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• RECOGNITION WORKS 2026 • RESEARCH SESSION

The Recognition Impact Gap:

Why Some Programs Change Behavior and Others Don't

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A research report for attendees of the session, with the findings and the tools discussed.

Help people see what mattered and why

Recognition does its work when it tells someone three things: their contribution was noticed, why it mattered, and that it is worth repeating. How often recognition happens creates opportunities for that experience. Its quality shapes whether it feels meaningful and credible. Fairness makes people feel seen.

THREE THINGS A PERSON NEEDS TO FEEL

Capable

"I did this well."

Someone saw the work and named what was good about it.

Connected

"It mattered to someone."

The work reached a colleague, a customer or the team, and they noticed.

Free to choose

"I would do it again."

Nobody forced it. Pressure or a quota would undo the first two.

ONE MOMENT OF RECOGNITION

Contribution noticed



Meaning understood



Willingness to repeat



Observable behavior

TRY THIS

Give recognition people can understand and repeat

1 Name the contribution

Describe what the person actually did.

2 Explain why it mattered

Connect it to a colleague, customer, team or useful outcome.

3 Make it personal and believable

Say what you genuinely appreciated.

4 Choose the moment and delivery

Recognize while the contribution is still relevant, and consider public or private preferences.

AN ADAPTABLE MESSAGE STRUCTURE

I noticed [specific contribution]. It helped [person or outcome] because [why it mattered].
I appreciated [personal observation].

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

"You spotted the issue before we sent the order and helped the team correct it. That saved the customer an avoidable delay. Thank you for paying attention and speaking up."

Recognize contributions people can understand and repeat.

Make noticing a regular part of work

Our research compared people who receive recognition from a leader less than monthly with people who receive it at least monthly. On each of the three outcomes below, the at-least-monthly group did better. Recognition frequency acts as the foundation that supports great cultures.

54%

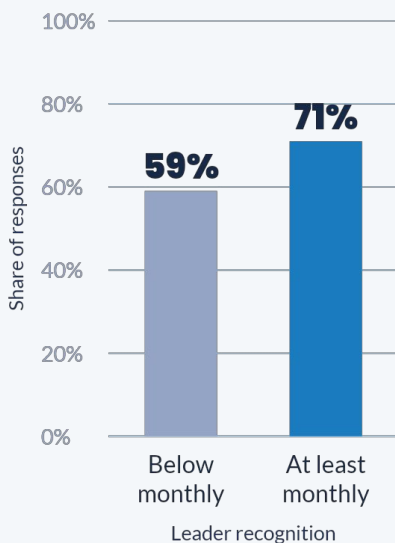
report leader recognition
less than monthly
1,713 of 3,165 responses

45%

report peer recognition less
than monthly
1,440 of 3,165 responses

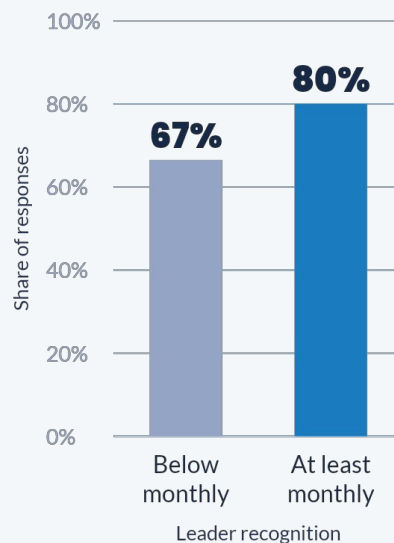
Engagement

Feeling energized and proud about their work.



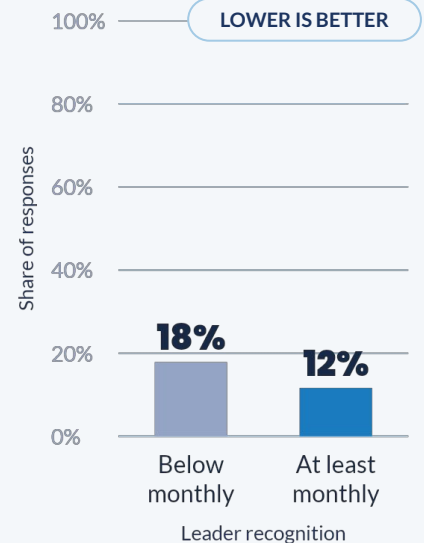
Satisfaction

Satisfied with the company as a place to work



Turnover intention

Regularly considered leaving in the past year



Below monthly includes people who never receive recognition.

TRY THIS

Make noticing part of work already happening

Before an existing team meeting or check-in:

- 1 Recall one useful contribution.
- 2 Explain what happened and why it mattered.
- 3 Consider whose work you may not have seen.

