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From boyhood to manhood  
Using symbols to recognize achievements

In a Discovery Channel television series entitled “The Deadliest Catch” fisherman travel to the Bering Sea in Alaska to catch king crabs. The show depicts the journey of five crews that leave the lapping waters of Puget Sound to enter the hostile, violent, sub-zero environment of the Alaskan sea to cash in on the lucrative market that thrives underwater. Crew members can make as much as \$50,000 for working on the boats simply by catching crabs for a few weeks. However, the life-threatening extremes they must endure in order to accomplish their goal is beyond words. They must survive sudden storms that produce thirty foot (freezing) waves that crash into the boat and can sweep them into the sea in a heartbeat, pound away with sledgehammers at six inches of ice that continuously engulf the boat, work for up to twenty four hours on deck without sleep hauling in crab cages filled with hundreds of pounds of crabs, confront hyperthermia, depression, hostility from the captain and crewmembers, and sit helplessly as the boat navigates ice flows that could easily rip the hull of the boat apart in minutes, sending them to a freezing grave below the sea. Each year a number of crew members lose their lives while fishing, thus depicting the moniker of the series.

Every boat has a crew of five members that includes seasoned veterans and one or two “greenhorns”. Many times the greenhorns succumb to the excesses of the sea and the boat must turn around and leave them at the base camp in Alaska. Those who continue with the crew are often pushed to their limits by the sea, the captain and the veterans who inspire them by ridiculing their very existence. In the last show of the season, one greenhorn who completed the journey wanted more than anything to have a jacket embroidered with the boat’s logo on it. It was not an expensive jacket; it was not even a new jacket. However, it was a symbol of his membership into the brotherhood of the crew and an announcement that he was not a boy but a man. After he was presented with the jacket, right off the back of the captain, he hugged each crew member and the captain, and exclaimed, “This is all I wanted. I don’t care about the money, I wanted this jacket”! I’m not sure if he would really feel this way if the captain told him that since he had the jacket he need not be paid, but the point is that it’s not about the money, it’s about being recognized and respected that counts. The jacket was the quintessential expression of recognition.

In companies, as on the boat, it’s not much different. Study after study has shown that, if commensurate with industry standards, employees don’t care about the money or benefits; they care about being recognized for their achievements. Similarly, as on the boat, recognition is best expressed in symbols that reflect their acceptance into the culture of the company. For example, a contract manufacturer for our company gave one of our employees a polo shirt engraved with their company logo. This person wore the shirt all the time and was the envy of many of our coworkers. The shirt cost only about \$25 and was not fancy but it symbolized his recognition for doing an outstanding job for them.

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If you think about it, symbols are continuously used to recognize contributions of individuals to the culture of a company or industry: the Oscar, the Tony, the Purple Heart, the Master's Jacket, a World Series or Superbowl ring. The Stanley Cup. The monetary value of each of these is relatively low but the value of the status embodied in them is priceless. What are the symbols your company uses to recognize outstanding achievement? More fundamentally, when was the last time you presented an employee with a symbol that expressed your appreciation for a job well done? If you haven't, how long will that employee stay with you? And how much money will you lose as a result of her walking out your door forever?

These are tough questions that require hard work and continuous effort. If you're interested in finding out if you have what it takes to honor your employees, you need to contact me. I've been successful with many clients and can probably help you.

A final word of caution. As with the captain of the boat you may have to symbolically give up the jacket right off your back. The results, however, will be priceless.