
BEING AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE

The Ultimate Union-Free Strategy (Part 2 of 2)

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Positive Employee Relations is designed to create the type of organizational culture that meets employee needs to the extent that *unions are not inevitable*. Modifying the customer satisfaction paradigm so that we think and behave as though employees are internal customers fits the Positive Employee Relations model perfectly.

In order to treat employees as customers, internal marketing must be included as a core component of your human resource strategy. And this applies to all stages of an employee's experience with your company.

This means that when recruiting new candidates, we must conduct employment interviews with importance, not just as an interruption in the day's normal events. Be on time. Hold interviews in a private office. Take a "professional" position rather than a "power" stance. Ask good, open-ended, and insightful questions to determine how each candidate thinks, makes decisions, and communicates with others. Be an active listener.

The "interview to job offer" ratio is high for an "employer of choice" because a good employer works harder to find people who fit the company culture. Know-how skills are very important, but being aligned with the organization's values is even more important.

If Positive Employee Relations is a company value, then employees who have a propensity to have *others solve their workplace problems* for them will not be aligned with the company's values. At best, this a turnover statistic just waiting to happen; at worst, it could be an employee who will never be satisfied and who will not voluntarily leave the

organization for more suitable employment.

Being hired by an "employer of choice" should be a privilege, not a piece of cake; the successful candidate should feel valued by being chosen. By contrast, an employee who lands a job because he's seen as a "warm body" is hardly going to feel privileged to work for the organization.

Orientation and Training

You want to assure your newly hired "internal customers" that they made the correct decision by joining your organization. So, tell them about the benefits of working for your organization.

Too often the word "benefits" is limited to insurance-sponsored benefits. Not so. Benefits coalesce around the job and the responsibility, authority, and accountability equation that goes along with it.

Newly hired employees want to know that they have been hired because of their competencies, their experience, their ability to think clearly, and their ability to make good decisions. No one wants to be just another payroll number on the time sheet.

Ask yourself how often external customers receive information about your organization's products and services? The likely answer is: as regularly as is feasible.

If your business wants to be seen as creative, innovative, and customer-focused, it will likely develop a strategy of "orientation" for its customers to inform them of new products/services. This could, for example, take the form of a newsletter, luncheon meetings, sports events, a helpful website, or a series of breakfast meetings.

Using a similar line of thinking, how often do we re-orient our internal customers? Once in an employee's tenure is arguably not

enough. For example, if the average length of service is four years, ask yourself, "Is the organization the same today as it was four years ago?" Is the culture the same? Has technology changed the workplace? Are there new and significant customers? Has the ethnic diversity in the workplace changed?

In all likelihood, much has changed, either deliberately or through a process of evolution. Hence, there is ample and meaningful subject matter to share with your internal customers. *The goal of reorientation is to update and refocus employee perspectives.*

If management does not take full advantage of these positive opportunities to influence our employees, no one will. Please remember, management wins union campaigns on its history, not on its promises. Reorientation is an example of "making history".

Communication

The most effective way to communicate is face-to-face. All other communication methods are of secondary value when compared to the opportunities for clarity, listening, and intuition that are made available during one-on-one communication. Though the most effective, it is also the most time-consuming, and therefore is the most costly.

For this reason, and because most front-line supervisors are not adequately trained as communicators, the face-to-face approach is left for a few critical events—the hiring interview, performance feedback, discipline, and termination interviews.

The least effective way of communicating with employees is in writing. Some employees don't read well, some read very selectively, and others complain that the writing style lacks clarity

or enthusiasm, or is just too wordy. Whatever the reason, just watch how many pay envelope inserts get thrown in the trash in the mad rush to see the amount of the paycheck.

So what is the effective way to communicate? Unfortunately, there is no simple answer. It depends on the sender and the receiver.

