

Video Script: The Key Elements of Highly Effective Employee Praise

Welcome

Hello, and welcome to today's presentation, *The Key Elements of Highly Effective Employee Praise*. Thank you for taking time out and watching.

As professional dentists, we all want to be part of a workplace that is characterized by high morale, optimal levels of productivity and a general buzz of positivity. After all, we human beings spend – on average – 90,000 hours of our life at work.¹ But for most employers this kind of utopian ideal does not come about without a little know-how and a whole lot of empathy and strategic planning.

That's where we can help you out. Let's take a brief look at today's content:

- First of all, let's dispel some of those common misconceptions we may have about praising employees.
- We'll look at the rationale behind employee praise – what are the benefits? What kind of culture do we want to create?
- Let's consider exactly what motivates employees and makes them receptive to praise.
- Finally, how do we translate rhetoric into reality? We will cover some all-important *practical* strategies that can be employed in your work environment. And how do we measure the success of our endeavours?

Misconceptions Dispelled

Most of us recognize the importance of patient satisfaction but how many of us actually think about *employee* satisfaction?² Even those of us who think we show our employees appreciation don't do it nearly as often, or as well, as we think we do. There are plenty of myths out there, actively *discouraging* employers from lavishing too much praise on their employees. Let's explore some of them.

- **Misconception 1:**

One of the most common misconceptions employers have is that they will be perceived as a 'soft touch' or taken advantage of if they don't maintain an aloof distance from their workforce. Not so. Research consistently demonstrates that

workers who feel valued and appreciated work harder and are more committed.³ Here we have a completely rational fear of appearing weak: as employers, leaders, bosses – whatever we label ourselves as – we want our workforce to respect us. Keeping a professional distance seems like a reasonable way to ensure this. But that shouldn't stop us from proffering praise *where it is due* (more of that later). After all, we don't have the monopoly on wanting to feel respected.

- **Misconception 2:**

Now, I'm sure we've all heard those dentists who would argue that a pay-check is the reward and recognition in itself, and question why someone should be praised for doing a job they are actually *paid* to do. In our ever-evolving world, perhaps this opinion holds some weight; many of us feel blessed just to be engaged in active employment and able to maintain a solvent lifestyle for ourselves and our families. Of course, the pay-check motivates someone to get up and go to work; it motivates them to complete the work as stated in the job description – but does it really inspire and engage workers to go that extra mile? Not really. Work becomes a mere economic transaction rather than something to be passionate about. Again, there is evidence to suggest that even highly motivated, productive individuals, when they feel prized, seem to find that little bit more to give.³ Just imagine if you could make every employee in your workspace feel that way? The aggregate impact on your dental practice could be phenomenal.

- **Misconception 3:**

Some dentists mistakenly believe that rewarding employees is an outdated concept. Sure, initiatives like 'Employee of the Month' have become jaded and meaningless – but while the method may be out of date, the concept of demonstrative gratitude and appreciation will never get old: we just need to find more effective methods of expressing it! After all, nobody likes to feel like a cog in a wheel.

- **Misconception 4:**

Competitive reward systems have long been deployed as a means of incentivising employees. Do they work? Sure they do – for the successful few. For those who fail to shine, this kind of 'praise' does nothing to reverse disengagement. In fact, it can contribute to plummeting morale and poor self-esteem – possibly even depression.

Imagine putting your all into your job on a daily basis, only to be outshone by a colleague? Envy and resentment ensue! Not great for peer support and collaboration, either! As dentists, we are in the business of making people feel better, whether that be on a clinical or cosmetic level. So this brand of praise hardly makes sense, does it?

- **Misconception 5:**

One final myth is that rewarding employees can be a costly business. This needn't be so. There are many – completely free – ways of praising employees, some of which will be outlined later in this presentation. Nevertheless, financial expenditure can reap its own rewards; research indicates that employees with higher engagement levels are notably more productive than their disengaged counterparts and are significantly less likely to leave.⁴ Sounds like a pretty good investment, doesn't it?

So now that we've uncovered the facts behind some of those myths, it's time to look at the benefits of employee praise.

Benefits of Praising Employees

The benefits of effective praise – with stress on the word 'effective' – are twofold: the impact is felt by both you *and* your employees. The two are not mutually exclusive: a happy, fulfilled group of employees drives a successful practice, which in turn contributes to the success, satisfaction and wellbeing of the dentist! A win-win situation. An increasing number of employers are coming to the realization that by treating their employees as rounded people yields better results – satisfied employees are more proven to be more productive; an increase in profitability is a natural consequence of this.⁵

Research bears out the notion that more engaged employees not only perform better, but are less likely to move on to another position – the obvious benefit here is that the dentist saves the outlay of advertising and training, while retaining established members of staff who really know the intricate details of your specific practice. Not only that, but employees who feel valued are less likely to take time off

sick: research clearly illustrates that engaged staff take fewer days off sick than their less engaged peers.⁵ This amounts to a significant economic impact.

