

# Measuring the Impact of Recognition

By Bob Nelson, Ph.D.

An old management maxim says, “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.” Recognition is no exception. Justifying the time, effort, and expense of any recognition program means demonstrating its impact, which requires that you be able to determine a baseline and any change—hopefully improvement—in that baseline.

Using Donald Kirkpatrick’s model\* for evaluating the impact of training (another “soft” behavioral discipline), we can identify four levels of measurement for recognition:

Level 1: Reaction. The first level of measurement is often obtained at the end of a training seminar or workshop simply by asking employees, “How did the training feel to you?” using a scale of 1 (didn’t like it) to 5 (thought it was excellent). With recognition, this measure often surfaces in employee attitude surveys. When morale is low, employees typically rank one or more of the following items very low:

- My manager recognizes me when I do good work.
- My manager makes time for me when I need to talk.
- My manager has discussed my future career aspirations with me.
- I feel appreciated for the work I do.
- I feel I’m a valuable member of the team/department.

Surveying attitudes can be a useful way to determine whether employee perceptions of the company are improving and a way to quantify the level of individual, group, and organizational morale.

Level 2: Learning. The second level of evaluation deals with what participants actually learned during the training session. Kirkpatrick defines learning as the “extent to which participants change attitudes, improve knowledge, and/or increase skill as a result of attending the program.” It is typically easier to determine what new knowledge or skills participants acquired than it is to determine the ways in which the training changed their opinions, values, and beliefs. Tests are the most frequent method of evaluating learning.

As it applies to recognition, we can measure if certain skill or awareness levels have changed based on recognition training or the roll-out of one or more recognition programs. Managers can be asked (before and after recognition training) how important it is to recognize employees, how often they should do so, in what types of situations, and in what ways. In a seminar they can be taught guidelines for effective praising and be allowed to practice the skill with feedback from others. Other measurable recognition skills include knowing how to praise publicly, how to write a persuasive nomination for an employee award, and what forms of

recognition work well for different types of performance.

Managers need more than an academic understanding of the importance of recognition. They must have specific skills associated with effective recognition techniques and be comfortable using those skills. Tracking progress as managers acquire these skills can thus be a significant measurement for any organization.

Level 3: Behavior. The third level of measurement involves the impact of the training back on the job. Trainees can learn and demonstrate new skills and then never use those skills after they return to work. This form of evaluation can be time-consuming and costly, involving direct observation, follow-up interviews, and surveys—of participants as well as those with whom they work. It is somewhat easier if the measurement is established as part of the program (e.g., a tracking report), not as a separate activity to be done later.

For recognition, we can measure how frequently a manager recognizes his or her employees, perhaps by the increase in use of available recognition tools and programs. We can also track the number of employees who receive a written praising from managers, peers, or customers; the number of employees nominated for awards; the number of managers who make nominations; the number of formal awards given; and so on.

This data can be useful in examining variations over time by manager or department, by level in the organization, or by facility. Comparisons can be done of corporate offices versus field operations and among different regions, etc.

Level 4: Results. The fourth level of measurement focuses on the impact the activity has back on the job. In training, this could mean faster and better operations; fewer errors; or increased judgment on the job. For recognition, this could mean more of the behavior or performance the recognition was reinforcing, such as increased revenues or money-saving ideas, improved customer service, increased cross-departmental support, improved safety records, enhanced on-time delivery, better processes, and so on.

To the extent that each of these behaviors can be quantified in financial terms, it has even more viability as a significant indicator of organizational success.

Of course, it is usually the fourth level—results—that organizations most want to demonstrate to management. The more that recognition activities and programs can be geared toward driving significant organizational performance and strategic objectives, the easier it will be to make this connection.

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