For example, in an advanced technology workplace (where the average education level is likely at a university or college level), a computer-driven overhead presentation might work well. In a multi-branch/site organization, electronic communications may achieve some results, whereas in a factory located in a multicultural metropolitan city, translators may be needed because of an illiteracy factor and/or because English may not be the first language of many employees.

The correct communication method may also depend on the topic being communicated.

Promotion about the company picnic is very different from that of an individual's retirement plans and financial options. When the topic is simple and straightforward (for example, the date and location of a company golf game) and the employees' comprehension level is high, then a complex communications strategy is not required.

If, however, the organization wishes to communicate information about its Positive Employee Relations program and the benefits to employees of the one-to-one relationship it has with the leadership group, a simple poster or short article in the newsletter *will not do*. Considerable time is needed to plan such a campaign, to clearly understand employee' perceptions about the job satisfaction-dissatisfaction platform, and to know which features and benefits should be highlighted. *Never lose sight of the principle that face-to-face communication is the most credible and influential vehicle available to leaders.*

A thought about the word "campaign". If it conjures up a beginning, and end and a lot of hype, I suggest you have the wrong picture. What I am referring to is an approach to communication that springs from your values about employees. *This "first class" communication should be ongoing, and should reflect the level of importance or esteem with which you view your employees.*

The Role of Recognition

Most people, regardless of job responsibilities, work for two fundamental reasons.

First, to earn the financial resources to ensure that their basic, psychological, and, to some degree, social needs are satisfied and secured.

Second, people work to achieve their higher-level needs of self-esteem (or self-worth) and self-actualization (or creativity at the core of their being - currently referred to as one's spirituality). It is too often the case that people cannot satisfy these needs at the workplace because their job has little inherent depth or substance. So, they seek to satisfy these needs outside the workplace and we, as employers, miss a significant opportunity.

Just think about all the creative talent that leaves the workplace at the end of the day: craftspeople, writers, computer wizards, artists, volunteers, musicians, politicians, Olympic-class athletes—the list goes on.

Ask employees to think smarter, harder. People who experience their supervisor as one who challenges their thinking, innovation and creativity are more likely to build a quality or professional relationship than with those who see their leader as a task master.

Further, recognize and reward the results and the efforts of employees who put their *brains* to work for the organization. Nothing does more to satisfy employees' self-esteem and self-actualization needs than genuine and deserved

recognition of the work they perform.

Countless Human Resource research projects have confirmed that one of the most frequent employee complaints is that their efforts are not recognized by their employer.

Although supervisors/managers often say that their most valuable resources are their human resources, they don't always behave in ways that make employees feel truly appreciated. Unfortunately, it is quite common to criticize employees when things go wrong, and far less common to acknowledge their successes in a formal way. *Only you, as a leader, have the authority (and arguably the responsibility) to recognize employee achievement. Don't let such an opportunity slip by.*

Principles of Recognition

An effective recognition program will reward employees for behaviour and performance that is consistent with the organization's values and goals. Leadership and employees know that if something is not formally rewarded, it is not a priority.

Companies that run recognition programs consisting entirely of long term service awards are sending a clear message that seniority is the greatest achievement an employee can attain. Surely there are better ways to maximize employee contribution than using a tactic so critical to the union movement. Seniority forms a core value for unions, and this is why the trade union movement handles seniority-related recognition better than most employers do.

Employees who have experienced that their contributions lead to rewards become productive and stay productive because the rewards meet their expectations for higher-level needs such as self-esteem.

As a result, organizations develop the capacity to attract, retain, and encourage a motivated work force. *Values-based recognition encourages people to*

become excited about their workplace and the work they do.

Guidelines for a Recognition Program

When designing your own recognition program, consider the following 10 guidelines as a useful starting point.

1. Rewards must be clearly tied to values and objectives.

Leaders often assume that employees intuitively know what is expected of them. But specific behaviours must be encouraged by positive consequences. We must work at increasing the behaviours that will help us achieve core organizational beliefs and goals.

