Making Employee Recognition a Tool for Achieving Improved Performance: Implication for Ghanaian Universities

Abena Serwaa Amoatemaa*   Dorcas Darkoah Kyeremeh
College of Technology Education, Kumasi, University of Education, Winneba, P. O. Box 1277, Kumasi, Ghana

Abstract
Many organisations are increasingly making use of employee recognition to motivate employees to achieve high performance and productivity. Research has shown that effective recognition occurs in organisations that have strong supportive culture, understand the psychology of praising employees for their good work, and apply the principles of employee recognition. This paper examined employee recognition, its benefits and the various types of employee recognition programs. It also sought to propose that employee recognition looked at from the perspective of formal, informal and day-to-day, could motivate staff to ensure high performance in Ghanaian universities. It is thus, recommended that management of Ghanaian universities should commit credible resources to the design and implementation of employee recognition programs to yield the needed outcome.
Keywords: Employee recognition, employee recognition programs, performance, management, Ghanaian universities

1. Introduction

The ability of organisations to achieve their business strategy and have a sustainable competitive advantage depends to a large extent on the performance of employees. In their bid to motivate employees to achieve high performance, organisations often placed emphasis on financial rewards at the expense of non-financial rewards such as recognition. However, considerable basic research has shown that though financial rewards positively reinforce performance-enhancing behaviours and satisfy employees to some extent, but for committed employees, recognition must be given to keep them motivated, appreciated and committed (Luthans, 2000; Danish & Usman, 2010). Employee recognition has been identified to be a strong motivational tool that enriches employees' energies towards the accomplishment of organisational goals and objectives (Imran, Ahmad, Nisar & Ahmad, 2014) and also have significant positive relationship with employee performance (Rahim & Daud, 2013).

Employee recognition, according to Harrison (2005), involves the timely, informal and/or formal acknowledgement of a person's behavior, effort or business result that supports the organization's goals and values, and which clearly has been beyond normal expectations. Recognition has been held to be a constructive response and a judgment made about a person's contribution, reflecting not just work performance but also personal dedication and engagement on a regular or ad hoc basis, and expressed formally or informally, individually or collectively, privately or publicly, and monetarily or non-monetarily (Brun & Dugas, 2008). As rightly stated by (Nyakundi, Karanja, Charles & Bisobori, 2012) the aim of employee recognition is to allow individuals to know and understand that their work is valued and appreciated, provides a sense of ownership and belongingness, improves morale, enhances loyalty and increases employee retention rate in the organization.

With organisation success tied to the performance of employees, recognition is now globally more relevant and embraced in organizations determined to succeed in an economically competitive era (Nyakundi, Karanja, Charles & Bisobori, 2012) and its extensive scope presents varied options for use (Sonawane, 2008). Maritz Institute (2011) has pointed out that recognition encompasses a variety of practices and experiences that expand and enrich employee capabilities. Brun and Dugas (2008) in their scientific literature have identified four approaches to employee recognition expressed in the form of personal recognition, recognition of work practices, recognition of job dedication and recognition of results. They added that these four recognition practices recognize employees as full-fledged individuals as well as workers capable of being committed to their jobs by investing time and energy to perform duties competently and deliver concrete results. It has been held that recognition is inexpensive to distribute, available for all employees and can be offered in various forms ranging from a manager saying or writing formally to record thanks; a more senior manager in the organisation writing to the individual; public appreciation of the individual employee of the month or year to provision of gift cards and certificates, shopping vouchers, domestic goods, dinner, trophies, reserved car parking space, theatre/cinema tickets, as well as use of certain facilities (Grote, 2006; Silverman, 2004; Nolan, 2012; Luthans, 2000).

