

Research on Gratitude, Recognition and Employee Appreciation

Recognition

Recognition is:

- “about what people do” (Robbins 2019).
- conditional - involves giving positive feedback on employee results or performance (Robbins 2019)
- can be formal (award, promotion, raise) or informal (thank-you note) (Robbins 2019)
- based on the past – the work or behaviours have already been completed (Robbins 2019)
- scarce – all employees cannot receive the same amount of recognition, for example mentioning everyone in a memo or giving everyone a raise. (Robbins 2019)
- some aspects of recognition are typically top down, for example raises, but some initiatives can be peer to peer (Robbins 2019). Research has found that peer recognition was more appreciated by employees, as peers are more aware of daily work aspects.

Impact of Recognition:

- motivates employees to perform and exceed expectations (Gilbert et al. 2018). Research has found that receiving appropriate recognition according to employee recognition preferences doubled the desire of employees to remain with their company (Scarborough 2009) Companies that scored in the top 20% for building a "recognition-rich culture" actually had 31% lower voluntary turnover rates (Bersin 2012).
- builds self-esteem (Gilbert et al. 2018)
- enhances team success (Gilbert et al. 2018)
- promotes desired employee behaviours, such as more courtesy, respect and understanding towards peers and customers (Gilbert et al. 2018)
- makes the recruitment of top talent easier (Nelson 2002)
- organizations that have a culture of employee recognition outperform those that don't (Bersin 2012)
- research has found that financial incentives may not produce the desired motivational impact. These incentives may lower an employee's internal desire to complete tasks and their enjoyment in these tasks (Robbins 2019)
- peer-to-peer recognition and thanks contributes to meeting the needs of employees to belong (Bersin 2012).

Impact of Lack of Recognition:

- undermines employee confidence and organizational trust (Gilbert et al. 2018)
- can contribute to feelings of demoralization and may lead to increased employee turnover (Gilbert et al. 2018).
- Disparity between employee efforts and rewards facilitates burnout, emotional distress, which would increase the possibility of physical and mental health issues (Gilbert et al. 2018)



Recognition Key Principles

- Timely – on the spot is preferred, if possible (Robbins 2019 & Scarborough 2009)
- Genuine (Robbins 2019)
- Fair (Gilbert et al. 2018)
- Incentives motivate employees differently. Public recognition works for some but not others. receiving electronics may be preferable to younger employees but not some older ones. Find out how people want to be recognized and avoid surprises (Nelson 2002)
- Clearly define criteria that align with organizational objectives, goals and values. This prevents recognition from being subjective (Gilbert et al. 2018 and Bersin 2012).
- Recognize multiple types of employee efforts, for example, rewarding both high performers and employees that contribute to the community (if these both align with organizational objectives) (Gilbert et al. 2018)
- Avoid programs that need several approval levels and create some recognition initiatives that don't require approval. This prevents missing opportunities to recognize efforts (Scarborough 2009).
- Have initiatives where multiple employees can be recognized (Scarborough 2009)
- Lead by example. Encourage senior leaders to model recognition behaviours (Nelson 2002). Seeing this behavioural modelling encourages other employees to engage in recognition practices (Nelson 2002)
- Provide recognition based on specific results and behaviours, for example, "provide an award for delivering outstanding customer services when a specific problem occurred. This could lead to creating a culture of 'doing the right thing.'" (Bersin 2012).
- "Make recognition easy and frequent" (Bersin 2012).
- implement peer to peer recognition – not top down. Research found employees feel better when recognized by their peers rather than leaders. Peers know the day to day of the work, so a thank you can feel more impactful. Top-down recognition is often viewed as political and may not reach the quiet but critical high performers. Modern high-performance recognition programs are "social" – they let anyone in the company recognize anyone else (often using "points" or "dollars") The thank yours are totally public and displayed on a leader board so anyone can see them (Bersin 2012)
- share recognition stories – one of the most powerful practices we identified was "story telling". One of the most powerful practices we identified was "story telling." When someone does something great and is recognized by their peers, tell people about it, for example at a meeting, in a newsletter or company blog. These stories create employee engagement and learning (Bersin 2012)
- Praising effort can have more impact than praising results. Focusing praise on effort encourages persistence and effort (Bersin 2012).

