

# Recognizing Employees From A Distance

By Bob Nelson, Ph.D.

With the changing nature of work today, managers have to adapt to new circumstances for recognizing employee performance. Increasingly, empowered employees are working more independently in their jobs with the authority and autonomy to act in the best interests of the company as they see fit.

The workplace itself is being redefined to include work innovations such as telecommuting, flexible working hours, staggered work shift and job sharing. In fact, a recent article in *USA Today* reported that roughly 40 percent of employees are now telecommuting. Many organizations are also moving to greatly decentralized operations in which an employee's manager may physically be located at a different facility or even a different state.

How can managers best recognize employee performance in such drastic times—times in which an employee may not even have physical contact with his or her manager for weeks if not months at a time? Some of the answer may lie in a return to basics of human interaction.

**Make time for people.** There's no substitute for face time when it comes to building trusting relationships. Managing is a people

job—you need to take time for people. Not just when taking time is convenient, but whenever employees are available and need to meet.

Many companies have an “open door” policy in which employees can speak with their managers whenever they need to, but the effectiveness of such a policy is in how often employees actually use it, not just that it is available. If your employees are around less, meeting with them when they are around has to be a high priority. Coordinate your schedule so that you are at work when your employees



work. This could be set time each week or during “core hours” in which everyone is present. And how time together is spent

makes a difference as well. A key to effective communication, I've found, is to make the time spent together engaging. Talk about real issues of importance to employees, the work, or the company in general.

**Increase communication as you increase distance.** We know from electronics that the farther from the source the weaker the signal and that each relay distorts the signal. Likewise, the greater the distance from one's manager, the greater the effort both parties have to make to keep in touch. This can be done through updates, more frequent scheduled meetings and visits. Also go out of your

way to provide the same types of communication meetings with each work shift or arranging meetings that overlap work shifts or duplicate awards for each facility. I know one executive who schedules office hours when he visits his company's plants, and allows any employee to sign up for time to meet. Each employee who signs up is assigned a number. Overlooking the shop floor is a "now serving No. \_\_" electronic sign like you would find in a Baskin Robbins ice cream store. As the number gets within 2-3 of the employee's assigned number, that employee makes his way to the executive's office for their meeting.

**Use technology; don't let it use you.** To often managers use technology like voice mail or e-mail as another means to dump work on their employees. It may seem faster and more efficient to do so, but employees are denied even a chance to ask questions about projects that are assigned when work is delegated over such one-way communication vehicles. Use

technology as a communication vehicle, not just to distribute data. Promote the exchange of information and encourage questions. Have problem discussion boards or host "chat lines" with managers or executives or create an "applause" bulletin board to capture the exchange of group praisesings.

Today's managers have to work harder to be available to others.

If you value strong working relationships and clear communication, you need to seek out others to be sure adequate communication is taking place.

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