

Management by Proverbs

Scriptural Wisdom for Superior Results

Michael Zigarelli



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Principle 21

Reward Employees with Praise



A young man walked into a diner and asked to use their phone. The waitress pointed him toward the end of the counter and then eavesdropped as the man made his call.

“Hello, Mr. Anderson?” she heard him say in an enthusiastic voice. “My name is Patrick Cummings and I was just calling to ask whether you’d be interested in hiring a bright, hard working sales manager to oversee your staff... Oh...I see...You already have a bright, hard working sales manager? Okay. Well, thanks anyway.”

The young man walked back toward the door with a smug grin on his face, an expression that perplexed the waitress. “What are you smiling about?” she asked with a touch of attitude. “You just got turned down!”

“Well, actually, I didn’t,” the young man replied. “You see, *I am* that ‘bright, hard working sales manager.’ I just wanted to make sure that my boss thought so, too!”

This modern-day parable has become well-worn in both pulpits and business schools across the country. Pastors and professors alike remind us about the power of recognition and encouragement. In fact, many employees value this more than almost anything else in the workplace. That’s not to discount the importance of things like fair pay, job secu-

rity, interesting work, and advancement opportunities. But beyond these basics, people also want to hear they're doing well and that their effort is appreciated.

In fact, they're *starving* for it. The hunger runs so deep that many people, like our fictitious sales manager, will actually manufacture ways to feed that hunger. Consider the all-too-familiar scenarios. Doesn't almost every workplace have at least one person who's in the habit of walking around (often with a coffee cup in hand), telling people how busy he or she is? Aren't there some people at work who regularly steer conversations in the direction of what they've achieved or expect to achieve? Hasn't each of us, at one time or another, subtly sought positive reinforcement from a boss or other co-worker? And if none of that resonates, consider this in the context of a household: How many spouses and parents thirst for a simple thank you from those they serve?

You see, the desire for affirmation is part of the human condition. At the same time, though, the practice seems to be diminishing in our super-busy and increasingly-narcissistic culture. Although the affirming boss is not yet extinct, this person has been on the endangered species list for some time.

That's unfortunate because employee recognition is a powerful and low-cost (usually *free*) motivational tool. It's even more unfortunate in light of the copious counsel that God offers to us about praise and encouragement.

Proverbs on Praising and Encouraging Others

Proverbs has a lot to say on this topic, a testimony to the issue's significance. In particular, it teaches us the value of praise, as well some specifics about how and when to offer it. It's remarkably practical advice and strikingly transcendent, so let's take a close look at it.

Offer Praise as a Reward

From a scriptural perspective, how important is praising others? So important that God punctuates His wisdom book with this very lesson. You might recall that the Book of Proverbs concludes with a discourse lauding “The Wife of Noble Character” (Proverbs 31:10-31), a truly a remarkable person by any standard. The woman celebrated in this passage makes clothing and linen by hand, brings food from great distances, cares for her family day and night, speaks with wisdom and has no anxiety about the future. If that were not enough, in her spare time she also takes care of the poor and needy, plants vineyards, and runs a profitable business.

With such impressive attributes, how should we reward this woman? What does she deserve as recompense for her extraordinary character and productivity? The last two verses of Proverbs tell us:

*Charm is deceptive a beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
Give her the reward she has earned,
And let her works bring her praise at the city gate
(Proverbs 31:30-31)*

We could say so much about this passage, but let me highlight just three quick things for our purposes. First, praising someone is a reward for them, and not just any reward. *Praise is the consummate reward for a job well done.* Proverbs doesn’t say that this prolific worker should get a merit raise, a bonus, a new Lexus chariot, or a weekend at the Jerusalem Spa. Instead, the ideal reward for this ideal woman is that she be praised.

Second, verse 31 indicates why we dare not neglect our responsibility to recognize people for a job well done: It’s something they have “earned.” It’s, in fact, just like a paycheck. The employee has done his or her part and now

we must do ours. From a proverbial perspective, the praiseworthy individual is essentially *entitled* to our affirmation.

