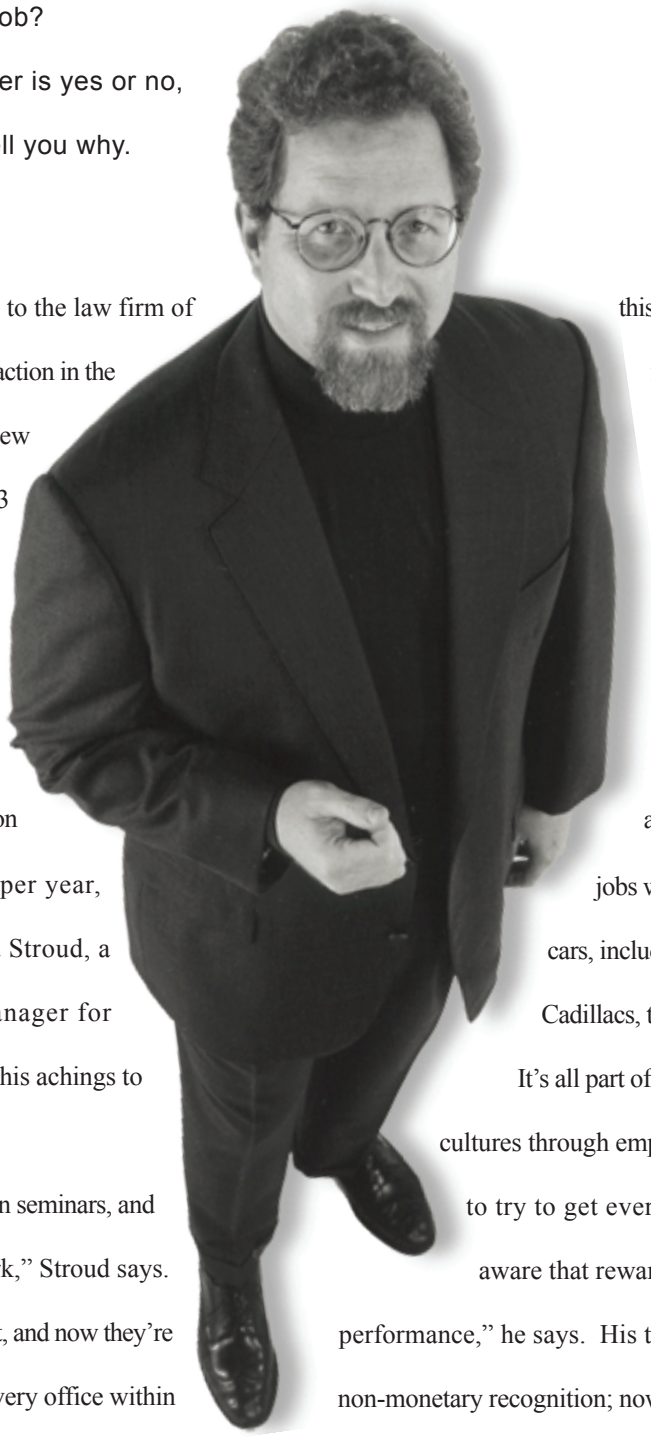
A mission to motivate

Do you love your job? Whether the answer is yes or no, Bob Nelson can tell you why.



When Bob Nelson came to the law firm of Perkins Coie, job satisfaction in the finance department grew from 48 percent to 73 percent within two years.

What is ironic is that he never actually stepped into the firm's Seattle office.

As a motivational speaker, Nelson addresses 80 to 100 audiences per year, including one attended by Carla Stroud, a finance department project manager for Perkins Coie. In turn, Stroud used his achings to help transform the firm.

"I've now been to two Bob Nelson seminars, and I know that these techniques worrk," Stroud says. "They've worked for my department, and now they're working for every department in every office within this company. I've learned it's the little reminders that make a difference."

For instance, Perkins Coie created a "Happiness Committee": five anonymous people who, at any time, can say, "It's time to do something fun." The committee throws picnics on the roof of the building and spur-of-the-moment parties for jobs well done, and has given Matchobx cars, including Mercedes-Benzs, BMWs and Cadillacs, to all employees.

It's all part of Nelson's goal: to change company cultures through employee rewards. "I'm on a mission to try to get every single manager and company aware that rewards are the single biggest driver of performance," he says. His thesis for graduate school studied non-monetary recognition; now he sees himself as a translator of

motivational research. He puts that research--what is often lost in technical and academic journals--into practice.

"Employees are unhappy with their jobs only because they've given up," Nelson says of his basic philosophy behind employee motivation." I'm trying to show employees that they can make things happen, and I'm trying to show bosses that the way they manage can have a big impact on results."

To do that, Nelson espouses three key techniques. They are:

1) Reward behavior you want repeated.

2) Use personal recognition to motivate. Surprisingly, studies show that thank-you notes, drop-in visits to praise work habits, and impromptu congratulations at staff meetings are far more motivational than cash bonuses.

3) Give managers the tools—and the same kind of encouragement you expect of them—to enact change. The primary reason why most managers don't frequently reward and recognize employees is that they lack the time or the creativity to think of ways to do it.

That's where Nelson steps in. In 1994, he published *1001 Ways to Reward Employees*. In typical Nelson fashion, the book is packed with 2,500 positive activities that honor workers. That book—now with more than 1 million copies sold and 50-plus months on *BusinessWeek's* best-seller list—reached people such as Carla Stroud and began to change the way companies motivate employees. The book's success also launched Nelson's speaking career: Readers called and asked him to give presentations at their companies.

> "I show employees that they can make things happen."

Although it took his fans to begin his motivational speaking career, Nelson's career path shows this was part of a natural progression. Nelson has worked for both large corporations and small businesses, often in the human resources department. For 12 of the past 15 years, he also mentored under *One Minute Manager* co-author Dr. Ken Blanchard, working every job from ghost writer to department manager for Blanchard's California-based firm, The Ken Blanchard Companies. "I have also been influenced by Peter Drucker [author of *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*]," Nelson says. "I feel like I'm standing on their [Blanchard's and Drucker's] shoulders."

In 1997, three years after beginning his speaking tour, Nelson founded Nelson Motivation, Inc. The San Diego company markets his 18 business-related books, including Nelson's latest best-seller, *1001 Ways to Take Initiative at Work*. The 10-employee company (only five work full-time) also offers two Nelson-led services: speaking and "Consultant on Call." Nelson's consultation service charges quarterly fees for exclusive resources such as private executive briefings and quarterly reviews of members' recognition and reward programs. As a speaker, Nelson has addressed thousands of people—including the employees and management teams of many Fortune 500 companies including Hewlett-Packard, American Express Financial Services and Walt Disney World. Today, Nelson makes about $7,500 for a half-day seminar.

In the future, Nelson hopes to refine his motivational offerings, making it easier for individuals to foster good workplace environments. "I talk to 600 people and they take notes; I never know what happens," he explains. "I'd like to set up a free three-month assessment that people can take to management to show that motivating employees through rewards is working. People don't need to wait for management—they can change companies themselves."

-Jennifer Dirks

© Bob Nelson, Ph.D., president of Nelson Motivation Inc. and best-selling author of 1501 Ways to Reward Employees, 1001 Ways to Energize Employees and The 1001 Rewards & Recognition Fieldbook. Contact Dr. Bob: bob@drbobnelson.com, 1-(858) 673-0690, www.linkedin.com/drbobnelson. Originally published in Frontier.