



Supervisor NEWSLETTER

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Why Employees Need Both Recognition and Appreciation

By Mike Robbins

Recognition and appreciation. We often use these words interchangeably, and think of them as the same thing. But while they're both important, there's a big difference between them. For leaders who want their teams to thrive and organizations that want to create cultures of engagement, loyalty, and high performance, it's important to understand the distinction.

Recognition

Recognition is about giving positive feedback based on results or performance. Sometimes this happens in a formal way: an award, a bonus, a promotion, a raise. Sometimes recognition is given more informally: a verbal thank you, a handwritten note. All of these methods can be meaningful, especially if they're done in a timely and genuine way. They're also motivating and exciting — everyone wants their good work to be applauded. But there are some limits to recognition.

First, it's performance-based, so it's conditional. Second, it's based on the past, so it's about what people have already done. Third, it's scarce. There's a limited amount of recognition to go around — everyone can't get a bonus or be mentioned by name in a memo — and it can be stressful when many people are vying for a finite amount of praise. Fourth, it generally has to come from the top. Many organizations have set up programs that allow peers to highlight each other's efforts, but the major forms of recognition (promotions, raises, and so on) usually are given by senior leaders.

And while recognition that includes monetary compensation can be great, researchers from the London School of Economics found that financial incentives can actually backfire when it comes to motivating employees. According to an analysis of 51 experiments, "these incentives may reduce an employee's natural inclination to complete a task and derive pleasure from doing so."

Appreciation

Appreciation, on the other hand, is about acknowledging a person's inherent value. The point isn't their accomplishments. It's their worth as a colleague and a human being. In simple terms, recognition is about what people do; appreciation is about who they are.

This distinction matters because recognition and appreciation are given for different reasons. Even when people succeed, inevitably there will be failures and challenges along the way; depending on the project, there may not even be tangible results to point to. If you focus solely on praising positive outcomes, on recognition, you miss out on lots of opportunities to connect with and support your team members — to appreciate them.

How to Show Appreciation

Here are a few simple ways to show appreciation for those around you:

- **Listen.** One of the best things you can do for the people you work with is also one of the simplest: Put down your phone, turn away from your computer, and genuinely listen to them.
- **Tell people what you value about them.** Doing this proactively — not because someone did something great or because you want something from them — is an incredibly powerful gift. It can positively

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affect how your colleagues feel about themselves, your relationship with them, and the culture of the team.

- **Check in.** There's a quote I like that is often attributed to Teddy Roosevelt: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." No matter who said it, it's such a great reminder. Check in with the people you work with. Asking how they're doing (and meaning it) and what they're challenged by right now can show them that you care.

Showing appreciation for employees is especially important if you're a manager. In Glassdoor's Employee Appreciation Survey, 53% of people said feeling more appreciation from their boss would help them stay longer at their company — even though 68% said their boss already shows them enough appreciation. The lesson? More is better.

Great leaders have to successfully focus on and cultivate both appreciation and recognition. And all of us benefit from understanding this distinction in business (and in life). Recognition is appropriate and necessary when it's earned and deserved. Appreciation, however, is important all the time.

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References:

<https://hbr.org/2019/11/why-employees-need-both-recognition-and-appreciation>

