

WHY LEADERS NEED TO PRAISE THE POSITIVE TO RETAIN STAFF

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One of the most important interruptions you can make in a staff member's day when you're a leader is to catch them doing the right thing and then praise them for it – as specifically as possible. Reinforcing positive behaviour is an often overlooked yet powerful leadership strategy, particularly at times of high stress and change. We all want to feel valued and appreciated and in difficult times, acknowledging someone's hard work can help galvanise them to persevere, repeat the good behaviour and find their second wind. It can also encourage others in the team to lift too. As John F Kennedy said in a 1963 speech, "A rising tide lifts all boats."

Yet at times of stress, leaders often spend more time addressing people problems, poor behaviour and performance issues. Not only because they tend to be more prevalent when people are under the pump, but because as humans we have a negative bias. We look for and see the negative far more quickly than the positive. Some leaders even hesitate to give praise, believing it's unnecessary to commend someone for simply doing their job. My response to that is simple: do you want people to do their best work for you or not? Because if you want your staff to be motivated to perform well, catching them doing the right thing and genuinely showing your appreciation is a simple, quick and free way to ensure that happens.

That doesn't mean you necessarily praise your people publicly. Some staff won't like that. This is where knowing your people pays off. Some may prefer to be told privately, others may like the public accolades. The key is to make your feedback specific, not generic. For example, if one of your staff handles an angry customer in an empathetic way that de-escalates conflict, despite the pressure of a busy day, don't simply say "Good job". Rather, go with something like this:

“*The way you used empathy to help that customer de-escalate was really impressive. Despite it being stressful today, you took the time to listen and build rapport, while also maintaining boundaries about how they could speak to you. Well done. That's exactly the sort of customer service I want to see.*”

You can clearly see the difference in these approaches. One is a platitude that could be construed as generic and condescending, the other demonstrates real appreciation and shows that their efforts have been noticed. Employees are more likely to walk away with a clear understanding of what good performance and behaviour looks like, empowering them to replicate it in the future.

On the flip side, if your people don't feel appreciated when they are under pressure, they may lose motivation and seek job opportunities elsewhere, contributing to high staff turnover in businesses.

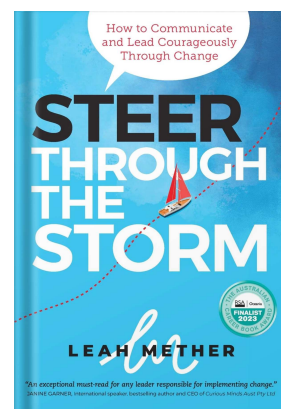
So how can you get better at catching people doing the right thing and telling them? Here are some tips:

- Gamify it: Challenge yourself to catch one person doing the right thing every day. Keep track of this in a notebook and set reminders in your phone. Once you start consciously looking for people doing great work, you'll be more likely to see it.
- Identify key behaviours: Focus on the specific behaviours you want to reward, whether it's excellent customer service or living the company's values. Look for these actions, not just high sales figures.
- Be specific: What is it about

the action your staff member took or the way they behaved that you considered "the right thing"? Make sure you explain it so they can repeat it.

- Involve your team. Encourage your leaders to recognise and appreciate outstanding work too. A culture of positive reinforcement benefits from everyone's participation.
- Choose your recognition method: Tailor your appreciation to individual preferences. It could be a one-on-one conversation in the moment, a handwritten note left in a team member's pigeonhole, or a public acknowledgement at a team meeting.
- Be consistent and fair: Look for and recognise positive behaviours across all staff. Make sure it's genuine and without favouritism.
- Explain why: When praising someone, articulate why their actions were appreciated so they understand the impact of their efforts.

By adopting a practice of praising the positive, you create a supportive and motivating work environment that nurtures employee growth and loyalty. A little appreciation goes a long way in bringing out the best in your team.



Steer Through the Storm: How to Communicate and Lead Courageously Through Change (Ingram Spark, \$25.00) by Leah Methers