Effective recognition occurs in organisations with strong, supportive culture that understand the psychology of praising employees for their good work, apply the principles of employee recognition and encourage other employees to initiate in their working relationship (Harrison, 2005; Saunderson, 2004). Manjunath and Rajesh (2012) and Ferguson and Reio (2010), in their study also pointed out that individuals already have the potential and required expertise to drive higher performance levels, but need to be driven by employee recognition. However, not every organisation is committed to employee recognition. Neither does the scheme of service of most organisations spell out how employee recognition is to be executed. According to Brun & Dugas (2002), most managers in organisations

are disinclined in giving recognition to employees as a result of fear of losing control, employees creative abilities, resistance to egalitarian relationships, bias against recognition, lack of time, inadequate knowledge and skill for implementation. It has been observed that when organisations recognize and acknowledge employees in terms of their identification and working capacity, performance is seen to be very high because of the loyalty and commitment built over the years (Baron, 1983).

2. Objectives

The paper seeks to achieve the following objectives:
- To examine the concept of employee recognition
- To find out the types and benefits of employee recognition programs
- To examine the nature of employee recognition in Ghanaian universities
- To offer suggestions to management of Ghanaian universities to improve the practice of giving recognition to employees.

3. Types of Employee Recognition Programs

According to Punke (2013), recognition programs should be balanced between performance-based and value-based initiatives, but the programs should be comprised of three methods: formal, informal and day-to-day recognition. Similarly Saunderson (2004), has also mentioned that there are three types of recognition ie organisation-wide formal recognition, departmental-specific informal recognition and everyday spontaneous recognition.

Formal recognition consists of structured recognition programs with clearly defined objectives, processes, and criteria linked to rewarding and recognizing individuals, teams, or departments on a company-wide level for achieving specific business targets, exemplifying specific organizational values, or performing actions that go above and beyond normal work expectations. According to Punke (2013), this approach is extremely organized recognition involving recognizing employees who have done so many years of service at the organization.

Informal recognition focuses primarily on performance achievements, goal accomplishments, and other milestones by individuals or teams that may occur monthly or quarterly. It may include low-cost awards, refreshments, point-value incentives, gift cards, and certificates (WorldatWork Report, 2011). Informal recognition programs have been identified to point out employee value and contribution at the right moment as a result of its instantaneous nature and the continuous changing work environment.

Day-to-day recognition is a type of recognition practices that are frequent (daily or weekly), low or no cost, often intangible and often reliant on interpersonal skills for positive feedback that can be given to all employees (WorldatWork Report, 2011). According to Harrison (2005), the day-to-day recognition brings the benefit of immediate and powerful reinforcement of desired behavior and sets an example to other employees of desired behavior that aligns with organizational objectives. To him, it gives individuals and teams at all levels, the opportunity to recognize good work by other employees and teams, and it also gives the opportunity for them to be recognized on the spot for their own good work.

Petterson & Luthans (2006) have stressed that the conceptual differentiation between formal recognition and social recognition (informal and day-to-day recognition) is very important. Although social recognition has been given relatively less attention than formal recognition, considerable research has shown that if social recognition is provided on a contingent basis in managing employee behavior, it can be a powerful incentive motivator for performance improvement (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1997, 2001, 2003 as cited in Peterson & Luthans, 2006).

4. Benefits of Employee Recognition

Employee recognition has been identified to be a highly effective motivational instrument, that can have significant positive impact on employee job satisfaction and performance as well as overall organisational performance (Zani, Rahim, Junos, Samonol, Ahmad & Merican, 2011) and (Rahim & Duad, 2013). From the perspective of Freeman (1978), when effective recognition is provided in the workplace, favourable working environment is produced, which motivates employees to become committed to their work and excel in their performance. Highly motivated employees serve as the competitive advantage for an organisation because their performance leads an organization to well accomplishment of its goals and business strategy as well as achieve growth and prosperity (Danish & Usman, 2010; Imran, Ahmad, Nisar & Ahmad, 2014). However, a demotivated environment has been identified to produce low or courageless employees who hardly practice their skills, lack innovativeness and not fully commitment to the extent an organisation needs. Non-financial rewards such as recognition have been highlighted to have positive relationship on employee job satisfaction and organisational performance (Erbasi & Arat, 2012; Ngatia, 2015; Tausif, 2012). According to Imran, Ahmad, Nisar & Ahmad (2014), satisfied employees have positive attitude towards organisation and their jobs thereby increasing the quality and quantity of employee performance.

