



© SUSIE FITZHUGH



# Learning the Languages of

*Certificates, public honors, and gift cards may sound like a great idea, but do they really encourage school staff?*

## **Paul White**

**M**ost Americans today don't feel valued at work. U.S. Department of Labor statistics show that individuals who voluntarily leave their employment cite not feeling appreciated as the top reason they are leaving (Robbins, 2000). Although 51 percent of supervisors say they recognize employees who do a good job, only 17 percent of the employees at the same organizations report that their supervisors do well at recognizing them (Society for Human Resource Management, 2012).

Like any workplace, schools need to ensure that employees feel appreciated for their good work. Research

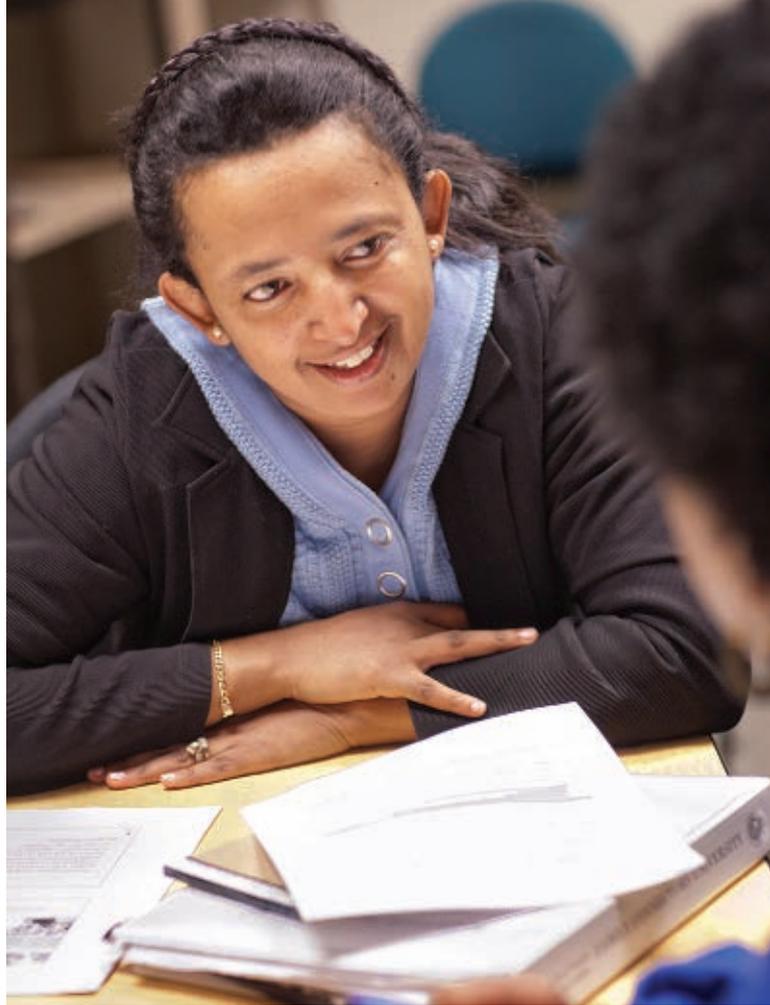
has shown that appreciation and recognition are important for educators in a variety of roles (Fraser & Brock, 2006; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001; Heller, 2004). When teachers and staff feel valued, numerous positive results follow, including lower staff turnover (Scherer, 2003) and improved student achievement (Cotton, 2003).

## **The Problem with Recognition Programs**

Although almost 90 percent of all organizations and businesses in the United States have some form of employee recognition program (Bersin, 2012), job satisfaction and employee engagement are actually *declining*. In a 2012 poll, Gallup (2013) found that only 30 percent of U.S. employees are actively involved in and emotionally committed to



© STEFANIE FELIX



© SUSIE FITZHUGH

# Appreciation

their place of employment. This is the highest level of disengagement found since the research began in 2000.

