

Law Office Management & Technology

How to Boost Office Morale without Spending a Dime

By Paul Sullivan

The best motivator isn't money, it's recognition.

In my role as office administrator I can see the different visions lawyers and staff members have of the ideal office environment. I see busy lawyers working long hours on complicated files and longing for more time outside the office. I see clients demanding more and willing to pay less. Firms are competing with each other, and with the threat of competition from multi-disciplinary practices and the unauthorized practice of law, it's no wonder lawyers are stressed. Bottom line: lawyers want to practice law, be rewarded financially, and not deal with problems in the office.

I also see many staff people dedicated to their work, likewise working long hours when needed, and feeling frustrated because there is little feedback from the lawyers. Many staff members don't understand or appreciate how much pressure lawyers endure. And so it becomes a vicious circle. The lawyers are stressed and they put more demands on themselves and the people around them. Sometimes this stress creates absenteeism and employee turnover, which decreases efficiency and creates even more stress. But often, what the staff members really want is just a little recognition.

It is my observation that lawyers in their role as "managers" perceive things differently than staff when evaluating their reason for working in a particular place. This seems to be supported by the results of surveys (not law-office-specific) of manager and staff attitudes (see sidebar). If this survey is indeed factual, then managers may not give recognition to their staff members because they don't look upon it as important to themselves.

FYI . . .

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Dr. Gerald Graham of Wichita State University initiated a study in which employees were asked to identify what response by their immediate manager to good performance motivated them most. The responses in order were personal thanks,

written thanks, promotion for performance, and public praise. A full 58 percent said they never received personal thanks, 76 percent said they never received written thanks, and 81 percent said they never received public praise. The study concluded that the techniques that have the greatest motivational impact are practiced the least, even though they are easy and inexpensive.

I believe that in most cases lawyers do appreciate their staff but forget or simply don't take the time to give them positive feedback. If you sense tension or low morale in your office, I suggest you give serious consideration to implementing some type of recognition program for your staff members. This may not be the magic solution to all of your problems, but if there is any truth to the studies quoted, then you will at least have a good start.

Recognition takes time, not money

Recognition by definition is appreciating someone for something he or she has done for you or your firm. Recognition can be a structured program or it can be spontaneous, but its presence as a part of your daily operations will energize your employees. Rita Numerof, president of Numerof & Associates, says that "[o]nce employees see that what they do makes a difference to the organization and is valued, they will perform at higher levels."

Look for reasons to recognize an employee. It's probably occurring around you all the time. In fact, many things staffers do daily are worth recognizing. Here are just a few:

- learning new skills
- helping out another employee
- helping defuse a conflict
- volunteering for "less desirable" work assignments
- giving a client extra attention
- mentoring a new employee
- proposing solutions to problems
- making people laugh in a stressful situation
- sharing information
- having perfect attendance
- adapting willingly to change
- cross-training another employee

- putting in a great performance on a particular task or project
- staying late in a crunch time

You can recognize an employee in many ways. A written or spoken sincere and simple "thank you" can work wonders, as can a smile or nod of acknowledgment. Showing interest in employees' special work achievements, helping them gain education and training, and acknowledging and celebrating meaningful events in their lives all are morale boosters.

All of the above cost you nothing except a little conscious involvement, and the payoff is huge. Other no-cost forms of recognition include sending a praise message via voice mail or e-mail, praising staffers in front of others (they won't soon forget it), giving some extra time off (a long lunch, perhaps, or a three-day weekend). Or send them a letter of recognition and tell them a copy is going into their file.

If you still aren't convinced that recognition really does work, answer the questions below and remember how you felt at the time.

Has a client or colleague ever complimented you on a great job? Have you ever received a plaque or trophy for something you've done? Have you ever received applause? Have you ever seen your name in print for something good? Does it feel better to win than lose? Has someone recommended you? Would you rather make a hole in one while shooting a practice round by yourself or on Saturday morning with your regular foursome?

It may take a little conscious effort, but if you can incorporate recognition into your daily routine, you'll be amazed at how people around you respond. To quote Bob Nelson, Ph.D., a motivational professional: "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got."

Management/employee motivators

This study, which asks managers and staffers to rank from 1-10 ("1" being highest) what they wanted most from their jobs, was first performed back in 1949 by Lawrence Lindahl Personnel. It was repeated in 1980 by Ken Kovach and in 1991 by Nelson Motivation, Inc.

	Managers	Employees
Full appreciation for work done	8	1
Good wages	1	5
Good working conditions	4	9
Interesting work	5	6
Job security	2	4
Promotion/growth opportunity	3	7
Personal loyalty to workers	6	8
Feeling "in" on things	10	2

Sympathetic help on personal things	9	3
Tactful disciplining	7	10

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