

## Recognition

### *Month 5 Leadership Challenge*

#### **Purpose**

To build the habit of meaningful, inquiry-based recognition that helps people feel seen for the work that matters most to them, not just what leaders happen to notice. This challenge focuses on shifting from praise-giving to *reflective recognition* by inviting others to share what they are proud of and why, then reflecting it back.

#### **Why This Matters**

In high-pressure clinical and academic environments, good work is often invisible, normalized, or rushed past. People push through long hours, complexity, and emotional strain without pausing to acknowledge their own progress.

Reflective recognition helps people *stay present to their progress*. Research shows that when people reflect on progress toward goals that matter to them, they feel motivated to continue. By inviting reflection, leaders reinforce effort, learning, and persistence—not just outcomes—and help protect against the exhaustion that comes from never pausing to see how far you've come.

Littlefield, C. (2022, October 25). *A better way to recognize your employees*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2022/10/a-better-way-to-recognize-your-employees>

#### **A Caution: Praise Is Not the Same as Recognition**

Most leaders believe they recognize their people well. But research shows a gap: we can only recognize what we see, and our recognition tends to focus on what we value—which is not always what employees want to be acknowledged for. Without reflection, leaders tend to praise surface-level behaviors while missing invisible labor, growth, and resilience. This challenge asks you to slow down and listen before recognizing.

#### **Your Challenge**

Within the next 14 days, intentionally practice reflective recognition in at least three real leadership interactions:

1. **Invite them to share.** In a one-on-one, check-in, or informal moment, ask an open question that invites the person to share what they are proud of or what has been hard but meaningful. Focus on listening, not responding.
2. **Probe positively.** When someone shares, resist the urge to jump to praise. Instead, ask follow-up questions that help them reflect on effort, learning, and

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progress — especially the work you don't usually see. Listen for barriers they overcame, sacrifices they made, and struggles they worked through.

3. **Reflect back.** After they have shared, intentionally reflect back what you heard: name the effort, challenge, growth, or values demonstrated. Make the recognition specific and grounded in their perspective, not yours.

### Guidelines

- Use everyday leadership moments like rounds, supervision, informal check-ins, or hallway conversations.
- Keep it brief. 5 minutes is enough.
- Focus on progress, effort, and learning, not just outcomes.
- Avoid fixing, redirecting, or evaluating during the conversation.
- The goal is meaning, not performance management.
- **Expect initial suspicion.** The first time you try this, don't be surprised if people look concerned or wonder why you're asking. You can preface the question: *"I've been thinking about how I often don't see most of the work people do every day. I'd love to learn more about what you're proud of that I might not notice."*

### Reflective Recognition Prompts

Use any of the following:

To invite sharing:

- "What have you been working on that you're most proud of right now?"
- "What do you want to be acknowledged for that I might not see?"
- "What's been the hardest part of your job lately, and how have you been navigating it?"
- "What are you working on that's exciting you?"

To probe positively:

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

### Key Reminders

**Recognition Is a Skill, Not a Personality Trait.** Reflective recognition feels unfamiliar at first, for leaders and employees alike. Some people aren't used to talking about what they're proud of. Discomfort is normal. Like coaching, it improves with deliberate practice.

**What You Notice Shapes Culture.** When leaders consistently recognize effort, learning, and resilience, they signal what truly matters, even under pressure. If you build

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reflective recognition into one-on-ones and team meetings, people will start coming ready to share.

**Recognition Builds Motivation.** By helping people name their own progress, reflective recognition supports intrinsic motivation and protects against burnout.

### Reflection Questions

After completing the challenge, reflect on the following:

1. What surprised you about what people wanted to be recognized for?
2. Where did you notice yourself wanting to jump to praise or evaluation?
3. How did reflective recognition change the tone of the conversation?
4. What invisible work did this surface that you had previously missed?
5. How might this approach shift your team's culture over time?