



The Power of Recognition

Who needs to be appreciated? We all do. Yet we do not take much care to give to others what we want for ourselves. Recognition can be the answer to many of our personal, parental and business problems. It ought to be a way of life . . .

□ The story of Joey the Mechanical Boy is well-known in the annals of psychiatry. Joey believed that his life was controlled by a machine. When this imaginary mechanism was "turned on," he would eat, sleep and move about more or less normally. When it was "off," he would sit silent and motionless for hours at a stretch, like a parked car.

The psychiatrist treating Joey inquired into his background. It turned out that his parents had ignored him, except to attend to his physical needs. He had therefore transferred his role as a non-entity in the human world into the world of machines, where he was beyond the reach of emotion. When a fuss was made over him, he gradually emerged from his strange existence. On the way to recovery he wrote an essay in which he said, "Feelings are more important than anything under the sun."

While this is an extreme case, it is not without its lessons in human relations of all descriptions. For a lack of recognition can indeed turn a human being into a kind of mechanical thing. People who feel unnoticed and unappreciated will go through the motions of what is expected of them as if someone had pressed a button to activate them to do so. They will not, however, display the human spirit of enthusiasm or initiative. At work, at school and in the home, we have many of these "mechanical boys" in our midst.

People like this are deprived of a psychological ingredient which is as vital to the mind as a nutri-

tious diet is to the body. Their need is not only basic, but simple: it is to have those around them acknowledge that who they are, and what they do, is worthwhile. Their response to having this need denied is simple, too: like Joey, they "turn off" from the aims of their parents, teachers, mates or bosses. It is a tit-for-tat proposition: "If they don't care about me, I don't care about them."

Recognition lately has become a battle-cry in the literature of motivation. But though modern behavioural scientists have managed to measure its effects in projects and studies, the knowledge of its potency is as old as mankind.

In their detailed monographs and tables explaining why recognition is so important, the psychologists and management experts of today are long-windedly echoing Shakespeare: "One good deed, dying tongueless, slaughters a thousand waiting upon that."

"Give credit where credit is due" is high on the list of wisdom that has been passed down to us over the ages. No reasonable person would deny the validity of this advice. Who therefore would have thought that the failure to heed it still wreaks its damage in the homes, schools and workplaces of the late 20th century? The fact that it does so shows that man learns quickly when it comes to understanding the workings of inhuman things like airplanes and computers, but slowly when it comes to understanding his fellow man.

The giving of credit seems to be something that

has to be learned, at least by some people. It is not instinctive, which is rather curious, because the desire to receive credit clearly is.

Babies still in diapers will babble to call attention to some accomplishment such as pulling themselves up by a table, glowingly pleased with themselves and expecting you to be pleased along with them. As children grow, they seek acknowledgement of the little tricks they have learned, sending out the message: "Look at me. Aren't I smart?"

The thoughtful parent — thoughtful in both senses of the word — will respond with an appropriate "good for you," building up the child's confidence in his own abilities and thereby encouraging him to develop them further. This is what is known as "positive reinforcement" in behavioural science.

How to induce efforts that might never be made

Encouraging children to learn is only part of the parental task of preparing them for a reasonably happy future. The need to cultivate a healthy personality is at least as great. And in this, the giving of credit is crucial. "Words of praise, indeed, are almost as necessary to warm a child into a congenial life as acts of kindness and affection," wrote the great American educator Christian Bovee. "Judicious praise is to children what the sun is to flowers."

As every parent knows, children will always contrive to attract attention to themselves in one way or another. It is testimony to the strength of the innate drive for recognition that they will "act up" at the risk of being spanked. Apparently they subconsciously prefer recognition in the form of punishment to no recognition whatever. A troublesome child is employing a drastic means of making his presence felt.

In such cases, it may not be that recognition is lacking, but that it is excessive or inconsistent. It is literally possible to spoil children with an overdose of pampering and praise which they come to expect as a right. The inconsistency of sometimes lauding and sometimes condemning a child's "cute" antics according to one's mood produces

moody children. The pioneer psychiatrist Karen Horney warned that a child who sulks and pouts to gain attention may carry a sullen disposition into adult life.

According to psychologist Erik Erikson, recognition is the key to the development of what he called "ego identity." This is the individual's inner idea of himself — of who he is, what he stands for, what he wants out of life.

Ego identity is formed in adolescence from the sum of all a person's experience up to that point. Erikson wrote that it "gains real strength only from . . . recognition of real accomplishment." So recognition must have a perceptibly valid basis if it is not to spoil the child, perhaps for life.

Adolescence is a particularly delicate stage in personality development. Most teenagers are more shy and self-conscious than they publicly let on to be.

Good teachers make a point of seeing to it that recognition is spread evenly throughout their classes, and not confined to the more attractive students. Another characteristic of youth is impatience. Young people who feel that their efforts are being overlooked may cease trying to do their best.

Making the consumer feel like one in a million

The society surrounding them — surrounding us all — is very recognition-conscious. It has seen fit to create a plethora of awards, prizes, trophies, medals, scholarships and what-have-you to pay homage to achievements of all kinds. Some of these achievements are questionable, such as bouncing on a pogo stick 105,338 times in a row to get one's name included in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. If nothing else, such silly endeavours prove that recognition is necessary to induce efforts that otherwise would not have been made.

The system of recognition is primarily based on competition, rewarding those who have done better than their colleagues. It sometimes loses sight

of its purpose, heaping laurels on people for having little more than a pretty face or a loud mouth.

