

TAKES OFF AT SEATTLE ZOO

Showing your appreciation of employees can go a long way.

Any great company is only as great as its employees — recognizing great employees is essential to creating a workplace that isn't just a job, but a community of people who value each other. Reward systems have to be meaningful yet simple and engaging to use — all while not breaking the bank.

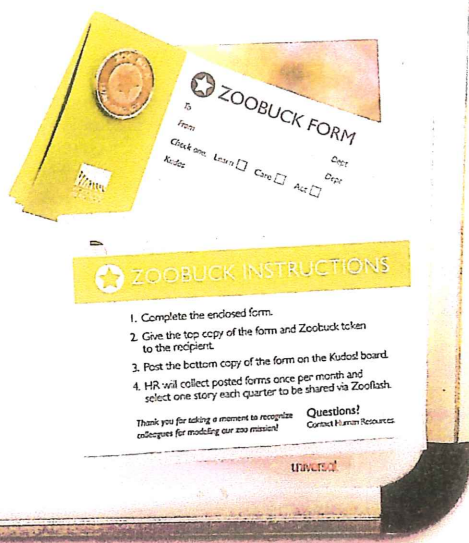
For Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, creating a great workplace is as easy as flipping a coin. In order to recognize exemplary acts, the zoo instituted a peer-to-peer recognition system called ZooBucks. ZooBucks are small cards accompanied by a custom-printed silver token valued at \$1 and redeemable anywhere in the zoo. The ZooBuck system is easy to use for employees and volunteers, easy to run for the zoo

and provides a meaningful sense of appreciation for all.

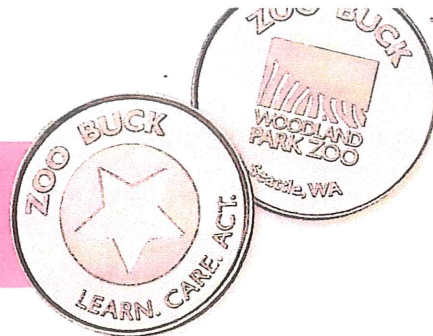
Woodland Park Zoo is a nonprofit zoo, with the mission of helping to protect and promote the conservation of animals and their habitats. Recognizing a staff of 275 year-round employees, 100-150 temporary employees and 750 volunteers for their dedication to the zoo's mission was a daunting task before the ZooBucks system was in place. Employees and volunteers are spread across 92 acres and perform a wide variety of tasks ranging from running international conservation programs to running summer camps for local kids. That made it difficult to create a system of recognition applicable to all of the various employees.

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By David Blumenfeld, Osborne Coinage



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vice president of human resources, reported that more than 406 ZooBucks tokens had been distributed. The program recognizes great service and creates a community of employees and volunteers who respect and recognize each other. Best of all, the coins recycle within the program, allowing the zoo to fulfill its mission of sustainability.

Thanks ... and a Coin

The tokens are attached to a Kudos form and are conveniently accessible to employees and volunteers at 32 "Kudos Boards" across the zoo. Each board is half cork board, half white board, and each contains a small box of ZooBuck forms. A \$1 ZooBuck token is attached to the form.

When one employee or volunteer wants to recognize another, he/she finds and fills out a ZooBuck form. The form is carbon paper, so one sheet goes to the employee and the other is posted on the Kudos Board.

The form includes spaces describing who the token is for and from, and which respective department. Checkboxes titled "Learn," "Care" and "Act" are next, indicating which aspect of the zoo's mission the employee went above and beyond to fulfill. Next is an open space titled "Kudos," which allows the witnessing employee or volunteer to describe the act and what made it special.

Whether an employee helped a customer change a tire in the parking

lot, helped another employee with paperwork or took time out of his/her day to train a volunteer, the acts rewarded have ranged widely, Keeler said.

"Our values are Learn, Care and Act, so everyday things you would appreciate qualify. Anyone can use it," she said.

The ZooBuck token is a silver coin smaller than a quarter, with a star in the middle and an inscription reading "ZooBuck, Learn, Care, Act" around the star. The other side features the Woodland Park Zoo logo.

A "Thank You" with Some Value Behind It

The employee or volunteer gets to keep the Kudos card and the coin attached to it. The other sheet of the Kudos form is displayed publicly for other employees and volunteers to read. Once a month, the HR department collects the posted ZooBuck cards and picks a story to publish in an all-zoo newsletter. The cards are even entered into a monthly drawing for tickets to Seattle-area arts and cultural organizations including museums, the aquarium and the science center.