As a psychologist and consultant, I've worked to help schools, businesses, and nonprofit organizations create more positive environments for their staff. In our work with schools, my consulting team and I have found that employees' responses when discussing employee recognition typically range from apathy to cynicism. One employee stated, "I haven't heard anything positive for two years, and you expect me to believe they value me?"

As well-intentioned as most employee recognition activities are, they often lead to negative results. The generic nature of rewards many programs use—when everyone gets the same certificate—makes them feel impersonal.

In addition, it has been reported that 90 percent of all recognition programs give awards for time of service, which does little to motivate staff (World at Work, 2011).

Another problem is the focus on recognizing employees in front of large groups, which is uncomfortable for many people. One teacher we worked with emphatically stated, "They can give me the award, but I won't go up and get it unless they carry me up there!"

Finally, most recognition programs heavily emphasize tangible rewards—plaques, certificates, gift cards, coupons, and small tokens. Although most people don't mind receiving gifts, if they don't also hear verbal praise, receive individual attention, or get assistance when they need it, the objects received seem superficial.

# Appreciation has the most positive effect on workplace culture when **both**



## **Core Conditions for Appreciation**

In our work with school personnel, we have found that four conditions need to be present for team members to feel appreciated.

### **1. Appreciation is communicated regularly.**

What does *regularly* mean? It varies depending on the work setting, the frequency of interaction between coworkers, and the nature (length, history, and closeness) of the relationship. However, it clearly implies more than once a year at a performance review or when someone receives a “Staff Member of the Month” award.

### **2. Appreciation is communicated through language and actions important to the recipient.**

Most of us tend to communicate appreciation through actions we value, but not everyone feels appreciated in the same ways. The ways people like to be affirmed can be thought of as five different “languages of appreciation.” Some people value *words of affirmation*, and others are encouraged when someone does an *act of service* by helping them with a task. Spending *quality time* is another way to demonstrate support. One teacher reported, “I just want my principal to stop by my room once every two weeks and listen to me vent for 10 minutes.”

Bringing a colleague a *tangible gift* like a cup of coffee when you know he or she has had a long day can be a pick-me-up. Even a *physical touch*, like a celebratory high five or a fist bump when a difficult project has been completed, can be valuable.

One assistant principal shared that he didn’t really need to be told that he was appreciated. This is because when he was growing up, “if someone praised you, the next thing that was coming was an ‘ask.’ They would ask me to do something for them or loan them money. So when I receive a compliment, my first response is, ‘What do they want?’” His language of appreciation was quality time. He was a coach, and if you hung out with him at practice, he lit up and almost couldn’t stop talking about his players.

### **3. Appreciation is personal and individualized.**

Recognition of a group is a good start, but if the appreciation doesn’t relate to what each team member did to help achieve the goal, the communication can fall flat. People want to hear about what *they* have done—that you appreciate that they stayed late after the parent meetings to help clean up or that you have noticed them coming in early to provide extra instruction to a struggling student.

To effectively offer words of affirmation, follow these guidelines:

- *Use the person’s name.* People like to hear their name. In larger schools, a cafeteria worker may wonder if the principal even knows who she or he is, and the personal touch is especially important.

- *Specifically name what the person did.* Just as students respond best to specific praise, so do colleagues. Describe the valued action (“Juanita, I really appreciate how you answer the

# coworkers and supervisors offer it.

phone and greet visitors cheerfully”) rather than just give a global compliment (“You are doing a great job!”).

■ *Tell the person why that action is important.* Often team members follow through on actions, but they are not sure why their contribution is important. (“Marquees, when you get your reports to me on time, it makes it easy for me to compile my reports and get them to administration on time as well. Thanks!”)

#### 4. *Appreciation feels authentic.*

If the recipient does not believe the appreciation is genuine, nothing else really matters. So what makes appreciation seem inauthentic? People we’ve worked with mentioned these factors:

■ A person’s tone of voice, posture, or facial expressions don’t seem to match the words.