Let's not forget, though, it's not all about money: the real objective here is to ensure that our employees feel valued and respected.⁶ Focus on the person, and the rest follows naturally. Valuing the individual clearly dovetails with the wellbeing agenda which, let's face it, is here to stay. Many wellbeing policies are essentially *reactive* and address issues only when they present themselves. The World Health Organisation defines workplace stress as a response that is presented when demands and pressures are not matched to the individual's ability to cope; the worker may feel that they have little or no control over their work and that their superiors offer very little support, if any.⁷ It's not too much of a stretch to see how effective praise can be used in a *preventative* capacity. Who wants an employee who feels so utterly demoralised as to fit the World Health Organization's description? Investing in developing effective praise as a *preventative* strategy in your practice can have exponential benefits.

The Power of Motivation

So, we know that effective praise benefits everyone concerned in the world of dentistry. But in order for praise to actually be effective, we need to know exactly what it is that motivates our employees. The truth is, there is no 'one size fits all'. Everyone is different; different people are motivated by different factors. There is no short-cut to getting to know the people in your employ, into building relationships and learning what makes each individual tick. There are, however, some general principles that will always hold true. Let's take a look at a couple of these.

- **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

Abraham Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' outlines a basic organisation of categories of need, ranging from concrete needs at the bottom to more abstract needs at the top: a sense of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Remember earlier, when we mentioned the pay-check in itself not being a great motivator? That's because it fulfils a basic physiological need – to make enough money to survive, have a home, be able to eat, and so on. So what we, as dentists, have to do is tap into those more complex needs. Satisfying these needs contributes to employees feeling good and functioning well; it enables them to engage with colleagues and patients, and to

adapt to changing circumstances in the work environment. The very definition of wellness! So what kind of role does praise play in all this? Let's consider the two key types of motivation:

First of all, extrinsic motivation: this involves a tangible transaction, such as the exchange of money for service – that pay-check again. An extrinsically motivated task can be performed despite having little or no interest in it. On the other hand, we have intrinsic motivation, which compels us to perform well in order to derive some kind of satisfaction. This satisfaction can be derived from enjoyment, from a sense of engagement that comes from being trusted and having some degree of autonomy – and from a confidence rooted in the knowledge that a job is being performed well. They have belief in what they are doing. So just how do employees know that a job is performed well? The answer is: praise. The key is to offer the kind of praise that the employee values: for some, this could be public acknowledgement of a job well done; for others, the praise could be implicit in being given the autonomy to carry out a task. The key to selecting the right kind of praise is, as mentioned earlier, the relationship that has been developed between dentist and employees. Do treat with some caution, though: excessive or inauthentic praise has been found to decrease motivation. We've all been on the receiving end of this kind of praise; we can smell the insincerity. So relationships matter. They're fundamental. The two types of motivation just described can interact, of course. Material rewards can easily be the prize for successful completion of tasks that are intrinsically motivated - for example, a good grade can be an extrinsic reward for hard work, but the hard work itself may be the result of intrinsic motivation. Just ensure that the material reward is not the only push factor.

- **The Power of Purpose**

Many great leaders throughout history have inspired others to follow their vision, simply by communicating a strong sense of purpose.⁸ Now, we may not see ourselves on the scale of Martin Luther King or some 'tech giant', but we undoubtedly want to inspire our employees and make them feel invested in our vision. Try asking yourself just how far your employees *really* care about the future of your practice – for some of us, the answer to that may be slightly discomfiting. There is, however, a way forward. Our purpose is to ensure that our people emotionally

invested; that they have the impetus to do the work they do; that they actually want to contribute to our success.

This concept of emotional investment clearly harmonizes with Maslow's theory. And don't we all want that exact thing: employees who contribute? In a nutshell, let's think of the concept as a circle: imagine three concentric circles, with the word 'Why' nestled proudly in the center; this is followed by 'How', then finally 'What' in the outer circle. This is the reverse of the strategies adopted by most organizations and businesses. Yet it works. Think about the success stories of numerous technology companies who motivate their employees in this way, as just one example. We want our employees to have an unprompted and unambiguous response when questioned as to *why* they do their job ; 'I get paid to do it' should be quite far down their list. So how do we, as leaders of dental practices, tune in to their 'Why'? You guessed it: praise! Think 'inspiration' rather than 'manipulation'; think 'praise' rather than 'raise'.