Additional Research

- A longitudinal research study conducted in the 2000s found that managers aged 40 and below were more likely to recognize their staff and believe employee recognition is important compared with managers ages 50 and older (Nelson 2002).
 - a. Some reasons that older managers objected to employee recognition included being unsure of how to recognize employees effectively, not feeling that recognition is part of

their jobs, not having the time to recognize employees, feeling worried about missing recognizing some employees (Nelson 2002). Strategies to build employee recognition skills include: providing training in recognition skills, encouraging executives to seek feedback on their recognition abilities and learn from the feedback provided, set organizational expectations for people leaders to provide recognition (potentially include this in performance summary conversations), education people leaders on the small amount of time it takes to provide certain forms of recognitions (positive emails, public recognition), educate people leaders worried about leaving people out on strategies that will prevent this, which could include double-checking recognition methods, double checking with a team member to ensure a full list of everyone that completed a successful project is captured, apologizing if someone is left out (Nelson 2002).

- Rewards systems that are based on tenure (for example rewarding employees for 10 years of employment) have not been found to impact organizational performance (Bersin 012)

Recognition Practices:

- Brag box where employees can post online about others' achievements (peer-to-peer) (Scarborough 2009)
- Hand-written notes
- Positive emails
- Public Recognition
- Every communication offers an opportunity for employee recognition, for example, praise in newsletters, recognition boards, kudos report, team meetings (Nelson 2002)
- At the end of each meeting, have all members share one thing they have done to recognize someone on the team (Nelson 2002)
- List direct reports on weekly to-do list and check them off when you're caught them doing something right (Nelson 2002)
- Take team for lunch (top-down)
- Give a gift card
- Offer extra time off
- Recognition at team meetings
- [GOAL 2.0 Appreciation and Recognition Conversation Guide](#)

Appreciation

Appreciation is:

- About who a person is (Robbins 2019).
- "about acknowledging a person's inherent value," rather than their accomplishments. "It's about their worth as a colleague and a human being" (Robbins 2019).

Appreciation Key Principles:

- Listen. Give someone your full attention. Put down the phone and look away from your computer (Robbins 2019)
- Tell people what you value about them. Do this regularly and proactively, not just because someone did something great. This can positively influence how colleagues feel about

themselves, their relationship with the person providing the appreciation and the team cultures (Robbins 2019).

- Check-in. Ask people how they are doing and what they're challenged by to show them you care (and mean it) (Robbins 2019).
- More appreciation is better (Robbins 2019)
- Appreciate others strengths, even if they differ from our own (Newman 2017)

Additional Research:

- Showing appreciation is particularly important for managers. A Glassdoor employee appreciation survey showed that 53% of employees surveyed states that feeling more appreciation from their boss would help them stay longer at the company, despite 68% of respondents reporting their boss already shows them enough appreciation (Robbins 2019).

Appreciation Practices:

- [GOAL 2.0 Appreciation and Recognition Conversation Guide](#)

Gratitude

Gratitude is:

- One step beyond appreciation. "It recognizes how the positive things in our lives – like a success at work – are often due to forces outside of ourselves, particularly the efforts of other people" (Newman 2017).
- There are three different types of gratitude in the workplace:
 - **"Episodic gratitude"** is the feeling of appreciation you get in the moment in response to an experience. It happens during and after a specific event. Ex. You feel grateful when a coworkers helps you meet a deadline, company provides some extra time off or a new opportunity.
 - It is linked to organizational citizenship behavior. Employees that feel grateful for something that was done for them are more likely to help others and the company. These employees can help others meet deadlines or go out of their way to help a customer.
 - To foster it, employees need to understand the benefits they are getting. Ex. Two employees go to a fancy training. One has worked in another organization and never had this type of training paid for before. The other hasn't worked anywhere else before and expects it to be paid for. These employees experience different types of gratitude.
 - It is helpful for employees to try to be aware of the benefits around them and the help they are receiving from others.
 - It's important for employees to feel like the company and managers are doing things for the benefit and not the bottom line. If HR hosts yoga, the reason matters. If employees perceive it is happening because HR care about wellness, employees will feel grateful. However, if employees feel it is happening to get them to stay at work later, they are unlikely to feel thankful. It's very important to take care in how new programs, policies and opportunities are communicated. Make sure there is a benevolent reason behind it." (Grabarek P)

- **“Persistent gratitude** – one’s tendency to feel grateful in a specific context. If you have persistent gratitude at work, you are more likely to see and interpret other people’s actions as something to be grateful for. Those with persistent gratitude will notice the little things that others might miss.
- **“Collective gratitude** – gratitude at the company level. It can be thought of as a culture of appreciation – persistent gratitude that is shared by all or most members of an organization.