A CONVERSATION STARTER

"What have you worked on recently that I might not have seen?"

High-quality recognition changes how people feel about work

High quality means people agree the recognition they receive is genuine, timely, personalized and fair. Low quality means they did not.

Engagement

Feeling energized and proud about their work.



Satisfaction

Satisfied with the company as a place to work



Turnover intention

Regularly considered leaving in the past year



Frequent and high-quality recognition is a game-changer.

EACH QUALITY ON ITS OWN

Share who meet each outcome, among people who did not agree with the statement and among people who did.

	Engagement		Satisfaction		Considered leaving	
	Did not agree	Agree	Did not agree	Agree	Did not agree	Agree
Genuine	44%	71%	33%	82%	35%	11%
Timely	51%	70%	44%	82%	29%	11%
Personalized	53%	73%	50%	84%	25%	10%
Fair	56%	75%	56%	87%	23%	9%

TRY THIS

Check a message against the four qualities

1 Genuine

Did you say what the person actually did, and mean it?

2 Timely

Did it arrive within the week?

3 Personalized

Is this how they like to be recognized?

4 Fair

Would similar work by someone else get the same recognition?

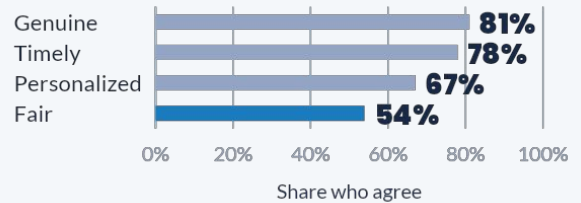
Recognize similar contributions equally, whoever makes them

54%

Only 54% agree that recognition is distributed fairly among employees

Fairness means similar contributions get similar recognition, whoever makes them. When that holds, people feel seen. Providing fair recognition is seen as the biggest challenge facing organizations in terms of recognition. Below are some tips on how to use AI to help.

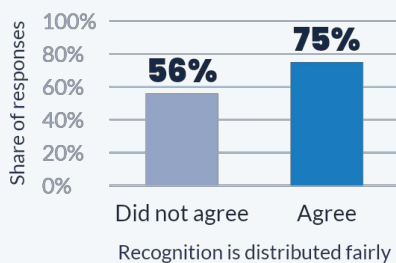
Agree with each quality statement



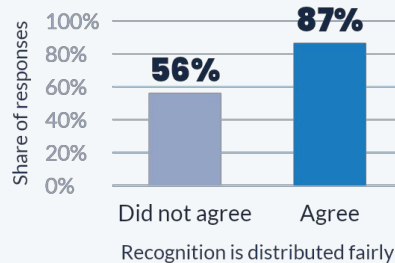
FAIRNESS ON ITS OWN

People who agree that recognition is distributed fairly, compared with people who did not.

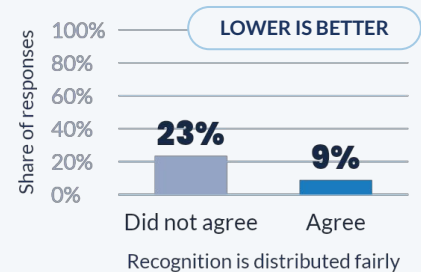
Engagement



Satisfaction



Turnover intention



GOOD WORK IS NOT ALWAYS THE MOST VISIBLE WORK

- ☐ Helping a colleague learn the job
- ☐ Preventing an error before it lands
- ☐ Serving customers on another shift
- ☐ Quiet support work behind a result

Similar work gets unequal recognition when some of it is harder to see. Two things help: clear criteria for what deserves recognition, and more chances to notice it.

TRY THIS

A fairness check

"Would the same contribution get the same recognition on another team, shift or location?"

A PROPOSED WORKFLOW TO TEST: USE AI TO HELP GOOD WORK GET NOTICED



AI could organize peer nominations, prompt managers, flag coverage gaps and draft messages from verified information. People add personal meaning and choose the delivery. Used this way, AI widens who gets noticed: it surfaces contributions from the teams, shifts and roles a manager rarely sees, reminds leaders when someone has gone unrecognized for a while, and gives similar contributions the same chance of a timely message. More contributions get noticed, and each message still comes from a person.

Choose a behavior worth repeating, then recognize it every week

Recognition can only guide what people do next when the thing being recognized is nameable. Pick one behavior, make it observable, and recognize it soon after it happens.



Raise a concern early

A risk flagged before it becomes an incident.



Help a teammate learn

A colleague who can now do the task on their own.