2. Goals and rewards must be well understood and publicized.

All employees need to know exactly what they must do to achieve recognition. Goals should be as specific and measurable as possible. Providing information to employees on how well they are progressing towards goals keeps communication lines open and motivation and enthusiasm high.

If employees know how much farther they have to go to achieve a goal, they will be much more likely to get there. *A recognition program will only be as important to the employees as it is to the leaders who sponsor it.* If leaders are lax in commitment, promotion and enthusiasm, the employees will care less too.

3. Rewards must be perceived as fair.

If employees believe that only those personally favoured by leaders will be rewarded, the recognition program will have a *negative impact* on morale. Steps to reducing charges of favouritism may include setting measurable objectives or performance goals and seeking peer input into nominations for recognition.

4. Goals must be realistic.

Competition between individuals or departments can lead to a reduction of team spirit

and even lead to sabotage of one another's efforts. An organization's beliefs and goals should not become the victims of competition.

Cooperation and collaboration, rather than competition, are Positive Employee Relations values. It is preferable to structure rewards so that criteria are based on reaching a measurable objective rather than on merely being better than others. In this way all strong contributors will be rewarded rather than the individual who had the best performance.

5. The cost of the award is less important than the prestige associated with winning it.

A Recognition Program is in place to address employees' self-esteem needs, whereas the paycheque is there to take care of monetary needs.

Public acknowledgment is very powerful; it makes people feel good about themselves. An article and/or picture in the organization's newsletter or the community newspaper lets employees bask in the glow of the spotlight—something they may not experience very often.

Similarly, a plaque or gift is a symbolic representation that serves as an ongoing reminder of things done right. Team clothing, watches, or mugs can be displayed with pride to improve feelings of belonging. Lunches or dinners can make the employees feel special and important. Giving cash is nice, but the effect usually lasts only as long as the money does.

6. Just as with food, presentation makes a difference.

Management creates the symbolic worth of a reward through the manner in which it is presented. By carefully structuring who presents the reward and when and how it is presented, leaders invest the award with a worth that is many times its

financial value.

It is essential that the presenters clearly cite the accomplishment and sincerely express appreciation. And the higher the status of the presenter, the more impressive the presentation. Thus, senior executives will often present the most significant rewards.

Whenever possible, award presentations should be made in the presence of all the employees. The symbolic significance is greatly enhanced by the presence of others, and the effects on employee attitudes are much more profound as a result.

7. Rewards should be customized whenever possible.

What works for one organization or one department may not work for another. While it is certainly easier to have a standard list of rewards to be distributed when necessary, it doesn't take a lot of extra time to match the rewards to the people who are receiving them.

For example, one group may wish to have team hats emblazoned with the company logo while another group may greatly prefer t-shirts or coffee mugs. One person may wish to have an extra vacation day, while the next might prefer lunch with his or her partner. Making a contribution to an employee's favourite charity is another option.

8. Give rewards as soon as possible after the goal is reached.

One reason that wages make a poor primary reinforcer is because employees find it so difficult to connect the money to the actual effort. A paycheque does not increase proportionately from one week to the next, even though an employee has gone to the effort of putting in that extra mile.

Some recognition programs fail because by the time the rewards are given out; people can barely remember the work they did to earn it. It is like telling a student to

do an onerous homework assignment because it will really pay off one day.

As a rule, we humans have a hard time stretching ourselves today for a benefit that seems far in the future. Therefore, distributing rewards on an annual basis will almost certainly ensure failure. Of course, in some cases circumstances make it impossible to give awards immediately, but the sooner they are given, the more influential they will be.

9. Recognition Programs need periodic adjustments.

It is reasonable to expect goals to change when circumstances change. Reviewing the program every six months to a year allows leaders to keep goals challenging yet realistic.

If too few or too many employees are achieving goals, change is in order. Also, some components may have to be re-addressed or dropped if they are not working as well as planned, while new components may be integrated depending on employee feedback.