In our present cultural context, we might bristle at this notion, in light of the endless parade of contrived entitlements that some people demand. But any distaste we have for today's entitlement mentality shouldn't blind us to a timeless truth: God does not regard praising employees as optional. It's not just another way to manage or some politically-correct pacifier for "people who need that sort of thing." Rather, praise is something earned and as such, something owed by faithful managers to their worthy employees.

Praise in Public Whenever Possible

A third lesson from the passage is that we should praise one another "at the city gate." In ancient times, cities were like fortresses, built with huge, protective walls surrounding them. The walls were continuous except for the several city gates that were opened during daylight hours to permit people to come and go. Because the gates were in high-traffic areas, business people routinely set up shop and sold goods there.

It's in this hub of activity that Proverbs 31:31 says that the Wife of Noble Character should to be praised. In other words, *the recognition of someone's good works*, the verse says, *is best done publicly*. Why? Because public affirmation elevates the honor. It transforms our words into something even more rewarding for this person, since now everyone knows what this person has accomplished. That also, by the way, has the effect of reinforcing laudable behaviors in the culture—or in your corporate culture, for that matter.

Jesus also publicly praised people. When He commended Peter for confessing Him as Messiah, Jesus did so in front of all the other apostles (Matthew 16:17-20). When Jesus praised a sinful woman at His feet for her repentance, He was surrounded by Pharisees (Luke 7:44-47). And when the centurion expressed faith in Jesus' power, Jesus turned to

those following Him and said: “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith” (Matthew 8:10). It would seem that by doing these things, Jesus not only validates public praise as a reward, He also models for it for those who follow Him.

Praise Should Be Timely

Notice, too, that in each of these instances, Jesus praised both publicly and *immediately*. He didn’t delay, but instead, seized the moment to extend some well-timed and well-deserved affirmation. Proverbs presents the principle this way:

*A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—
and how good is a timely word!*
(Proverbs 15:23)

Untimely praise is often empty praise. As with any behavior, a significant gap between the behavior and the reward can undermine the value of that reward. By contrast, Proverbs says, “timely” words are fruitful words. They are an “apt reply” to a deserving individual.

The New Revised Standard Version and the King James Version further illuminate the lesson, rendering the Hebrew: “a word in season, how good it is!” (NRSV; “is it” KJV). Those translations highlight an important nuance that we know from our own experience, namely that praise doesn’t have to be instant, but it should be in reasonable proximity to the behavior. God invites us to affirm deserving people sooner rather than later—“in season” rather than a few seasons down the road.

Praising Others is Gratifying

Proverbs 15:23 also says that the timely, “apt reply” also brings joy to the one who delivers it. Surely you’ve had this

pleasant sensation. It follows almost automatically when we recognize and encourage someone. And as we'll discuss shortly, another type of "joy" may come to us as well when we habitually praise our employees—the joy of working with more satisfied, more productive, more committed people.

Praise Can Be Nonverbal As Well

One last lesson: Proverbs indicates that we can affirm people without saying a word. In fact, even a mere smile goes a long way with our people:

*A cheerful look brings joy to the heart,
and good news brings health to the bones.*
(Proverbs 15:30)

*When a king's face brightens it means life;
his favor is like a rain cloud in spring.*
(Proverbs 16:15)

These verses not only underscore the value of praise (praise "bring joy to the heart" and "health to the bones"), they remind us that the mere expression on our face speaks volumes to the people around us, and that it provides lasting, positive effects. We have lots of options for recognizing a job well done, and we should avail ourselves of all of them, but especially when we're pressed for time, a "cheerful look" is itself a valuable reward. When the "[leader's] face brightens," Proverbs 16:15 tells us, that's akin to something that was *life-giving* to the community that originally received this wisdom: A spring rain cloud that would nurture their crops.

You'll no doubt have ample opportunity to experiment with this. Try it, for example, in your next meeting after someone makes an insightful comment. It'll take no time

and it'll cost you nothing. Building "life-giving" morale doesn't get any easier or more affordable than this!