But if the system overemphasizes stardom, it does give credit for simple effort. We say thank you to people for minor courtesies, and tip those who serve us, perhaps adding a little extra for extra care and service. We applaud performances — not always, regrettably, for their excellence, but because the performer has obviously tried so hard.

The advertising industry knows how to make people feel special even when they are among millions in a mass audience. Modern ad campaigns are predicated on a point made by Dr. Samuel Johnson a couple of centuries ago — that “every man is of importance to himself.”

A commercial for a muffler service assures you that “you’re a somebody,” especially if you use that service. One of the most spectacularly successful campaigns in years, for a hamburger chain, stresses that “you’re the one,” and that “we do it all for you.”

Young people who have been brought up in this atmosphere, expecting to be recognized at every turn, may find it hard to adjust to the impersonality of life once they reach adulthood. They are accustomed to being the objects of attention, but attention now proves difficult to procure. The means of drawing notice to themselves are restricted by convention. An adult cannot kick and scream and knock over furniture without running the risk of being locked away in a padded cell.

It's at work that people are in for the biggest shock

As if the apathy of the outside world were not dampening enough, they may feel unappreciated in their own households. Actions which elicit praise from one's mother do not necessarily have the same effect on one's mate. The convention of “acting your age” prevents some people from revealing to their wives or husbands that they feel taken for granted. A man who sincerely says that his wife doesn't understand him usually means that she doesn't appreciate him as much as he thinks she should.

But it is in the work place that young people are in for the biggest shock, particularly if they join an organization run on traditional principles. Tradition dictates that “the business of business is business,” and not worrying about how employees feel.

The old-fashioned stereotype of the business boss — one still seen, incidentally, in television commercials and comic strips — is that of the tough-as-nails taskmaster who rides his subordinates unmercifully. The traditional concept of motivation was aptly expressed in a cartoon a few years ago which showed “the boss” talking to a new hiree. He says: “We have an excellent incentive plan. It you don't work your guts out, you're fired!”

The super-rich and the craving to be appreciated

For many years, the guiding philosophy of employer-employee relations was “a fair day's work for a fair day's pay,” until somebody discovered that it generated only “fair” production. Seeking to improve productivity, companies began taking pages out of psychology books and experimenting with motivational techniques.

One of the first facts to emerge from studies of employee motivation was that the old proposition that more pay equals better work could not be substantiated. Like food and water, money is of the essence when you don't have enough of it. But to normal people (meaning those not infected with ruthless ambition or greed) the significance of money diminishes in reverse proportion to the amount they have.

On this subject, it is interesting to look at people who have made more money than they could ever count, much less need: what do they desire after they have sated their desire for riches? In a word, recognition. Men have spent millions to have their names on an art gallery or concert hall, and near-billionaires would do anything to get into the House of Lords or the Senate.

In Toronto there is a monument to the lust for prestige, prestige being recognition in a tuxedo. It is called Casa Loma, and it was built by a tycoon named Sir Henry Pellatt with the object of enter-



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taining royalty. Royalty never responded to poor Sir Henry's invitations, and he died with the guest suites of his enormous castle empty. Thanks largely to the vast expense of its construction, he also died broke.

This helps to support William James's contention that "the deepest principle of human nature is the craving to be appreciated." And the same emotional force is at work in a multi-millionaire's mansion, in an office or on a factory floor.

Whoever they are, people want to do things well and have them acknowledged. The trouble is that the system tends to suppress this instinct. In the words of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the world "chills the ardour to excel."

*"We are very much what
other people think of us"*

"The most agreeable recompense which we can receive for things which we have done is to see them known, to have them applauded with praises which honour us," Molière wrote. That may be all very well for a famous playwright to say, but the tough-minded businessman is entitled to ask why an organization should go out of its way to praise employees just to make them feel good.

One answer is to be found in the basic definition of management as "the science of working *with and through people* to meet objectives." It takes no great perception to see that objectives are more likely to be met if the agents of meeting them feel good about what they are doing than if they do not.

The manager who finds it extraordinarily difficult to gain objectives may blame it on the slack habits of the workers under him. In that case, he should examine his own attitude, because all of us are, as William Hazlitt wrote, "very much what other people think of us."

If the boss shows that he thinks his subordinates are laggard or incapable of thinking for themselves,

so they will be. If he wants to change their ways, he had better look for their good points and work on strengthening those.

The most conclusive argument for recognition in the managerial field is that it is successful. Companies that have built recognition into their management systems have consistently reported substantial increases in profits and productivity. This fact had led many to adopt formal recognition programs, which most human resources managers now regard as essential for motivating employees.

*It must be fair, sincere,
and kept in proportion*

By concentrating on publicly rewarding outstanding performers, however, recognition schemes perpetuate a problem familiar to parents, teachers, managers and supervisors everywhere. This is how to recognize "good," as opposed to outstanding, behaviour while still holding out incentives for excellence. How does one ensure that unspectacular performers who are doing their best do not let up on their efforts because they feel overshadowed by their more capable peers?

Psychologist Daniel Katz put the question in a military context: "In the armed services, heroism beyond the call of duty is the basis for medals and decorations, but the everyday co-operative activities that keep an organization from falling apart are more difficult to recognize and reward." The only way around this is to make recognition an everyday way of life throughout the organization (or home or school). It must be fair, it must be sincere, and it must be in proportion. But wisely applied, it can work wonders in stimulating people to do their best.