Tip sheet: The importance of recognition and positive reinforcement

Some managers believe that they only need to give constructive or critical feedback and that if they haven't said anything, by implication, everything is going well. An absence of positive feedback and reinforcement will only boost the voice of the inner critic.

However, according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, esteem is an important motivator, and we know from theories of positive psychology that people learn more effectively through positive reinforcement.

Your team need to know when they've done a good job as it reinforces their choices and helps them develop a feeling of self-worth (and keep their inner critic at bay).

Whilst, if course, it is valuable to provide constructive or critical feedback, if we do not balance it with the positive, it will have a detrimental effect on a staff member's engagement and ultimately on the quality of their work. In fact, by adopting a culture of recognition where merit is actively appreciated, it is easier to provide constructive feedback. If you recognise excellent work, then people will be more open to and trust any feedback that asks them to change an unhelpful task or behaviour.

10 tips for providing recognition

1. Just like in any feedback, your recognition needs to be authentic, timely and specific. If it feels insincere, then it might not have the desired effect and can be demotivating. Similarly, if you just thank someone generally for their work, it doesn't help them to learn what they did that was effective, the positive impact they made. You may wish review our resources on effective feedback section to learn the key elements of successful feedback.

2. Ensure that the approach you use is fair. If, for example, you are only providing recognition for results you might be failing to notice and motivate someone who has made considerable improvements in their work but hasn't yet achieved a tangible result (and in research they may never get that result!). Give recognition for effort and engagement in a process, not just results or milestones.

3. Recognise behaviours and approaches as well as accomplishments. Your research team may have a shining star who gets all the credit but if you can recognise those who have supported them, you will build a more engaged, motivated and productive research culture. If we only recognise our top performer, it can demoralise everyone who contributed to the success. You may want to review our video on the skill/will matrix to think about how to motivate and recognise different people.

4. Clarity, and consistency are also important when we recognise staff members. People need to see that each person who makes a similar contribution is on an equal footing and will receive similar recognition.

5. Check in with your team about how they like to be recognised. One size doesn't fit all. You could simply ask individuals about what kind of recognition has had an impact on them. In the past, when have they felt most recognised. Or simply use a variety of different methods to see what 'lands' with them. Some people enjoy public recognition and may appreciate a call out in the team meeting, others might like to know their efforts are being recognised by a senior leader and so putting your head of department on copy on a recognition email may be more impactful. Other team members may appreciate a simple thank you or recognition privately or by their peers.

6. If the whole team have been working hard, consider a collective recognition e.g. a more flexible workday such as a late start or early finish. You could also organise a group lunch, cake or coffee together or perhaps a team walk to encourage doing some physical activity and having a break from the workspace. You could invite a senior leader to a team meeting to share their positive feedback and build recognition.

7. On an individual level you might want to recognise someone's efforts by opening up training or development opportunities, arranging a meeting with a senior stakeholder or mentor, or job shadowing. By delegating and increasing their autonomy you can also clearly articulate that their work is of a high standard and is being recognised. You might also consider endorsing them via social media if they wish to raise their profile externally.

8. It can help to start people off on the right track by assigning new team members a mentor or buddy, this can help develop the leadership skills of the person you choose and help the new staff member feel valued.

9. As a team leader be on the lookout for any 'hygiene factors' you can solve or obstacles you can remove to help people feel valued. Hygiene factors are characteristics associated with or leading to job dissatisfaction such as a poorly equipped workspace, conflicts with colleagues or low pay. Or simply ask them whether there are any obstacles or conditions getting in the way f them being able to make progress and feel motivated. If they feel you are looking after them and their needs, they will be more engaged in the projects and research.

10. Ask for and share ideas with your peers on what has worked when showing recognition to team members. Your mentor may also have some ideas that have been successful for them.