By consistently and frequently applying formal, informal and everyday recognition programs, organisations are provided with a powerful tool for influencing employees to live the organisation's values and implement its focus (Herzberg, 1996 as cited in Luthans, 2000). It also affords the organisation opportunity to highlight desired actions and behavior thereby creating role models for other employees (Silverman, 2004). According to Nelson (1995 as cited in Luthans, 2000) an effective employee recognition culture is achieved where the recognition programs designed and implemented, fully support the organization's strategic goals and corporate values. A white paper by Maritz Institute (2011) has supported this by indicating that a culture of recognition helps the organization to align to corporate strategy and be more responsive to market shifts thereby paving way for competitive advantage in the long term. By specifically reinforcing expected behavior, organisations not only indicate to employees that their efforts are noticed and appreciated but also inculcate in them the organisational values, goals, objectives, priorities and their role in achieving them.

Employee recognition programs have been identified to point out employee value and contribution at the right moment as a result of its instantaneous nature and the continuous changing work environment. From Silverman (2004), the traditional annual awards are distant from the performance it is rewarding thereby making the reward not to be properly valuable and meaningful. As a powerful motivational tool, employee recognition programs assist employees to see how they contribute to bottom-line results and how their contributions will be recognized and rewarded immediately. A long deferred reward loses most of its power and fails to create frequent opportunities to talk with employees about their performance and celebrate their results. In any case formal, informal and every day recognition programs are able to satisfy both employees' and employers' needs as well as bring the maximum result and function for organizations.

Employee recognition programs have become more popular and accepted in most organisations as a result of insufficiency of financial rewards alone to motivate high performance. It has been proven that financial rewards only motivate employees temporarily (Whitaker, 2010; Schechter, Thompson & Bussin, 2015). Similarly, Silverman (2004) has pointed out that though money is highly valued and employees will go all length to get, its impact on intrinsic motivation is limited at best. Relying on financial rewards as a motivator has also been identified to encourage employees to focus on whatever will earn an immediate incentive rather than creating new approaches, perceive each other as opponent in competition, strip of pride associated with work and perceive the reward as entitlements (Zobal, 1999). Taking a holistic view of rewards, Thumbran (2010) has argued that by offering non-financial rewards to potential and existing employees would be both relevant and beneficial to business and this would enable businesses to better strategize in terms of the value offered to employees. He added that employee recognition allows individuals to know and understand that their work is valued and appreciated, provides a sense of ownership and belongingness, improves morale, enhances loyalty and increases employee retention rate in the organization.

5.   Employee Recognition in Ghanaian Universities

Ghanaian universities are expected to serve as a repository of knowledge for nurturing the manpower requirements of the country. The realization of this goal depends to a greater extent on the critical roles of management is to create a work environment that will motivate to employees to be committed and perform at their best. The work environment of Universities in Ghana has undergone significant changes over the years in terms of the nature and scope of work. The changing nature of the work environment has necessitated the use of various approaches to motivate university staff to service an ever-growing student population and manage new initiatives. Attractive remuneration packages have been cited as very crucial to high perform because it fulfills financial and material desires. According to Tettey (2006) dissatisfaction with salaries is one of the key factor undermining the commitment of academics to their institutions and careers. Anku-Tsede & Kutin (2013) in their study also provided that the African worker is more interested in financial reward and may not be affected by the absence of non-financial reward. However, Management of Ghanaian universities have long expunged the erroneous belief that highly motivated employees are those who have received financial rewards in a form of high salary and other benefits. Ghanaian universities have a long history of celebrating excellent performance and meritorious work of staff through awards and recognition. The recognition programs in place seek to praise efforts, reward results, honour achievements and increase influence of employees at all levels (senior members, senior staff and junior staff) to enhance performance and productivity. Most of these programs are in the form of cash awards, symbolic awards, spot programme and verbal recognition. The corporate strategic plans of most Ghanaian universities have captured the need to give meaningful recognition and budget allocations are earmarked for such purposes. Recognition of employees in Ghanaian universities seemed to take place during graduation ceremonies to make the contributions of employees overtly made known to other employees and the general public. Employees who get recognized for doing good work feel a greater sense of self-esteem. These positive feelings play a significant role in how they view themselves and work with others.