Five Insights from the Academic and Practitioner Literature

Interestingly, the academic research on this issue dovetails nicely with the scriptural teachings we've seen above.¹ First, there's little debate about the biblical and intuitive notion that employee recognition can have a positive effect on employee performance.² Academics and practitioners widely acknowledge that recognizing an employee's contribution increases learning and motivation.

Second, researchers say that most managers don't offer enough praise, in part because *managers tend to underestimate the importance that employees attach to feedback and to overestimate the value of other rewards.*³ That's one of the reasons why we see so many employees seeking out positive feedback from anyone who will offer it, as we said earlier.⁴ Popular business books have said much the same thing, with best-selling authors like Ken Blanchard and Bob Nelson being the staunchest proponents of narrowing the praise gap.⁵

Third, positive reinforcement tends to be most useful if it actually indicates *why* the employee's performance was good.⁶ The statement: "You did a first-rate job on the report, Jim. Nice work!" is certainly better than saying nothing, but it also omits essential information Jim needs. Taking the time to explain why it was "nice work" (e.g., the report was clearly written, it was succinct, it was creatively formatted) increases the chances that those specific attributes will appear in Jim's future work.

Fourth, in situations where we give positive and negative feedback to an employee (e.g., a performance review), research suggests that employees are more likely to accept

the negative feedback as accurate if we offer the positive feedback first.⁷ Whenever possible, though, provide positive and negative feedback in separate conversations. Praising an employee but following up with an immediate correction, some say, has the effect of nullifying any beneficial aspects of the praise.⁸ So whenever possible, avoid presenting bad news on the heels of good.

Lastly, it's not always the case that more praise is better. There comes a point of diminishing returns. A classic field study, for example, concluded that feedback every two weeks is about as effective as feedback every week.⁹ And from practitioners, we often hear that employees can be quite cynical about excessive affirmation, inferring that their manager may be using it manipulatively.¹⁰ So to get the most out of this practice, be sure to use employee recognition in an authentic and judicious manner.

Ordinary Ideas, Extraordinary Results

We've all been there, and it's not a happy place. We earned a major thank you but didn't get it. Few things frustrate like ingratitude.

Over time, whether this occurs in the workplace, in a home, as a church volunteer, or in some other service capacity, a lack of recognition can cause resentment, a "do-the-minimum" mind-set, and in some cases a severing of the relationship—natural reactions to the withholding of something earned. Scripture suggests an alternative path, though, encouraging each one of us to make affirmation our standard operating procedure.

One CEO did this by placing five coins in his left pocket at the beginning of each day and then moving one coin to the right pocket each time he complimented someone. Another manager, a restaurant owner whose schedule was too hectic to recognize his staff during working hours, took a few

minutes after closing time each day to jot personal notes to those who made a real difference that day.¹¹ Ordinary ideas, extraordinary results.

There are no organizational constraints tying your hands in this area. Simply make a choice. Make a commitment. Make God's wisdom your own. It doesn't matter that you may not have the gift of encouragement and it doesn't matter that no boss has ever been an encourager to you. In faith, get in the habit of rewarding the people entrusted to you with the praise they have earned.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you think of the argument, advanced in the chapter, that praise is something that we owe to employees?
2. If you don't recognize employees' contributions as much as you probably should, why not? What are the obstacles to making this a habit?
3. The conclusion of this chapter suggested a powerful technique for making recognition more of a habit: Keeping five coins in your pocket. What practical ideas do you have for becoming more of an encourager to those around you at work?
4. Do you think that some people desire affirmation and recognition more than others? If so, how should this affect the way you manage people?

⁹For the classic articulation of this problem, see Frank J. Landy and James L. Farr, "Performance Rating," *Psychological Bulletin*, 87, no. 1 (1980): 72-97.

