



WHEN RECOGNITION BACKFIRES

How a leader's best intentions can fall flat
and have the reverse impact.

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Coaching Irene was a sheer pleasure. She was unusually reverent and her humanness came through with her calming tone and peaceful nature. Irene was a director of nursing for a major medical center.

Not surprisingly, Irene's key strength was as a mentor and in supporting others. She went out of her way to help everyone – the patients, nurses, physicians and even candy strippers. She was a true servant leader and her humanitarian focus consumed her and propelled her to unmatched success in her job.

In leadership, our best intentions and actions can sometimes have the reverse effect. This is why measuring and understanding your employees' intrinsic motivators is pivotal to:

- energize and inspire top performance, and
- to bolster employee retention and loyalty.

In fact, Irene was so well thought of by all of her nursing staff, the physicians and administrators that an unexpected surprise was bestowed on her one day at work. When she told me the story, she became strangely somber. Irene explained that

One day, they asked me to go to the lobby for a brief meeting. When I went there, they escorted me quickly to the back of a large black limousine. The driver just went a few blocks and then returned to the back parking lot of the hospital. When I got out, there was a huge celebration with hundreds of employees there with balloons and music in an outdoor setting. I was brought onto the stage that had been set up with banners and a microphone. The banners had my name on them! It turned out they were out there to honor me as the 'Leader/Employee of the Year.' I couldn't believe it. I was mortified. It was the worst day of my working life. I somehow managed to get through the event but almost felt numb. I swore to myself that if they ever did anything remotely like that again, I would quit.

On her CDR Drivers & Rewards Assessment she scored 0% out of 100% on her motivational need for "Fame & Feedback". So, in her case, public praise and recognition was actually an intense "aversion" rather than being a positive motivator. So, while the hospital executive team and staff's actual intent was to thank and honor Irene, their enthusiastic and expensive effort not only failed, but had the reverse impact. The experience horrified and humiliated their best employee and leader.

While most people tend to have moderate to high needs for "Fame & Feedback," there are also quite a few "Irene(s)" out there. Irene had only one high Drivers & Rewards score. That was in, not surprisingly, "Humanitarian Efforts."

In another case, my coaching suggestion somewhat backfired in a lower profile, but similar situation. I was coaching Marilyn, the Director of the Leadership Development Institute at a state university. Marilyn also scored under 5% in Fame in Feedback on her Drivers & Rewards Assessment. So, I mentioned to her that

Often leaders (like her) who score low on this Driver may tend to not recognize staff members sufficiently when they achieve goals or perform well because it is not a need for them personally. Since praise and public recognition is not something they appreciate or like, it simply is not on their radar of things to do for other people. After all, why would you do something for someone else that you find unpleasant?

Now, Marilyn was a very warm and caring leader (with high Interpersonal Sensitivity on her CDR Character Assessment) so this comment hit her pretty hard.

A few days later, she acted. A new employee, Mike, had brought in a couple of big corporate accounts. So, Marilyn took initiative and had a balloon bouquet delivered to his office for all to see to recognize Mike's success. He told me the following week when I was debriefing his assessments with him that he was completely embarrassed and very uncomfortable with the balloon arrangement. It turned out that Mike had a really low score in Fame and Feedback too. Of course, we shared this tidbit with Marilyn and we all had a good laugh afterwards. Marilyn learned quickly not to publically praise Mike again! She also learned that when you "guess" or assume what someone's Drivers are, you often guess wrong.

In another situation involving a group of employees, we had a client in the petroleum pipeline industry that thought they had an employee loyalty problem developing. In fact, they were concerned that their non-union field technicians were unhappy or discontent. They were worried that this could potentially lead to union organizing activity. Previous to this, we had conducted job validity research studies on a couple of job groups for this company. Fortunately, one of those jobs was the field technician position.

The issue that triggered their concern was that only a couple of the field technicians showed up at the Annual Safety Awards Banquet. This was concerning because all of the field technicians were being honored for no lost time accidents or recordable incidents. They had achieved a stellar safety year. We went back to the validity research. We reviewed the technicians' Drivers & Rewards analysis and, as it turned out, they scored really low in Fame & Feedback. Plus, all of their other related data points showed that they were introverts who were not comfortable attending social gatherings.

What we learned was that the company did not have a loyalty or a dissatisfaction issue, they were trying to reward them in a way that was purely distasteful to the field technicians. Their actual Drivers were in "Business & Finance" and "Scientific Reasoning." They welcomed financial rewards and exposure to the economics of the business. They also found the technical aspects of their work fulfilling. So, we helped the company to rethink and redesign their rewards approach to match their employees' needs.

The bottom line is to be sure to:

- get an accurate assessment your own motivational needs, drivers and potential aversions; and,
- most importantly -- get the same information on your employees!

In this way, you won't embarrass or reward your people in ways that they find off putting or uninspiring. Since the purpose of your recognition program is to reinforce and promote positive performance achievements, make sure your design helps you reach that goal. The toll of having your employee rewards backfire is too steep.

Below are highlights of the 10 facets we measure in the CDR Drivers & Reward report.

- **Fame + Feedback** – need for recognition, feedback, praise, respect and visibility
- **Business + Finance** – money, compensation or investments, economic issues
- **Artistic Endeavors** – creative expression or interests
- **Companionship + Affiliation** – close friendships in and outside of work
- **Amusement + Hedonism** – seeks fun times, personal indulgence, and welcomes humor
- **Humanitarian Efforts** – desire for “hands on helping” to directly help the less fortunate
- **Power + Competition** – status seeking, competitive, seeking upward mobility
- **Moral Platform** – life evolves around unwavering values and beliefs
- **Scientific Reasoning** – fascination with technology, scientific analysis and discovery
- **Safety + Security** – need for long term financial, employment and personal security