Periodic evaluations keep any program fresh and exciting to employees.

10. Employee input on the design and maintenance of the Program is essential.

Recognition is for the employees—so who better to help make it work? Management can never be truly confident about what employees find rewarding unless they ask. Additionally, employee involvement will make the entire employee population much more tolerant of the inevitable glitches in the system.

Internal Marketing Guidelines

When preparing for an internal marketing or internal public relations program, apply the same standards that you would if your organization were communicating with external customers or shareholders.

Selling, marketing and public relations skills, both visual and verbal, are unfortunately not skills

that all Human Resource professionals possess. So, if required, contract an employee communications specialist to plan and implement your program. Part of this specialist's mandate, however, should be to train an in-house resource person who can carry on with the project.

The following is a brief list of guidelines:

- We are bombarded every day with media messages from television, radio, the internet, newspapers, magazines, and books. Your messages and the media used to convey them should appeal to your specific employee audience. *Treat them as adults* by not talking up or down to them.
- Professionalism is needed at all times. You, as an employer, *are* your message. What you say, the positions you take, and how you package the message talk to and about your organization's values.
- Always assume that others will know about your internal marketing programs. This could reasonably include the employee's family and friends, the community press, or a union wishing to organize your employees.
- Touch the employee's life. Encouraging and supporting the employee's desire for a better lifestyle (e.g. career, self-development, or special volunteer opportunities) is frequently more meaningful than extensive financial data about the company.

The nature of business is survival and growth. These goals are achieved through good fiscal management of resources, especially profit. Profit, however, is the end result of having sound business systems and practices, and these business systems and practices have been and will continue to be developed and updated by your leadership and employee groups. Never lose sight of their value and importance to the organization.

Your internal marketing program will rise or fall on the success of reinforcing this message. *People make profit, and profit is a measure of how well your employees create and maintain good systems and excellent relations.*

Opportunities for Internal Marketing

Consider adapting any of the following ideas to create internal marketing opportunities that support your organization's unique values and guiding behaviours.

Concentrate on finding opportunities to make employees aware of how the benefits of working for your company affect them personally. One of the goals of marketing is to make the *invisible* visible.

Enhancing the Job

Over time, especially during the re-engineered 1990's, job content has moved to a lower common denominator. On average, jobs now have less responsibility, more automation, and an expectation that employees will work harder and put in longer hours than they have in the past.

Arguments to support downsizing, such as globalization or a profit crunch, speak to the need for fewer people to do more work. As a strategy, downsizing has certainly not met all of its expected goals, even to the point that many managers rationalize the process and refer to it today as "rightsizing".

The net effect is that many employees (and many of their leaders) must now focus on *fast work* versus *smart work*; *conformity* versus *creativity*; and *doing what it takes to get it done* versus an *appropriate life and work balance*. Their "real" jobs have had the decision-making component reduced and, in some cases, eliminated.

The narrower the job responsibilities, the less employees can actually take from their jobs. That is, if the true motivators are responsibility,

achievement, self-development, and growth in one's field, *how can one derive these self-motivators from a job that does not inherently contain these elements?*

So, the best vehicle for motivation *is the job!* The more diverse, the more thought provoking and the more decision making needed to do the job, the more the employee can take from the job.

When leaders think about job design in this manner, they quickly realize that this is a win-win solution. *Employees will commit more attention to their work because their work is worthy of the attention.* Therefore, link recognition to the organization's values and what employees accomplish while satisfying their needs for "real" responsibility, achievement, and self-development.

Please note that the remaining internal marketing suggestions focus on the environment in which the work is being performed; that is, the "hygiene". When this is considered to be important (and we should take every marketing opportunity we have), the real winner is the job content.

What is Your Job Worth?

Using your payroll system or payroll supplier, you can create a document demonstrating the actual value of an employee's job. It should show the value of the employee's salary when the cost of benefits has been included.