So we're pretty conversant with the theories behind the power of praise – but how does that theoretical knowledge translate into practical application? Let's look at some strategies you can try out.

Rhetoric to Reality: Practical Strategies

1. Be judicious with your praise. Throwing around praise like confetti will have the reverse of the result you want. Make sure you mean it when you give it; make sure you're selective as when you offer it. Make the praise commensurate with the performance.
2. Be authentic. This really links into the idea of 'judicious praise'. If you praise someone just because you think you should, they'll know it.
3. Be specific in your praise. Now this really embraces the first two points, simply because you are giving a reason for the praise. This can be something along the lines of 'I was really impressed with that report you did for me; it was really well researched and detailed'. This can apply to pretty much any task and is the single easiest way to administer genuine praise.
4. Public acknowledgement. Not everyone likes this. But most people do. In a briefing, a meeting, or even in an email or minutes, for example, openly mention the contribution someone on your team has made. And don't forget

those 'invisible' people who work 'behind the scenes', possibly tucked away in offices, - the people who barely make it onto your radar on a day-to-day basis. They make a valuable contribution too – or they wouldn't be there! Recognition goes a long, long way.

5. Make small gestures. Small gestures may be small in themselves but they can make a big difference. This can be simple things like bring in coffees in the morning or sending staff home half an hour earlier on a quiet day. Make sure these gestures are unexpected and sporadic, however – you want your employees to feel valued, not take you for granted. This is one of those examples of praise that doesn't have to be verbalized – sometimes actions speak louder than words!
6. Remember and use names. There's not much to be said here; having your name forgotten doesn't exactly scream respect.
7. Enable autonomy and trust. Nothing tells an employee they are under-valued more than being micro-managed. Sure, some employees require more structure and support than others, but this form of management rarely has the desired effect. Most people work best when they are trusted to do a job and have a reasonable element of control. Try asking your employees (especially new staff) to write their own job description; chances are it will be at least as extensive as the original list of tasks – and possibly even longer! Show confidence in your employees by entrusting them with tasks, then giving specific praise on completion. In the longer term, this makes *your* job easier too!
8. Personalise. Use appraisal sessions to get to know your employees and what motivates them. Everyone is different: some may like to be regularly complimented on their work; some may like to be shown trust; some may be motivated by something else entirely. Again – relationships matter!
9. Encourage peer praise. This is great for fostering that positive workplace mentioned at the beginning of this presentation. This is about creating a *culture*. It may be somewhat 'gimmicky', but how about trying out a 'secret buddy' system? This works by 'secretly' issuing employees with the name of another employee, for whom they should regularly carry out tasks that boost morale: this can be leaving notes of support, a home-baked muffin, a nice piece of stationery etc. on the recipient's desk (or other convenient place).

Employees could organize this system themselves. Another form of peer praise is something called the 'FRED' award. 'FRED' stands for 'Friendly; Resilient; Enthusiastic; Dedicated'. Every week, on a slip of paper, an employee nominates one of their peers, citing the reason for nomination. This is followed by a weekly prize draw which is accompanied by a small – probably edible! – prize (let's forget we're in the dentistry business here...) It's a good idea to ensure that *all* nomination slips are then given to the recipients – who doesn't like to read positive comments about themselves? And team spirit is alive and well.

10. Last but not least: know yourself. It can be incredibly empowering to deepen your self-awareness. Knowing your own strengths and areas for development can greatly enhance the way you relate to your employees. It's human nature to relate better to people who are similar to ourselves – but it's more likely that we are surrounded by a range of different personalities. We want to get the best out of them *all*.

Summary

As you can see, we have covered some of the most salient elements of employee motivation and have been armed with some practical strategies to help us channel that motivation. Let's hope all this has given us some food for thought and thank you again for joining us today.

Quiz:

1) How many hours do we spend on average in our life at work?

- A. 120,000
- B. 90,000
- C. 75,000

2) 'Employee of the Month' is a highly effective form of employee praise. True/False

3) Praising employees will encourage them to take advantage of you. True/False

4) Which of the following is a form of extrinsic motivation?

- A. Enthusiasm
- B. Pay rise
- C. Public recognition.

5. Which of the following words should be at the centre of dental practice employee praise policy?

- A. What
- B. How
- C. Why

6. Most employees love to be micro-managed. True/False

7. It is important to randomly praise employees, even for poorly performed tasks. True/False

Quiz Answers:

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