■ How a person relates to you in front of others differs from how that person interacts with you privately.

■ The individual has a history of saying one thing and doing another.

■ The person offering the praise appears to have an ulterior motive.

■ The actions suddenly appear after a training or implementation of a program on appreciation.

■ Relational conflict in the past hasn’t been addressed.

How do you get past people’s perception that you don’t truly value them? There is no magic bullet. Ultimately, it comes down to a person’s assessment of your actions and motivation, something over which you have no control. The best course of action is to repeatedly and regularly communicate appreciation in the language and actions that are important to your colleague and that point to specific actions or character qualities you value. Over time, you may be able

to convince them that you truly mean what you are saying.

#### **Creating a Culture of Appreciation**

When we started working with workplaces, we focused primarily on managers and supervisors. But we kept hearing that team members wanted to encourage one another—not just those individuals who reported to them. This has affected our approach in two specific ways.

First, we’ve learned that appreciation has the most positive effect on workplace culture when both coworkers *and* supervisors offer it. A top-down approach does not work as well as an “any-direction” model. Food service providers can communicate appreciation to the assistant principal. Teachers can praise custodians. Paraprofessionals can encourage the learning resource center professionals.

Second, we argue against implementing a systemwide, top-down appreciation program. If all teachers, staff, and administrators are told that they are going to learn how to communicate appreciation, that edict automatically undermines the perception of authenticity of any appreciation communicated within the system. Alternatively, we recommend that team members be exposed to the concepts of authentic appreciation and be given the resources to apply the concepts to their work group so that they can opt in, if they choose. For example, having each team member take an inventory that identifies his or her preferred ways of receiving appreciation is an excellent starting point.

We’ve seen that when employers implement appreciation programs in this way, champions often emerge who are extremely supportive and enthusiastic about implementing the concepts

with their team. They may lead a pilot program in which their team receives training in showing appreciation to colleagues and begin applying what they learn. Then, as other groups see the program in action, they want to join in. Finally, the training and resulting culture change go viral as leaders and teams choose to go through the training process in a time frame that works for them. (Many programs and initiatives don’t succeed because the timing isn’t right for the participants.)

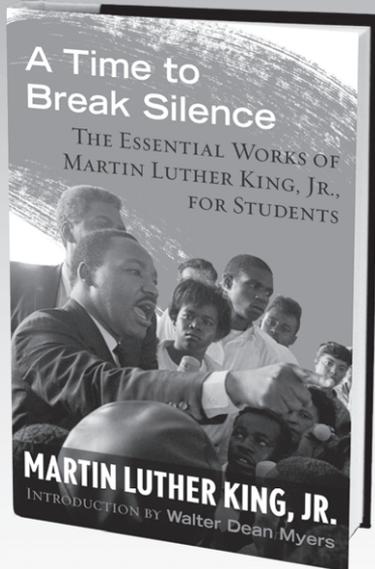
#### **What You Can Do**

As a psychologist, I am committed to behavior change. My goal is to help individuals change their actions and the interactions within their group. We know that no one is looking for more work to do, so we try to help teachers, staff, and administrators make sure their actions of encouragement are effective and efficient—that they spend time with those who value time, send notes to those who like receiving them, help out those who will be grateful for the assistance, and give a gift (and the right gift!) to someone who will appreciate the thought.

A key question, then, is, How do you know what your colleagues value? Do you just ask them? Probably not. In our culture, it’s not common for people to discuss how they feel appreciated. This type of question would typically make both the asker and the answerer feel uncomfortable.