"Some people write more than others, but we get some good stories, which helps us acknowledge our employees and volunteers for the great work that they do every day. It's a communication path for us to celebrate individually, but also across other venues," Keeler said.

It's more than just one employee saying "Thank You." With little effort from fellow employees, volunteers and the HR department, employees and volunteers get recognized on multiple levels. Combined with the simple addition of the coin, it's a "Thank You" with some value behind it.

Keeler was surprised that not many employees and volunteers have redeemed their tokens in the two months of the program's existence.

The coins add a novelty to the recognition system and are physical reminders of being recognized for great service, but the coins have some redeemable worth as well. The coins are valued at \$1 and are redeemable anywhere within the zoo — even in parts of the zoo that are run by third parties, such as the gift shop or any of the various food locations. Employees and volunteers have been recognized are treated to a refreshing soda on a hot day or a small gift at the gift store.

"Maybe they're saving tokens up to buy something at the gift store. Maybe they just like to keep it as a physical remembrance of their recognition," Keeler said. "I kept mine as a reminder of the great program we have created. I also keep it visible on my desk as a reminder to recognize people often for their contributions."

Creating a Community

Keeler and a recognition committee of cross departmental employees looked to other zoos' employee recognition

programs as they were designing Woodland Park Zoo's program. The committee was inspired by the zoo in Phoenix, which uses paper fashioned to look like a dollar bill. The Woodland Park Zoo opted for a coin instead, not only because the zoo uses tokens for other purposes but because it was a more sustainable option.

"Sustainability is a core value here, we're always looking for ways to reduce waste and reuse materials, so the coin made sense over a piece of paper," she said.

Whereas the paper ticket could tear or be crumpled, the coin is sturdier and can be recycled within the system once spent onsite. The Kudos forms are printed on recyclable paper, so altogether, the program doesn't create much waste.

Spreading the Word — and the Culture — of Appreciation

Having tokens around is nothing new for Woodland Park employees; the zoo uses tokens for rides on the carousel, and as promotional materials for their conservation programs. Naturally when it came time to order, the HR department turned to the zoo's pre-existing relationship with Osborne Coinage. Keeler appreciated the ability to customize both sides of the coin and insert the values of the zoo into the ZooBuck coin: "Learn, Care, Act."

The recognition committee budgeted for \$15,000 the first year due to the cost of development, procurement of supplies and implementation. The committee expects costs to decrease as the program is sustained because

the coins are a central part of the program and can be reused.

Ordering was a bit trickier, given that Keeler had to place an order of at least 5,000 coins, which was more than she thought was needed. Still, it was cost effective and the value was worth it. She keeps the extra coins locked up — they are valuable, after all.

Because the coins are reusable, they go onto new cards once spent. Only about a hundred tokens are out at any given time — although, if employees and volunteers keep saving them, Keeler might have to dip into the surplus.


Even though the zoo was no stranger to custom coins, employees and volunteers had to be taught how to use the ZooBucks forms and Kudos cards. Keeler headed the initiative and with the support of an engaged recognition committee and the volunteer department used all-staff emails, meetings, volunteer newsletters and new-hire orientations to educate the employees and volunteers.

The program was so intuitive and simple that it caught on fast: In just four months, 406 tokens were given. Whereas other recognition systems the zoo has used in the past dealt with a specific department, the ZooBuck system applies to all employees and volunteers working for the zoo.

It's all a part of creating a culture of appreciation at the zoo, Keeler said. "We're all very busy, and it may not be top of mind, but building it in and giving employees and volunteers an easy way for that to be part of our culture is important."

Going Above and Beyond for Great Employees

With a coin and a card, Dana Keeler and the zoo's recognition committee created a system of recognizing and appreciating great employees and volunteers. Conveniently located where employees and volunteers will see them every day, the ZooBucks tokens are easy and fun to use. Best of all, it's a meaningful system of appreciation, and it's entirely sustainable thanks to the ZooBuck coin. Even though only valued at \$1, it's a powerful reminder of recognition. Employees and volunteers can exchange the tokens for something they want, like a drink or a small gift, or they can keep them as a physical remembrance of their act.

Only in the third month of the program, Keeler is confident that ZooBucks will take off and be a crucial part of recognition and employee life at the Woodland Park Zoo. The zoo continues to win awards because of the great community it continues to create. 

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