasks, but they refused, fearing that the training would deprive them of their job security, and even threatening to bring in a union lawyer.

Later, when Butler found a night-shift technician who agreed to do the video, he made a point of presenting him with a \$100 gift certificate in front of his peers, and asked the technician's supervisor to do the same. When the original techs saw the payoff, they realized that their negative behavior had backfired, Butler says. And now, as the company considers layoffs, they have new reason to fear for their jobs. "They saw that a willingness to cooperate and share knowledge was valued and rewarded. It's a lesson they won't soon forget."

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