But people do tend to think in terms of encouragement and discouragement. So you might ask, “When you’re discouraged, what is something that someone can do or say that would encourage you?” Even this question can feel weird to some, so you might consider creating an online survey

# MLK FOR THE COMMON CORE



The first collection of Dr. King's most important writings and speeches for students includes:

- An introduction by award-winning author **Walter Dean Myers**
- Eighteen works that were carefully **selected by teachers** across a variety of disciplines
- Selections such as "I Have a Dream" and "What is Your Life's Blueprint?" that **speak to issues young people face today**
- A **teacher's guide and companion curriculum** aligned with the common core available at [www.thekinglegacy.org/teachers](http://www.thekinglegacy.org/teachers)
- **Additional resources from the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute** available at [www.kinginstitute.info](http://www.kinginstitute.info) and [www.freedoms-ring.org](http://www.freedoms-ring.org)

## THE KING LEGACY FOR STUDENTS



Published by Beacon Press

Visit [www.beacon.org](http://www.beacon.org) for information on ordering exam copies.

asking people what kinds of encouragement and support they value most. Our website ([www.appreciationnetwork.com/resources](http://www.appreciationnetwork.com/resources)) offers a variety of free resources on employees' different languages of appreciation.

If you or your colleagues are exploring how to improve the morale in your school, consider the following:

**Commit to taking action.** Commit to do what *you* can to communicate your appreciation to others. Don't look to your supervisor, administration, or the district to take the lead. Start by doing what you can, where you are.

**Team up with others.** Any behavior change is more likely to occur (and to continue over time) when others are involved. Ask a friend, a colleague, your supervisor, or the team you lead to do some reading with you and discuss how what you read could apply to your setting. Commit to working on a plan of action together.

**Learn from others about what works and what doesn't.** Other teachers, principals, administrators, and districts have tried a variety of employee recognition programs and activities—some of which have been helpful and others of which were a waste of time and energy. Learn from them.

**Persevere.** Most things that are worthwhile take time and effort. There will be obstacles or delays. You will try something, and it will "sort of" work. Learn from it, make corrections, and try again. And beware of programs that sound too good to be true.

Our experience has shown that true, significant change can occur in workplaces when the *right people* (which could mean anyone, regardless of position) implement the *right actions* (that is, authentic actions) at the *right time* (when people choose to and when they have the time and energy to commit to the process). I challenge you to give it a try and then enjoy the benefits of your actions! **EL**

## References

- Bersin, J. (2012, June 13). New research unlocks the secret of employee recognition. *Forbes*. Retrieved August 30, 2013, from [www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2012/06/13/new-research-unlocks-the-secret-of-employee-recognition](http://www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2012/06/13/new-research-unlocks-the-secret-of-employee-recognition)
- Cotton, K. (2003). *Principals and student achievement: What the research says*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Fraser, J., & Brock, B. L. (2006). Catholic school principal job satisfaction: Keys to retention and recruitment. *Catholic Education*, 9(4), 425–429.
- Gallup. (2013). *The state of the American workplace: Employee engagement insights for U.S. business leaders*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved September 1, 2013, from [www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/163007/state-american-workplace.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/163007/state-american-workplace.aspx)
- Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S. W., & Broer, S. M., (2001). Respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of para-professionals who support students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 67(4), 485.
- Heller, D. (2004). *Teachers wanted: Attracting and retaining good teachers*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Robbins, M. (2000). *Focus on the good stuff: The power of appreciation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Scherer, M. (Ed.). (2003). *Keeping good teachers*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Society for Human Resource Management. (2012). *The impact of recognition on employee engagement and ROI* (SHRM/ Globoforce Employee Recognition Survey Winter 2012 Report). Southborough, MA: Globoforce. Retrieved September 1, 2013, from <http://go.globoforce.com/rs/globoforce/images/SHRMWinter2012Report.PDF>
- World at Work. (2011). *Trends in employee recognition*. Scottsdale, AZ: Author. Retrieved November 12, 2013, from <http://worldatwork.org/waw/adimLink?id=51194>

---

**Paul White** ([paul@drpaulwhite.com](mailto:paul@drpaulwhite.com)) is a psychologist, speaker, and consultant who focuses on making work relationships work. He is the coauthor, with Gary Chapman, of *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace* (Northfield, 2011).