

Learning to Soar with the Eagle Award At Blanchard Training & Development, Inc.

When it comes to rewards, many managers believe that the only thing that their employees want is more money. However, while money can be an important way of letting employees know their worth to the organization, it tends not to be a sustaining motivational factor to most individuals. That is to say, cash rewards such as salary, bonuses, and the like are nice, but seldom are they what motivate people to give their best efforts on the job.

Cash rewards have one more problem. In most organizations performance reviews—and corresponding salary increases—occur only once a year, whereas the things that cause someone to be motivated today are typically activities that have happened recently within the immediate workgroup; things such as being thanked for doing a good job, involved in decision-making, or supported by one's manager. To motivate employees, managers need to recognize and reward achievements and progress toward goals by employees on a daily basis.

When you ask employees what is most motivating to them, rarely is money listed first. In fact, in numerous studies money is ranked about fifth in importance. What is most important to employees are such intangibles as being appreciated for the work they've done, being kept informed about things that affect them, having interesting work, and having a sympathetic manager who takes time to listen to them. These intangibles cost little or nothing to implement, but they do take the time and thoughtfulness of a manager who cares. These principles have been put in place at Blanchard Training & Development, Inc. (BTD).

Company Background

BTD is a management training and consulting firm located in Escondido, California. It employs a particularly effective form of recognition to keep employees motivated. At BTD, specially designed "Eagle Awards" are presented to individuals who have gone above-and-beyond to assist a customer. The Eagle Award is part of an overall system of employee rewards and recognition at BTD that has helped to create a highly motivated workforce—and more satisfied customers. The company was founded in 1979 by Ken Blanchard, coauthor of *The One-Minute Manager* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 1986), and his wife, Margie. Since its founding, BTD has grown to a workforce numbering some 150 employees and has operations throughout the United States and abroad.

Some of the stated goals of the organization are to:

- Develop leadership at all levels.

Source: Wilson, Thomas B., *Rewards That Drive High Performance*, Amazon Publisher, New York, 1999.

- Empower employees to set goals and solve problems.
- Provide exemplary customer service.
- Implement learning through technology.
- Manage the organizational change process.
- Energize organizations around the world.

Reasons for the Program

The Eagle Award was established to recognize “legendary service” to customers—one of the organization’s strategic objectives. Customer surveys conducted indicated that customer service was ranked seventh or eighth as an attribute by the company’s customers. BTD’s goal in designing the Eagle Award was specifically to increase the perception of customer service in the eyes of its customers.

How the Eagle Award Was Developed and How It Works

The first step in establishing the Eagle Award was to ask for volunteers to form a committee that would take charge of developing and implementing a customer service recognition program. This committee was given the sole goal of improving customer service, along with complete freedom to do whatever it took to get the job done. The only constraint was that the program was not intended to be a cash-based program. Since employees were already being paid salaries to do their jobs, bonuses and similar financial incentives would not be a part of the program. However, some funds were available to the committee to support recognition items and activities as needed.

The committee met to discuss the best ways to improve customer service at BTD. The result of these discussions was the Eagle Award program. Anyone caught providing exceptional service to customers could be acknowledged by any other member of the organization, who would complete a half-page “eagle-praising” form distributed to all employees and available in the company lunch room and mailroom. One side of the form contained the program’s objectives; the other side was the application itself. The application asked for the nominee’s name and a description of the behavior worthy of recognition. Typical examples of rewarded behavior included staying late to ship materials, helping a customer locate a cost order or resolve a billing problem, and rearranging training schedules to deliver a last-minute request by a customer.

Once completed, nomination forms could be submitted to any member of the Eagle committee, which was composed of five volunteers, including both managers and non-managers.

The committee reviewed each submission and in general honored most with the Eagle Award, then made a surprise visit to the individual’s work area for a picture of the person holding his or her Eagle Award, which was actually one of several eagle trophies that rotated around the company. The winner got to keep the eagle trophy on his or her desk until it was needed for a new recipient—typically a week or so.