For example, a salary of \$10 per hour is likely to show up as \$13 per hour if the organization is paying for benefits at the rate of 30 percent on each payroll dollar. Benefits in this context include those provided by insurance premiums, vacation plans, recreational and social activities, education assistance, and a subsidized cafeteria, to name a few. The cost of benefits is the direct cost to the employer shown as a percentage of payroll dollars.

Benefits can include the following:

FINANCIAL

- Regular earnings
- Overtime earnings
- Vacation pay
- Allowances (e.g. call-in pay)
- Automobile lease or allowance
- Relocation expenses
- Profit sharing, stock or cash bonuses
- Bereavement paid leave
- Stock purchase or savings plans
- Pension plan or RRSP contribution
- Jury duty leave

INSURANCE-RELATED

- Medical insurance
- Dental insurance
- Social insurance tax on wages and salaries

HEALTH-RELATED

- Accident/illness benefits
- Employee assistance programs
- Health/fitness programs
- Medical facilities
- Grief counselling

EDUCATIONAL

- Scholarships for employees' children
- Matching donations to major colleges and universities
- Cost of tuition refund program

SOCIAL

- Club memberships
- Lunch and coffee breaks
- Social and recreational programs

RECOGNITION

- Suggestion awards
- Recognition program
- Service awards

WORK-RELATED

- Cost of premium on Workers' Compensation
- Cost of safety equipment
- Shift premiums
- Paid parking
- Food services

Benefit Payout

Your employee benefits provider can provide the cost of benefits paid out over any period you select. This information is not normally shared with employees, and this creates a missed

opportunity to educate and inform employees about the "benefits of the benefit".

For example, if the long term disability and weekly indemnity payout amount to a significant number, you can communicate this type of job security (or job protection) and the value of the payout as another example of your Positive Employee Relations program. This link between premiums and paid out benefits can apply to any type of benefit program (for example, dental or medical).

An employee newsletter is an appropriate medium to convey the information, but it should be communicated *without identifying* the recipients of the benefits, in order to protect their privacy.

Life-long Learning

A similar opportunity exists to market the benefits of the company's educational assistance program. For example, if the organization co-sponsors employees who further their skills, competencies, or general level of academic education, this can be expressed as the number of educational hours or credits earned by the employees, and as the number of dollars spent by the employees and the company.

If the organization supports 100 percent of further education, the message is even stronger. This also applies to scholarship programs for the children of employees.

Volunteerism

Another internal marketing idea is to discuss the volunteer contributions supported by the organization. This might include financial support to local charities, and the number of company-paid "work hours" employees have spent in charitable and civic events.

Another variation on this message is the number of retired or disadvantaged individuals the organization has provided with employment opportunities, or the amount of support given to these

individuals who, in turn, give time back to the community.

Social and Recreational Activities

Communication about specific activities (for example, the annual picnic, or the children's holiday party) is frequently the employer's responsibility; however, the marketing of these events is generally lacklustre. Why not recognize the individuals who devoted hours to plan and organize these events?

The organization likely spends more on the holiday party than on all other social events within the year. If we do not share information about the financial support the organization provides with our employees, no one will. This approach to internal

marketing can apply to all recreational and social events.

Internal Marketing – What is at Stake?

I'm recommending a high standard. It's part of a long-term solution, not an expedient short-term quick fix. But look at how much is at stake:

- your reputation as an employer
- your ability to hire and retain good (and perhaps even the best) employees
- your success in convincing your employees that you—not a trade union—have their best interests at heart
- your ability to build a track record of Positive Employee Relations, which could be the

only winning factor in the event of a union campaign.

In closing, I would like to refer to an idea expressed in the Introduction to Part 1 of this article. To remain union-free means that the employee stakeholder group has voted, or expressed their support, for management and not against management. This positive affirmation for management's behaviour and the manner in which it has understood and addressed dissatisfaction in the workplace is the foundation for becoming an "employer of choice".