Impact of Gratitude:

- Enhanced employee productivity and engagement **HOWEVER, gratitude programs that are perceived by employees as aimed at enhancing their productivity will not have the desired effect** (Newman 2017).
- Early studies on gratitude in the workplace have found links with more positive emotions, less stress and fewer health complaints, a greater sense of goal achievement, fewer sick days, higher job and co-worker satisfaction (Newman 2017).
- Building a culture of gratitude can “transform work lives, leading to deeper connections to each other and to the work we’re doing.”
- Research has found that grateful employees and employees that receive more gratitude perform more “organizational citizenship” behaviours – acts/services that go beyond an employee’s job fact sheet but provide the institution with helpful benefits (Newman 2017)
- “Gratitude improves life satisfaction, reduces aggression and motivates prosocial behaviour – behaviours aimed at helping others (Fehr et al. 2017).
- “People with persistent gratitude are more likely to feel positive emotions at work, like excitement and happiness, which improves overall well-being. Persistent gratitude can lead to high quality relationships. Employees with persistent gratitude are happier overall, have higher well-being, and have stronger relationships with their coworkers.” (Grabarek P).

Gratitude Key Principles:

- Building appreciation can lead to building a culture of gratitude.
- Program must be genuine and not based on wanting to extract more work from people (Newman 2017)
- To build a culture of gratitude, programs must be consistent. For example, adding gratitude to internal communications and having short gratitude practices during regular meetings will be more impactful than a one-off event (Newman 2017).
- There are three ways that organizations can foster gratitude: appreciation programs; developmental feedback; contact with beneficiaries.

Additional Research:

- Potential negative consequences of gratitude campaigns: 1) they may come off as insincere, a token nod to employee well-being that can be advertised in corporate brochures. 2) Some people may be wary of expressing gratitude and acknowledging their debt to others, seeing it as a sign of weakness. 3) Even if the program is generally well-received, some employees could feel left out if they rarely receive gratitude or recognition. 4) programs to foster gratitude and

appreciation could feel like one more thing that employees don't have time for (workload management). (Newman 2017)

- Research has shown: that gratitude tends to emerge in workplaces with more “perceived organizational support,” where employees believe that the company values their contributions and cares about their well-being. And caring means valuing employee health and happiness for their own sake, not just as a way to eke out longer work hours and greater productivity. (Newman 2017)
- A Willis Towers Watson study of managers found that 20% of respondents would work on gratitude if they had permission but don't out of fear; 32% feel negatively toward gratitude and won't do it, 25% are positive toward gratitude and 22% wouldn't mind expressing gratitude but need parameters and education on how to do it (The Culture Works 2020).

Gratitude Practices:

- To encourage episodic gratitude:
 - Remind employees of the benefits they are getting (Grabarek 2018). For example, if two employees go to a fancy training and one employee has worked at another organization that hasn't offered this type of benefit and the other employee hasn't worked anywhere else and expects the training to be paid for, these individuals will experience different types of gratitude (Grabarek 2018).
 - Encourage employees to be aware of the help they are receiving from others (Grabarek 2018).
 - Be planful when developing and communicating new policies and opportunities and ensure their rationale is genuinely to help employees (Grabarek 2018). Perceived organizational support (feeling the organization truly want to help) can lead to feelings of gratitude, while a perception by an employee of the institution developing a program for more nefarious reasons will not lead to feelings of gratitude (Grabarek 2018).
- To encourage collective gratitude, remind people that gratitude is contagious and that interacting with people who show appreciation and thankfulness can lead to positive emotional contagion. (Grabarek 2018).
- To encourage persistent gratitude:
 - Encourage people to take time to savor positive experiences and reflect on what they are thankful for.
 - A study found the practice of gratitude journaling for as little as 15 minutes was enough to boost positive emotions (Newman 2017)
- Start team meetings with an opportunity for employees to express gratitude or appreciation (Fehr et al. 2017). (informal way to build collective gratitude)
- Create a gratitude or thank-you board (Fehr et al. 2017) (informal way to build collective gratitude)

How to measure gratitude? Evaluation

- Gratitude can be measured with emotion checklists in a manner similar to other emotions. Be careful to distinguish gratitude from other related emotions, such as inspiration and awe. (Fehr et al. 2017)

- To measure persistent gratitude, scholars must assess the frequency with which employees tend to experience gratitude in the workplace. Scholars may also adopt a more granular approach, examining the tendency to feel gratitude within a particular unit of the organization or while interacting with a particular colleague. At the organizational level, collective gratitude can be measured via a direct consensus approach (Chan, 1998). Measure gratitude's emergence across levels. (Fehr et al. 2017).

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