Are Your Recognition Programs Stale or Stellar?
Here are Some Ideas to Enhance Your Employee Engagement Initiatives that Will Reach Out to Today's Employees.

I received a note on LinkedIn the other day from an HR professional that had heard me speak about Employee Engagement on a HR.com webinar event. She felt that her company's current recognition programs were "stale" and she was intrigued with some of the ideas I shared about new ways of relating to younger employees. I explained that there are several reasons why corporate recognition programs can become stale and made a few suggestions on enhancements to make them more intriguing and increase perceived value.

There are three main reasons why HR people are hearing that their existing recognition programs are going "stale":

1. Younger employees don't understand and prefer symbolic recognition like they used to (or so it appears). Surveys show that they all want cash, cash equivalents (gift cards) or things they can use (lifestyle awards). The problem, in my opinion, lack of trust and the nature of many surveys, leading employees to tell you what they think you want to hear. Add to that, nobody is going to admit that they earn enough money. Armed with this potentially erroneous survey data, companies add more retail stuff to recognition programs, then employees shop the value on Amazon, Overstock, eBay, etc. and your intentions are then judged by the discount dollar value they find on line ... what a turn off! It's really a perception and training problem, not a value problem, and it's certainly not about money.

2. HR people are often reluctant to mess with established recognition and reward programs, because upper management thinks that everything is fine. "Don't rock the boat ... we have bigger fish to fry right now... ". This leads to the situation that I described in the webinar, a series of siloed, disjointed programs that are bleeding money, with no way to accurately measure their participation rates, effectiveness, ROI or value to the bottom line. Nobody wants to look like they're taking away employee benefits, but in today's economy, they certainly can't afford to fund programs that don't show returns.

3. We have moved from the Industrial Age to the Information Age, so there are fewer workers doing the kind of labor that warrants and responds to the old Carrot and Stick approaches. Gen Y workers will soon make up half of the workforce and they are driven by a different work ethic and are often motivated by very different things than their older coworkers; environmental concerns, teamwork and fairness, workplace flexibility, giving back, etc. They also want more regular and meaningful forms of recognition that share their personal values. Most of these new motivators and not included in traditional recognition programs and not well understood by older managers.

So how do you go from "stale" to "stellar" and reenergize your company's recognition, employee engagement and performance management programs? We suggest a three step approach:

Step 1 – Evaluation and Recommendations

Take an inventory of your current recognition and incentive programs. We suggest you organize a committee for this and make sure it includes members from multiple generations. It's also a good idea to do a quality Employee Engagement Survey to rate the morale and attitudes of your people. This exercise will help you take the pulse of your organization, but also learn how many disjointed ways the money is trickling out the door, identify gaps, and see areas of overlap, weakness, entitlement and just plain waste.

Step 2 – Supervisor and Employee Training

Because of the importance of employee perception in regards to program results and ROI, it's important that manager training is used during program transitions to help improve communications, energize managers, engage employees, and set the stage for a more strategic approach to recognition. The types and amount of training will depend on the size, structure, current levels of employee engagement and your company culture.

Skipping this important step can lead to lower initial enthusiasm, misunderstanding of program goals, lack of trust and insufficient participation. Any of these will cost you some money, but more importantly could lead to the total failure of the program to gain traction and yield the financial benefits you have in mind.

Step 3 – Recognition Solutions

At Schaefer Recognition Group we use the term Umbrella Recognition Solution to describe a goal of orchestrating all of the ways you reach out to employees within a single, comprehensive strategy that supports your organizations Mission, Values, Goals and Growth Objectives. This can include all forms of Communications, Training, Recognition, Employee Engagement and Performance Management.

The goal is to simplify your approach, engage all stakeholders and be seen as relevant to the current market conditions and your organizations impact on your industry, the community and the world around you (that will appeal to your growing base of Gen Y employees). If you do this right, you will minimize costs, optimize results, turn current expenses into profits and be able to share the good news with your CFO!

Once you decide to consider a more comprehensive and creative approach to employee recognition, you will want to look at a wide range of awards and rewards that will hit all of your necessary price points and appeal to your specific employee base. You'll want to think about including awards that are up to date, fresh, unique, flexible and relatable to your audience. Once you get people engaged in the process, they must be able to win stuff that they really want, wouldn't normally buy for themselves and be able to earn these awards with improved behaviors over a realistic period of time.

We are beginning to see a resurgence of custom awards, due to the increasing shoppability of retail items. One reward option that is becoming popular and is expected to see significant of growth in the future is custom travel and unique personal experiences. Travel and Experiences resonate with a younger workforce, as well as older workers who are looking to travel, see unique places and do things that are a bit out of the norm.

Properly combining custom awards with traditionally valued recognition items, some new and unique award and reward ideas and low or no cost Peer to Peer options, will allow you to engage that elusive 60% middle group of employees that will help make your program pay for itself. A well designed, properly developed, well launched and effectively monitored program will realize maximum Discretionary Effort and the productivity, savings and profit that goes with it. Recognition done right will help you optimize your most important asset – people!

To learn more about Awards, Rewards and the best ways to use them to optimize our investments in your people visit **http://www.SchaeferRecogntionGroup.com** or email me personally at **john@SchaeferRecognitionGroup.com**.

John Schaefer is a Consultant with more than 20 years of experience helping companies realize and react to what he calls the *Employer/Employee Disconnect*. "Your people have the capacity and desire to become far more involved and productive than they are today. The resources required are freely available, if you simply choose to use them," says Schaefer.   "The key is to get your managers and supervisors to embrace this challenge by seeing what's financially in it for them." John is the author of the book *Get More Productivity for Less Money … Your Employees will Love You for It!* as well as *The Vocational Shrink The Game* and Manager Training Program *"Why Should Supervisors Care*?" which gets to the bottom of what they're *really* thinking, "what's in it for me?"
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