



Digital Article / Leadership and Managing People

A Better Way to Recognize Your Employees

Three tips for managers. *by Christopher Littlefield*

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Research shows what great leaders already know: Recognition is fundamental to the engagement and retention of top talent and the profitability of our organizations. A recent study found that employees who reported that their managers were great at recognizing them were more than 40% more engaged than those with managers who were not. In addition, they were more confident, felt better informed, offered more discretionary effort, and were less likely to quit.

Although most great managers want to recognize their people, the challenge, which has only been made more difficult in the hybrid world, is finding meaningful things to recognize them for. This is why it is important for leaders to add a new technique to their management repertoire: Reflective recognition is an inquiry-based approach where an individual or group is invited to reflect on and share what they are proud of and why.

Having spent over a decade both researching and training leaders in effective employee recognition, I noticed that there are limitations to our typical approach to praise. We can only recognize what we see, observe, or learn about from others and our recognition focuses on what we appreciate, which is not always what others want to be appreciated for.

Take Alia, who at the time was a training manager for a large Middle Eastern restaurant chain. “My boss is great at recognizing me, but her praise is always focused on my organizational skills, which I know she values. I’ve spent the last six months designing, producing, and launching a new training initiative, and I wish she would recognize all the creativity and work I have put into that,” she told me.

Like Alia, many employees want to be acknowledged for all the work they are doing that no one sees. The long hours, fielding difficult customer calls, navigating complex technical issues, moving mountains to meet deadlines, and doing it all on top of their lives outside of work.

And then there are the people on our teams that no matter how much they accomplish, how much we recognize them, they struggle slow down long enough to celebrate their progress, often driving them to burnout. If we want help our people stay present to the progress

and make sure our people feel recognized for the things we don't see, reflective recognition will help with both.

Putting Reflective Recognition into Action

Reflective recognition gives you, the leader, a window into what matters most to another person while at the same time, helping employees get present to their own progress and accomplishments. What's more? When employees stop and reflect on their own achievements, how they've tackled challenges, and how they've made progress, it is great for engagement, too. Research shows that when we make progress towards goals that matter to us, we feel motivated to continue. In other words, reflecting on even small wins can motivate employees to get more done. The best part? It is extremely simple, requires no preparation, costs nothing, and makes a world of difference for both parties.

There are three steps in reflective recognition which, to the employee, is going to just look like a simple conversation.

Invite them to share.

The first step is to empower your employees to share what they are proud of and why. This doesn't need to happen as a separate, focused meeting. During your regular one-to-ones, or even when you bump into each other in the office, you could ask them a simple question.

- We haven't spoken in a while, what have you been working on recently that you are proud of?
- What do you want to be acknowledged for?
- What are you working on that's exciting you?
- What has been the hardest part of your job lately and how have you been navigating it?

Note that the first time you try this with your employee, don't be surprised if they look concerned or suspicious of why you are asking. They may be thinking, "Did you just attend leadership training or something?" But here's a way to mitigate those reactions. You could preface your question by saying, "I recently read an article that explained how we often don't see most of the work our people do every day and it got me thinking that I would love to learn more about what you're proud of that I don't see."

After you ask, some people will take your invitation to share and run with it, and tell you everything they have been doing, and more. Others might give you a standard, "I'm proud of being a good team player," "Everything I'm doing is exciting," or even shy away from saying anything.

And this is where the next step comes in.

Probe positively.

In her book, *The Perfectionism Detox*, author Petra Kolber shared that as humans, we have a tendency to minimize our accomplishments and maximize our shortcomings. As their leader, you can help people dig into their achievements and uncover together what it took for them to do what they did.

If they respond with "I don't know" try following up with questions that help them reflect on what they have done.

If they say, "I've been struggling with this new program for a month, but I just finally figured out X and we can finally get it off the ground. That's exciting!" use positive probing to draw their attention to their own effort and progress. Here are some probing questions you might ask:

- How were you able to do what you did?
- What did it take to make it happen?
- What did you learn in the process?

As they are sharing — and they will likely reveal what is most important to them — listen for the barrier they overcame, the sacrifices they made, the struggles they worked through, to do all they did.

Reflect back.

After your employee has shared, it is time to reflect back on what you heard. Sometimes this can be as simple as “Thank you for all you have been doing, I had no idea you had worked through all that,” or “Thank you for sharing, that is amazing.”

Other times, maybe when you have not spoken in a long time, or notice your employee struggling, it is important to reflect back in more detail to show them you understand what they have been working on and amplify what they have done. You could say: “Alia, I knew the training program you put together was amazing, but I had no idea everything you had been doing behind the scenes to make this happen. From the curriculum design, to organizing the filming and editing of all the content, to the thought you put into rolling this out to all our stores is extraordinary. And doing all of this on top of your life outside of work. Thank you for everything you have been doing.”

Reflective recognition is a simple way to empower your people to share what they are proud of and why. It’s important to note that some people aren’t used to talking about what they’re proud of, so it may take some time for your team to warm up to the idea. But if you build it into each of your one-on-ones, and team meetings, people will start coming ready to share and, you may just build a culture of recognition and celebration where good work is validated, and employees feel valued.

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Christopher Littlefield is an International/TEDx speaker specializing in employee appreciation and the founder of [Beyond Thank You](#). He has trained thousands of leaders across six continents to create cultures where people feel valued every day. He is the author of [75+ Team Building Activities for Remote Teams—Simple Ways to Build Trust, Strengthen Communication, and Laugh Together from Afar](#). You can follow his work through his weekly mailing [The Nudge](#).