Follow through on a customer problem

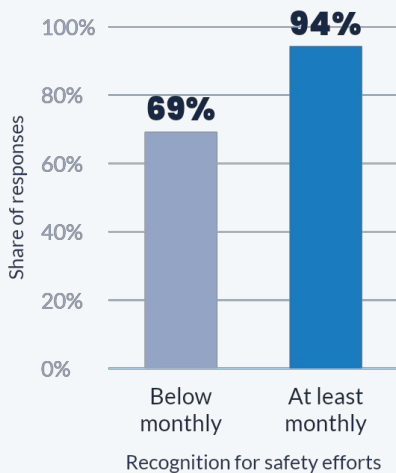
The customer hears back until it is fixed.

Observable. Repeatable. Within the person's control.

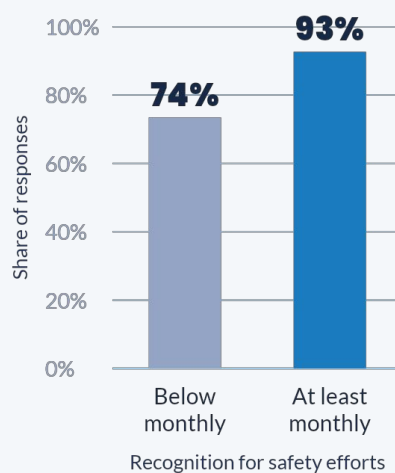
AN EXAMPLE WITH SAFETY

From our research with teams that follow formal safety procedures: recognition for safety efforts from a leader, below monthly versus at least monthly.

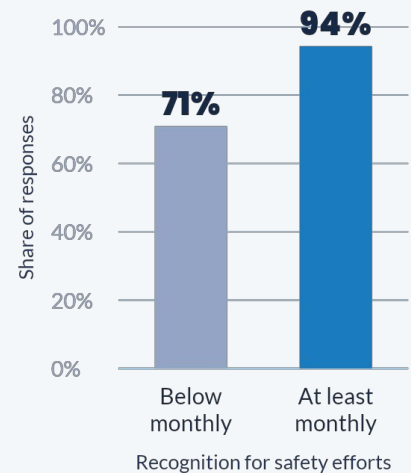
Feel free to report a concern



Follow safety procedures



Contribute to improving safety



TRY THIS

Make it a weekly habit



In a team meeting or check-in that already happens, with the behavior you chose. No quota: if nothing worth naming happened, say nothing.

Track recognition, then link it to the numbers you keep

Tracking recognition matters: it is how an organization learns whether its program changes anything or only runs. Most already have the three numbers this page brings together: the recognition feed, the counts from the work, and the records in HR and operations. The cards below show what to track, what should move first, and what should move later. A recommended short pulse is also included.

RECOGNITION • FROM THE FEED

What you track

Who was recognized, by whom, for what, and how soon.
Coverage by team and shift. The share that names the behavior you chose.



BEHAVIOR • FROM THE WORK

What it should move first

One count, week by week: concerns raised, near misses reported, new starters signed off, follow-ups closed.



RESULTS • FROM THE RECORDS

What it should move later

Retention, absence, incidents, quality, from HR and operations. Quarter by quarter, with a lag.

IF YOU ALSO WANT TO KNOW HOW IT FELT: A SHORT PULSE

Ask before the change and again after. Keep the wording and the response options the same.

SIX CORE QUESTIONS

- 1 In the past four weeks, how often have you received recognition from your manager or leader for your work?
Never • Once • Two or three times • About once a week • Several times a week
- 2 The recognition I receive feels genuine.
- 3 Recognition arrives soon enough to connect it with the contribution being recognized.
- 4 The way I am recognized fits my personal preferences.
- 5 At work, recognition is distributed fairly among employees.
- 6 The recognition I receive makes me want to repeat the contributions being recognized.

Questions 2 to 6 use a seven-point scale: Strongly disagree • Disagree • Somewhat disagree • Neither agree nor disagree • Somewhat agree • Agree • Strongly agree.

TWO OPTIONAL OUTCOME QUESTIONS

- 7 How satisfied are you with your company as a place to work?
Very dissatisfied • Dissatisfied • Somewhat dissatisfied • Neutral • Somewhat satisfied • Satisfied • Very satisfied
- 8 During the past three months, how often have you seriously considered leaving your organization?
Never • Almost never • Rarely • Occasionally • Regularly • Often • Very often

THREE THINGS TO TAKE BACK

Notice contributions. Make them matter. Recognize them fairly.

ONE PRACTICAL NEXT STEP

“Pick one contribution worth repeating, say what you saw and why it mattered, check who you missed, and test it in one team before you scale it.”

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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