

## Tip of the Week from Bob Nelson

7/09/03

This week's quote is:

“What we achieve inwardly will change outer reality.”

Otto Rank (1884-1938)  
Vienna-born Psychoanalyst

I've been doing a lot of media interviews this week about my new book, *The 1001 Rewards & Recognition Fieldbook*. A frequent question that arises is “Can an individual employee make a difference in changing the recognition culture of an organization?”

The answer to this question is an overwhelming “yes!” Of course change tends to be easier when it has strong support from upper management, but a change does not have to start at the top of an organization to be effective.

A good example of this is Carla Stroud, a project manager at Perkins Coie LLP, a law firm of 450 lawyers based in Seattle, WA. In 1996, Perkins Coie conducted a firm-wide employee survey to gauge employee job satisfaction. In the case of the firm's 40-person-strong Finance Department, the score was only “average”—lower than expected.

In response, Perkins Coie created a “book club” with a focus on leadership. The group read books, discussed a selected chapter each month, and tried to apply the author's concepts in a real-world setting. Included in this group of books was *1001 Ways to Reward Employees*. According to Carla Stroud, a project manager at Perkins Coie, reading the book started a chain of events that has not only improved employee morale within the Finance Department, but improved employee productivity, too.

Says Stroud, “We decided that we didn't do enough to thank employees and that we needed to focus on that. During one of the first meetings we had regarding the issues, we came up with the idea of forming a Happiness Committee—I think the book called it a Morale Committee. Another supervisor from payroll and I just went around and asked people privately to participate. You see, it's a secret committee. At first we just gave people a basic outline of what we were doing and asked whether they'd like to join. And some really enthusiastic people jumped on board, but no one knew all five of the members. In fact, no one knows even now.”

Employees never know what to expect from the Happiness Committee, or when to expect it. The group's first formal act was to fill little Easter eggs with candy and wrap each one in a Dilbert cartoon in which the artist Scott Adams made reference to a “happiness committee.” Other creative Happiness Committee activities and have included:

- On Earth Day, department employees received plants, bags of dirt, and fertilizer with a prize to whoever can grow a plant the most successfully.
- A sack lunch picnic trip on a ferry across Puget Sound. Employees were required to bring permission slips signed by a co-worker allowing them to attend.
- A Veteran’s Day celebration where the department’s five veterans were honored by their 35 co-workers with a potluck lunch, complete with red, white, and blue balloons, and a sheet cake.

However, for a rewards program to be effective, it’s not just enough to come up with a creative idea once in every blue moon. Rewards and recognition programs have to be sustained; employees have to know that the organization cares enough about their well-being to make them a priority. According to Carla Stroud, “It’s interesting—it’s like a garden. You’ve really got to tend it. And if you don’t do something for a while—it’s not that people feel entitled, but they notice.”

And the Happiness Committee *has* been effective. Perkins Coie conducted a follow-up survey, asking employees the exact same questions as they were asked several years earlier. In the company’s Finance Department, the results were dramatic:

Percentage Who Agree:	1996	1998
My supervisor encourages independent thought and action	56%	95%
My supervisor creates an atmosphere that inspires trust	60%	88%
My supervisor treats me fairly	60%	88%
Overall, I am satisfied with my job	48%	73%

Not only did employee morale improve, but so did productivity. For example, accounts payable bookkeepers during the period 1994- 1998—during which workload increased some 36 percent and the staffing decreased from ten full-time equivalents to nine—demonstrated a productivity increase of 52 percent.

All this fun—and an improved work environment—has not gone unnoticed by other employees in other departments. With the assistance of the Perkins Coie Finance Department Happiness Committee, the firm’s Information Technology and Technical Support Departments have started up their own recognition programs. To kick things off, they have put up happiness boards like the ones already established in the Finance Department. Employees use them to post items about their families, their children, or whatever is going on in the firm.

Says Carla Stroud, “I see them slowly starting to do some things and forming their own ideas. They have a supervisor who is thinking of great ideas and trying to implement them herself. It has taken awhile, but people in some other departments have noticed what we’ve done. Someone on the operations department staff said to me, ‘You people seem so happy down there.’”

As further validation of their success, Perkins Coie was selected to be one of The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America for the first time by Fortune magazine earlier this year!

Bob Nelson

## The Take Away

Lessons from Perkins Coie, LLP you can apply in your organization:

- 1) It all starts with someone wanting to improve things. An effective recognition champion can come from any function or level in the organization.
- 2) Something fun and creative is worth many times what is expensive but boring. Pretend you don't have a budget to see how much you can do before you need one.
- 3) Tracking results allows you to show progress on your goals. If you can't measure it, you can't manage it and recognition is no exception to this rule. Find some way to track your progress to be able to show objective results.

Bob Nelson, Ph.D., is president of Nelson Motivation Inc. in San Diego, CA, and a best-selling author of the 1001 Ways to Reward Employees (now in its 41<sup>st</sup> printing), 1001 Ways to Energize Employees, Managing For Dummies (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), and his latest book: The 1001 Rewards & Recognition Fieldbook (available from any bookstore, Amazon.com or our website, [www.nelson-motivation.com](http://www.nelson-motivation.com)). For more information about presentations, related products and services call 1-800-575-5521, visit [www.nelson-motivation.com](http://www.nelson-motivation.com) or e-mail Bob directly at [BobRewards@aol.com](mailto:BobRewards@aol.com).

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