6.   Conclusion

From the forgoing, the most effective ways to motivate employees to achieve the desired goals of the organization involve creating an environment with strong, respectful and supportive relationships between the organization and employees and a focus on genuine expressions of appreciation for specific employee achievements, service milestones and a day-to-day acknowledgement of performance excellence. Management of Ghanaian universities may perceive employee recognition be costly, non-essential practice and an expense that generate no significant benefit to the organisation but by recognizing employees' accomplishments, many psychological and motivational needs are met, resulting in enhanced performance. Apart from being a cost effective tool for providing a good way to start getting employees happy and motivated within their workspace in the short term, the organization's adopting it also tend to see increased worker productivity and performance, improved profitability, higher retention rates, and decreased costs associated with turnover in the long run. Management of Ghanaian universities should have detailed policy documents with systematically approaches for recognizing employees formally, informally and day-to-day for their contributions to the university.

7. Recommendations

For management of Ghanaian universities to successfully improve its practice of giving employee recognition and reap the benefits from it, the following recommendations are made:

- Management should view employee recognition as an important investment rather than one of the costly and non-essential practices that generate no significant benefit to the University. Employee recognition when looked at from the perspective of formal recognition program alone may be perceived as a costly. Management should commit credible and sufficient resources to ensure effective planning and successful execution of the program. Miller (2011) has argued that for organisations to reap measureable results such as lowered absentee rate, improved quality productivity and customer service, the leadership of organisations should be able to dedicate the necessary human and financial resources to make the recognition program a success.

- Management should be on board. Continual management visibility is crucial in the effective implementation of a recognition program. Management of universities should have specific roles to play in order to remain an integral part of the program to encourage and model employee recognition for all levels of leadership. Recognition as a motivational tool is most of the time shelved because those who are to give recognition wrongly assume that it is not part of their work schedules and would not be valued by employees. Miller (2011) has pointed out that the key to being an effective leader of employee recognition initiatives is being committed. According to Saunderson (2004), organisations would have to provide their manager and leaders with training and educational resources to enable them become effective recognition givers. He added that greater accountability for giving verbal, written and tangible forms of recognition need to be built into performance contracts and reviews. In the opinion of Saunderson (2004) this will require improved organisational support through creating stronger organisational culture, clearer policies and procedures, along with budgeted monies for giving employee recognition. It has been argued that that nothing kills advances made by recognition programs faster than organisational systems that do not support desired behaviors (Nelson, 2001).

- Management should promote a culture of recognition. Carnegie (1985) has intimated that keeping the program clear, unambiguous, simple and easy to follow would prevent employees from perceiving it as another example of organisational bureaucracy. Daniel & Metcalf (2005) have also pointed out that the recognition program should be thoroughly maintained with a minimum of administrative effort. To them any system that requires either excessive management control, financial calculations that require complex gyrations or sophisticated plans that require exceptional employee understanding will not achieve desired results.

- Management should give meaningful and valued recognition. This suggests that recognition should be tailored to each employee (or group of employees) based on their personal preferences and circumstances. It has become evident that recognition when given by those who have the power and resources to make desired outcomes a reality for the recipient will have stronger effects than those recognition givers who do not have such power or resources. Principal Officers, deans of faculty and heads of department who have direct contact with employees should be tasked to continuously look for opportunities to recognize and appreciate employees for good ideas and work well done. Daniel & Metcalf (2005) have pointed out that any materialistic awards coming out of the recognition program must be valued by all participants and perceived as having value, dignity and meaning. Employees also see recognition to be very valuable when they are publicized on the organisation's website, newsletter, annual report, minutes of departmental meetings, staff meetings, day of appreciation and photo display on recognized bulletin/notice boards. Dineen (2005) has indicated that publicly announcing accomplishments of employees validates to employees that they are highly appreciated and reminds them of their opportunities for recognition and rewards, which in turn increases their level of effort and morale within the

organization.

