

Alchemy

How Great Leaders Make it Happen

by Mark Hirschfeld

I once worked for a company that has a monthly recognition program for employees. It takes a lot of work to earn this acknowledgment, so anyone who achieves the specified level of production is publicly celebrated for his or her outstanding work. In addition to the esteem and celebration that is given in the employee's honor, a tangible gift is also bestowed upon the hard worker – a pewter goblet.

The goblets are gorgeous. They are heavy, substantial pieces – much like a goblet you might see on King Arthur's table. If your hard work is ever impressive enough to earn you twelve goblets, you also receive a silver serving tray, suitable for use with your nicest china on those special occasions when such finery is required.

Sounds pretty nice, right?

The pewter goblets are truly impressive. During my time with this company, I was recognized with an entire set of them. However, there is a problem with the pewter goblets at my house; our fine china pieces are gold. Pewter goblets look great with silver serving pieces, but they are an eyesore next to the gold. For my extraordinary efforts I was awarded a dozen beautiful goblets for which I have no use. Mind you, I'm not Amy Vanderbilt or Martha Stewart, but even I can tell that they just don't look right together. To enjoy my hard-earned goblets, I would need King Arthur's pal Merlin to wave his magic wand and turn the pewter to gold.

I need an alchemist.

But, alas, no such luck. We have never used the pewter goblets. Last I checked, they are sitting in a box in our basement – twenty years of dust their only companion. Beautiful as they might be, they are of little use to us and are stowed away next to sentimental baby clothes and old family photos.

During the span of my professional career, I have heard hundreds of stories just like my goblet saga. A few years ago, a client of mine had an outstanding salesperson who was consistently the number one producer in the organization. The manager thought that the best way to recognize him was with an ornate, nicely engraved plaque that said "Salesperson of the Year." The manager thought the salesperson could hang it on his office wall so everyone could see what a remarkable producer he was. As it turned out, the salesperson didn't like plaques. Thus, the plaque never made it onto the office wall and, instead, was tucked away in a drawer somewhere.

I will never have a need for pewter goblets, and this gentleman will never care for plaques.

Knowing how to properly give recognition can have a significant impact on the employee receiving it and requires little effort from the leaders who are up to the task. The best leaders recognize their employees not with things that they might like, but with items that would be meaningful to the honored employees.

They know:

- Some people like plaques, others don't.
- Some folks like public recognition, while there are others (including yours truly) who would rather receive recognition in private.
- Some employees would appreciate more contact from their manager as a result of their success, while others would prefer to be left alone.
- Some would like to be considered for promotion opportunities; others have more interest in finding ways they can grow in their current role.
- Some of us have a use for pewter goblets; some of us throw them in the basement.



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We are all uniquely motivated. We each have our own definition of success. What means a great deal to one person might mean very little to another. Failure to appropriately recognize employee achievements can have a devastating impact on morale. Following is a statement made by an employee who expects very little, yet still feels that his role goes unappreciated:

I feel that my position does not get the credit it deserves. I would like more personal recognition for a job well done from our team leader. Simple verbal praise would be fine, but it just does not happen. I'm basically ignored, even though my fellow team members say I'm the most competent project manager in the firm.

When this manager took the time to learn about what really motivated his colleague, he did something very special. He took something of little value and made it precious.

This top-performing employee may eventually feel so slighted that he becomes tempted to find work with another company that rewards outstanding performance and

recognizes high achievers. Just as a manager shouldn't allow underperformance to go unaddressed, it is equally important that they take notice of the employees who produce exceptional work. Failure to do so may result in the loss of top performers. Everyone is wired a bit differently, and different things will mean more or less to different people. Those who have the privilege of leading others *should* invest some time learning how to best recognize the employees who work so hard for them.

You might be wondering what happened to the salesperson who didn't care for plaques? Although he truly didn't like plaques, he did have a daughter who was very important to him. When he was honored as "Salesperson of the Year" yet again the following year, his manager surprised him with a beautifully framed professional photograph of his daughter. To this day, that photo hangs in the salesperson's living room. He was so taken by the award that he told his manager that the day he received the photo was one of the most important days of his life. The manager told me the photo didn't cost much more than the plaque and has paid for itself a thousand times over.

When this manager took the time to learn about what really motivated his colleague, he did something very special. He took something of little value and made it precious. He recognized an employee in a way that touched his very soul. He turned an ordinary, routine task into an unforgettable experience. He proved that the alchemists of old were right and accomplished something that chemists say you can't do. He turned pewter into gold.