Principle 20: Deliver Criticism with Care

¹This anecdote compiled from the following sources: Eric Malni, "City Worker Held After 4 Supervisors Are Slain," *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1995, A1; Paul Feldman, "Shootings Spark Calls for Better Security Measures," *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 1995, B1; Stephanie Simon and Paul Feldman, "Search Goes On for Answers to Violence in the Workplace," *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 1995, B1; Patrick McGreevy, "Suspect Kept Gun at Work, Records Show," *Los Angeles Daily News*, August 10, 1995, 4; Janet Gilmore, "Ex-City Worker Handed Life Term," *Los Angeles Daily News*, February 8, 1997, 4.

² "Study: Evaluations Spurring Worker Aggression," *The Houston Chronicle*, April 10, 1996, 4.

³ For a representative sampling of this literature, see: Daniel R. Ilgen and Carol F. Moore, "Types and Choices of Performance Feedback," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 72, no. 3 (1987): 401-406; Kathryn Tyler, "Careful Criticism Brings Better Performance," *HR Magazine*, 42, no. 4 (April 1997): 57-61; Jeffrey A. Mello, "The Fine Art of Reprimand: Using Criticism to Enhance Commitment, Motivation and Performance," *Employee Relations Today*, 22, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 19-28.

Principle 21: Reward Employees with Praise

¹ Much of the following is derived from the literature review of Wayne F. Cascio in *Applied Psychology in Human*

Resource Management, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998), 270-71.

² See, for example, Daniel R. Ilgen, Cynthia D. Fisher, and M. Susan Taylor, “Consequences of Individual Feedback on Behavior in Organizations,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 64, no. 4 (1979): 349-71.

³ Martin Greller, “Evaluation of Feedback Sources as a Function of Role and Organizational Level” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 65, no. 1 (1980): 24-27.

⁴ David M. Herold and Charles K. Parsons, “Assessing the Feedback Environment in Work Organizations: Development of the Job Feedback Survey,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 70, no. 2 (1985): 260-305.

⁵ Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson, *The One Minute Manager* (New York: William Morrow, 1982); Bob Nelson, *1001 Ways to Reward Employees* (New York: Workman, 1994).

⁶ Jacob Jacoby et al., “When Feedback Is Ignored: The Disutility of Outcome Feedback,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 69, no. 3 (1984): 531-45. See also Joseph J. Martocchio and James Dulebohn, “Performance Feedback Effects in Training: The Role of Perceived Accountability,” *Personnel Psychology*, 47, no 2 (1994): 358-73.

⁷ Dianna L. Stone, Hal G. Gueutal, and Barbara McIntosh, “The Effects of Feedback Sequence and Expertise of the Rater on Perceived Feedback Accuracy,” *Personnel Psychology*, 37, no. 3 (1984):487-506.

⁸ See, for example, Bob Nelson, “Try Praise: It’s the One Incentive Any Small Company Can Afford,” *Inc.*, September 1, 1996, 115.

⁹ Jagdeep S. Chhokar and Jerry A Wallin, “A Field Study on the Effect of Feedback Frequency on Performance,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 69, no. 3(1984):524-30.

¹⁰ See, for example, Mark H. McCormack, “Being Praised Isn’t Always What It Seems,” *The [Cleveland] Plain Dealer*, June 3, 1997, 12C.

¹¹ Both of these examples come from Bob Nelson, “Try Praise,” *Inc.*, September 1, 1996, 115.

Principle 22: Reward Employees with Profits

¹ Michelle Conlin and Aaron Bernstein, “Working...and Poor,” *Business Week*, May 31, 2004.

² “PSCA’s 49th Annual Survey of Profit Sharing and 401(k) Programs” *401K Advisor*, November 2006, Volume 13, Issue 11, p. 11.

³ For a best practice example of hiring and training seemingly unemployable people, see “Pathways to Independence: Welfare-to-Work at Marriott International,” by Rosebeth Moss Kanter, Case number 9-399-067, (Harvard Business School Publishing: Cambridge MA), 1998.

⁴ For some of the cornerstone theoretical work on this subject, see Martin L. Weitzman and Douglas L. Kruse, “Profit Sharing and Productivity,” in Alan S. Binder, ed., *Paying for Productivity* (Washington D. C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990); and Douglas L. Kruse, “Profit Sharing