- Management should evaluate recognition programs. The recognition programs must be continuously monitored and evaluated in order to keep them relevant, current and aligned with their goals and values. Management should survey employees, hold focus group discussions, measure participation rates, and evaluate the effectiveness of recognition programs using measures that are statistically reliable, valid and substantive in nature. This evaluative process should be completed at the conclusion of every award cycle so that adjustments can be made to improve the system and also to update the program to retain employee interest.

- Management should establish and maintain a strategic communication plan that communicates all aspects of the recognition strategy, including program objectives, recognition processes, events, celebrations, tools, and a contact person for program information. Management of Ghanaian universities has to note that well-designed programs sometimes fail to accomplish their goals if they are not properly communicated and promoted. Effective communication by management will signal to employees creditable behaviours being reinforced and the reason behind such behaviour. The program details can be published on various notice boards, orientation handbook and other conspicuous workplace locations to educate employees on the program details.

- Management should ensure that the recognition practices meet the expectations of the organisation as well as the needs of employees. Haider, Aamir, Hamid &Hashim (2015) have indicated that the success of an organization at times hinge on the fine alignment between the organizational goals and that of employees' individual goals. As reiterated by Sutton (2015), management should ensure that recognition programs link the actual performance being recognized directly to the organization's core values and strategic objectives. To him, by tying recognition to the organization's objectives and then measuring that activity would not only ensure effective management of the organisational culture and talent, but would enable management to also provide on-going feedback. If there is no direct link to the bottom-line results of the company and no performance measures to establish this link, employees will be left wondering why the organisation is offering a program that is so disconnected from their day-to-day reality and the organisation will get no meaningful payback on its investment.

- Management should be able to provide well written policies or procedures on employee recognition that articulate the philosophy and objectives for effective implementation of all recognition programs. This has the potency to provide purpose and direction for the recognition program and encourage and reward specific employee behaviors that advance the organization's goals and objectives. Policies and procedures on recognition do not appear to be available and widely known in most Ghanaian universities. According to Daniel & Metcalf (2005), employees must understand the mission of the recognition program, have some opportunity to make decisions on it and exert control over the program's direction. Employees are more likely to participate in an employee recognition program if they are made aware of the program's existence at the outset.

- Management should be ready to give consistency, fairness and equality top priority when designing and implementing a recognition program and also ensure that the program is open to all employees. According to Catlette & Hadden (2008), consistency depends on nothing but conformity to an existing standard and involves treating all employees equally. To them fairness requires treating each employee appropriately, and individually, based on the circumstances and contribution of that employee. Management of Ghanaian universities should come out clear on behaviours and actions meriting recognition and follow through with actually recognizing and rewarding these behaviours consistently. Employees at all levels who meet the criteria outlined for receiving the recognition should be included and awarded. In line with the argument of Silverman (2004), Management should ensure that whichever approach is used for selection and awarding employees is credible, transparent and robust. To him, if employees feel in any way that the assessment method has not been fair, the program may be undermined thereby demotivating employees rather than motivating them.

- Management should ensure that recognition is given immediately the desired behavior or achievements have occurred in order not to underestimate the importance of the activity. In the University setting most outstanding performance get recognized and rewarded at the end of the year or during congregation ceremonies. By that time, the employee may well have forgotten all about the specific behavior being recognized and certainly would not be encouraged to repeat that behavior. For Management of Ghanaian universities to do away with memory distortions, the recognition should follow the behavior as immediately as possible in order to create a stronger link between the act of recognition and the specific behavior (Schacter, 2001). Where recognition is sporadic, employees may perceive the recognition programs to be unfair and bias and this will not encourage the desired behaviors and actions.

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