The presenters also gave the awardee a choice of a nominal reward that included restaurant discounts, zoo passes, car wash coupons, and so forth. Most of these rewards were obtained by bartering services with other businesses in the community.

To further recognize the efforts of each Eagle Award recipient, awardee photos were placed on a bulletin board in the front lobby of BTB's headquarters building around a picture of an eagle in flight, along with a couple of lines about what the employee had done to earn the award. In addition, a listing of "eagle sightings" was included in the employee monthly newsletter. At the end of the year, an Eagle of the Year award was selected by a vote of employees from a list of multiple Eagle Award winners. That person was presented an engraved clock at the company's annual celebration program.

The program was initially announced and explained at a companywide meeting, and it was open to any employee, with no limit on the number of awards given out each month. The Eagle Award program was run entirely by employee volunteers, with no intervention by management.

Primary Outcomes and Continuing Enhancements

The Eagle Award program was credited with making "legendary customer service" an established part of the company's culture. In the seven-month period following introduction of the Eagle Award, customer service came to be the number-one company attribute in the eyes of BTB's customers. Program costs were nominal at less than \$200. While the program was clearly successful, it was not without problems. Sometime after implementation, the Eagle Award program was reviewed to find out what worked well and what could be improved. Two findings were prominent.

It was discovered that the majority of people who received the Eagle Award had direct customer contact as a part of their jobs. Since others without direct customer contact (over half the company) could have a great impact on the delivery of exceptional customer service, the program was expanded to focus on internal customers too. At the outset of the program, the committee accepted most nominations. However, as the program evolved over time, the committee became more and more evaluative, turning down an increasing number of nominations for a variety of reasons. For example, some questioned if you should receive an award if "that's that person's job!" This was not a desired outcome of the effort, and Ken Blanchard personally met with the committee and proclaimed, "Your job is to celebrate successes—we already have enough evaluations."

The result was that the program was modified to make it even easier to be acknowledged for helping others by shifting from the Eagle Award as the end-all, be-all, to a new form of recognition known as "Eagle Hatchlings." Every employee received an Eagle Hatchling card, each of which contained spaces for 16 hatchlings, nomination postcards, as well as a supply of Eagle Hatchling stickers. Whenever an employee felt that a coworker did something worthy of recognition, he or she could write it up and award an Eagle Hatchling sticker on the spot, without going through the Eagle Award committee.

The date, performance, and nominator were listed on the back of the hatchling card for each occurrence. A completed Eagle Hatchling card earned the employee an Eagle Award plaque, which was engraved with the recipient's name and inspiring words about Eagle behavior and then presented at a company meeting.

Eagle Behavior

Eagle behavior is behavior that creates a story. It is doing something extra, unexpected, or special for someone else's benefit or the good of the company as a whole. Eagle behavior is going out of your way to satisfy a need that might otherwise have gone unsatisfied.

The plaque included spaces for nine Eagle chips, small-engraved brass plates of an eagle in flight given for subsequent completion of Eagle Hatchling cards. A "completed" plaque thus represented 144 instances of an employee going beyond his or her job requirements to help a coworker or customer. Employees who completed a plaque received a U.S. Savings Bond. Plaque recipients and their spouses were invited to attend a year-end dinner with Ken and Margie Blanchard, the company's owners.

Outstanding events could also merit bypassing Eagle chips with a committee nomination that a plaque be awarded. For example, BTD's chief financial officer once volunteered to fill in for the company's shipping manager, who was out on three months' disability leave, in addition to his own job. This earned him an Eagle plaque and a standing ovation from the company when it was presented.

Remembering the Purpose

This type of program is particularly effective because it starts with the employees you are trying to motivate to do something different; thus it is their program, not management's. It focuses on a grassroots level—namely, the daily interactions among employees, yet "rolls up" to include traditional recognition elements of plaques and public praise as well as social acceptance, communication, and visibility with top management. Participants learned that it's okay not to do a recognition program perfectly at first. It's more important to get it going by doing something that is timely and sincere and to make improvements and modifications along the way. The Eagle Award was simple yet effective—driving specific behavior and performance and allowing employees to feel valued for doing so.