

# Do You Tell Your Employees You Appreciate Them?



The research is clear: Employee recognition — when done well — has huge payoffs. According to the data we collect on leaders across industries, every measure of morale, productivity, performance, customer satisfaction, and employee retention soars when managers regularly provide recognition.

And, yet there are many leaders out there who fail to do it frequently or skillfully. In fact, the most common complaint that we hear about managers is that they fail to convey appreciation. One survey, conducted at a health care company, found that 29% of employees reported not having received any recognition within the past year.

The graph below is an analysis of a subsection of the tens of thousands of 360-degree assessments we've collected. The data shows the impact of giving recognition on levels of employee engagement. Leaders rated in the bottom 10% for providing recognition had employees at the 27th percentile on engagement. By contrast, those leaders rated in the top 10% were at the 69th percentile.

Those leaders in the top group also had employees who:

- Were much more confident that they would be treated fairly.
- Felt they were kept better informed.
- Showed significantly higher levels of discretionary effort.
- Were much less likely to quit.

## Does Everyone Want to Be Recognized?

When we asked a global sample of over 12,000 people about their preference for giving and receiving recognition, 33% indicated they dislike receiving recognition. We contend that this is most often a semantic problem. Had we asked, “Do you like to be appreciated for your accomplishments?” we suspect nearly all respondents would have said “Yes.” Almost everyone appreciates “appreciation,” which implies a more quiet, personal expression, without fanfare and hoopla.

For many people, “recognition” means being called out in a meeting and given public praise for something they’ve accomplished. It conjures up images of spotlights glaring at them, and they might find all that attention embarrassing. Whether because of their personality or perhaps cultural upbringing, being publicly singled out is uncomfortable for a substantial number of people. In other words, it’s the way that the recognition is delivered that they resist, not the underlying message of appreciation.

## What We Know about Leaders Who Are Inclined to Give Recognition

We conducted a different analysis of 658 leaders using the data we had on their preferences for giving and receiving recognition. Of those, 513 managers had a strong desire to give recognition while 145 resisted giving it. We compared that data to the 360-degree feedback ratings we had for those leaders from their manager, peers, direct reports, and others, and those who were more inclined to give recognition were also perceived as being better at:

- Collaboration and teamwork
- Being open to feedback from others
- Building relationships
- Inspiring and motivating

## Tips for Giving Better Recognition

Getting better at giving recognition requires focusing on both the substance of the recognition itself and the manner and context in which you deliver it.

### Improve the substance

- Appreciation that is specific is far more powerful than a general “good job” comment. Describe a specific event or action and the impact it had on you, the team, the organization, or your customers. This drives home the importance of what the person has done.
- While feedback from peers is appreciated, for most people, recognition from their immediate manager is most meaningful.
- While recognizing outcomes is valuable, it’s also important to recognize those actions that led to the positive outcome. Some outcomes are out of the person’s control, but their tenacity, hard work, and creativity are things they control. Those deserve recognition as well.

## **Improve the delivery**

- Many people feel embarrassed being singled out publicly. Respect those who prefer their recognition to be private and more personal.
- People appreciate notes and cards and we've heard stories of people saving such mementos for decades.
- Timely recognition is important. The sooner you give the recognition after the behavior, the higher the perceived value.
- Increasing the frequency of recognition will give you more chances to practice and improve this skill, while also making it more comfortable for the receiver who gets more used to hearing your appreciation.

## **Set a Goal to Recognize Others More Often**

Can a leader give too much recognition? We know it may be possible, but we have not seen it happen. It is often helpful at the end of each day to ask yourself: "Who went above or beyond today? Who did more than was expected? Who made a helpful contribution?" Then, when names come to mind — don't hesitate to give the recognition in a way that is most meaningful to them.

We all have heard about the importance of recognition and yet many leaders are not doing it enough. While the data from our research isn't necessarily groundbreaking, we hope it's an important reminder to tell people — those who report to you but your peers, and yes, even your boss — what they need to hear, not just what you want to say.

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