

Exceptional Client Service In Law Firms

Tips For Rewarding And Recognizing Employees

By John W. Olmstead, MBA, Ph.D, CMC

Our firm is often asked to help law firms design and implement client service improvement plans. A key ingredient of such plans involves helping attorneys and staff change their client service behaviors - one behavior at a time - into permanent positive client service habits.

In many law firms attorney and staff reward and recognition practices have been counter-cultural and failed to reinforce (motivate and encourage) positive client-service behaviors. As more law firms move toward improving client service many are looking for new ways to reward and recognize attorneys and staff that demonstrate positive client service behaviors. Exceptional client service goals are being linked to business plans and compensation is linked to achieving these goals.

Everyone has a need to feel good about the work that they do. By regularly rewarding and recognizing your attorneys and staff when they exhibit positive client service behaviors, rather than only noticing and commenting when they do something wrong, you help motivate them to keep up the good work and internalize the behavior. You can let your attorneys and staff know that they have done a good job in two ways:

§ **Informal Recognition**

This is the spontaneous, everyday type of recognition that lets your employees know that you appreciate the job they are doing, and it takes very little time, money, or planning to execute.

§ **Formal Reward Program**

This is a preplanned, firm-wide program for rewarding individuals, departments, practice groups, and teams who achieve outstanding results in client service. In general, they take time, money, and a good deal of planning to implement.

Studies and experience have shown that people thrive when they receive personal recognition for the work they do. While money is important - it will never replace the need for genuine appreciation for the efforts your attorneys and staff put in. While everyone is expected to do their job well, recognition encourages and motivates staff to exceed what is expected of them.

Informal Recognition

Studies have shown that regularly giving informal recognition to an employee is a stronger motivator than providing him or her with

formal rewards. Simple praise is remembered long after the event because it tells your employees that you noticed their efforts and took the time and trouble to personally thank them.

Although informal recognition is effective, inexpensive, and convenient, many attorneys don't give their fellow attorneys or their staff as many pats on the back as they could. Consequently, when they do praise - their inexperience often shows through and is interpreted as a lack of genuine appreciation. Here are a few hints that you can use to complement your compliments.

§ **Don't Do It In The Hallway**

Always make sure that you have the other person's full attention before you praise him or her. Don't try to give your staff a compliment when they (or you) are scurrying down the hall, rushing to a meeting, or trying to meet a deadline. Instead, setup a time and place that is convenient for them. If you are acknowledging a group of people for their efforts, set up a time when you can meet with them all in one place and praise them as a group.

§ **Go To Them**

Talk to your staff on their own turf or some place where they will feel comfortable and relaxed such as their desks or the lunch room. Don't ask your staff to come to your office because they may mistakenly think that something is wrong.

§ **Maintain Eye Contact**

Because people can perceive lack of eye contact to mean insecurity or lying, looking at your employees when you recognize them is critical. On the other hand, your employees are quite likely to look away from you because they probably haven't had a lot of practice at accepting honest, straightforward praise. Remember, you don't want to be standing up and looking down on your staff when you praise them. Stay level with them by taking a seat next to them.

§ **Do It Now - Don't Delay**

In order to have the biggest impact, you should recognize your staff as quickly as possible after the achievement has occurred. Don't wait until the Christmas party to praise performance that occurred last year. The further away you get from the event, the less impact the acknowledgement has.

Tips For Recognizing Employees

Often we find that once a law firm finally decides to implement a recognition program they want to go whole hog and spend a fortune. However, many other things can be done that don't cost an arm and a leg. Often the simplest, most spontaneous ideas yield the best results and the most fun. Here are just a few tips:

TIP #1: Send a personal handwritten thank you note.

TIP #2: Have the managing partner personally thank the employee.

TIP #3: Send a letter of praise from the managing partner.

TIP #4: Put up clients' letters of praise on the firm bulletin board.

TIP #5: Recognize employees that have demonstrated outstanding client service in the firm's newsletter.

TIP #6: Take employees to lunch.

TIP #7: Have a lunchtime pizza party at the office to celebrate outstanding client service results achieved during the week.

TIP #8: Send flowers.

TIP #9: Buy a plant.

TIP #10: Give away tickets to a sporting event. Make them available in pairs so the staff member can take a friend or family member.

TIP #11: Let the employee come to work an hour late - with pay.

TIP #12: Buy a magazine subscription.

TIP #13: Give a free tank of gasoline.

TIP #14: Give a gift certificate.

TIP #15: Treat an employee to dinner for two.

TIP #16: Send the employee to an outside training program.

Tips For Rewarding Employees - Formal Reward Programs

Although they don't have the same everyday impact as informal recognition, formal rewards are an important part of your strategy for service improvement. Quarterly and yearly award presentations should be highly

publicized and send a clear message about what client service values and behaviors your firm holds in high esteem.

Formal reward programs take time and planning as the firm must come up with a simple and practical way to measure who wins. Typically, we use a combination of ongoing client satisfaction surveys and supervisor nomination to identify client service employee of the quarter and year winners.

When designing formal reward programs it is important to:

- § Keep the rewards interesting
- § Vary the rewards to suit the person
- § Make the size of the reward appropriate to the achievement
- § Make it fun

Here are a few tips:

TIP #1: Identify a client service employee of the quarter. Give them a day off with pay and a letter of appreciation which is filed in their personnel file and presented at a firm meeting. Have their photo taken and put on the bulletin board and in the firm's newsletter.

TIP #2: Identify a client service employee of the year. Give them a week off with pay and a letter of appreciation which is filed in their personnel file and presented at a firm meeting. Have their photo taken and put on the bulletin board and in the firm's newsletter.

TIP #3: Have honorable mentions for the client service employee of the quarter and year and gifts for special mentions such as award trophies, pen and pencil sets, notepads, t-shirts, paperweights, and award pins.

TIP #4: Travel trips ranging from weekend getaways at a nearby bed

and breakfast to a week-long vacation at a resort. Includes travel and lodging expenses for two.

TIP #5: Cash awards.

Insure that the size of the award is appropriate to the achievement. Be careful not to cheapen the value of the award by making it less significant than the achievement calls for.

The most successful reward programs are simple to administer. They give everyone a change to win - those who serve either internal or external clients - and have simple, easy-to-understand rules and goals that everyone considers attainable.

Make it fun.

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Founded in 1984, Olmstead & Associates serves clients across the United States ranging in size from 100 professionals to firms with solo practitioners. Dr. Olmstead is the Editor-in-Chief of "The Lawyers Competitive Edge: The Journal of Law Office Economics and Management," published by West Group. He also serves as a member of the Legal Marketing Association (LMA) Research Committee.

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