MAKING THE MOST OF Employee Recognition

“I can live for two months on a good compliment.” —Mark Twain
Most companies understand that building a culture of recognition takes more than just putting a program in place. We all know that there is no substitute for caring. A flurry of recognition activity without genuine appreciation has diminishing returns. However, it is unlikely that you’ll ever achieve your goal of building an environment of positive reinforcement without establishing a formal recognition structure.

Here are three simple considerations when creating a structured recognition program:

**Recognition is best when it’s fair and equitable**—across managers, departments, and divisions. A formalized program sets expectations throughout the organization for managers and employees alike. Ad hoc recognition—without clear definition and program guidelines—becomes uneven and inequitable across the organization, since different managers implement recognition differently. Employees are quick to spot the disparity. The lack of unified recognition criteria and expression quickly leads to employee disengagement and cynicism.

**Recognition is best when it is specific and timely.** Since it’s impossible for managers to be everywhere at once, colleagues must have the ability to recognize each other “in the moment” for specific contributions or “saving the day.” In order for that to happen, employees need the go-ahead, the tools, and the resources to give and receive recognition freely—without special authorization and without approvals. Often, these free-flowing peer acknowledgments become the bedrock of a revitalized recognition program.

**Recognition is best when it’s personally meaningful.** The development of any formal program includes defining how employees want to be recognized, given their work environments and their job roles. (What kind of recognition is meaningful to a Millennial working in a distribution center will vary from what is meaningful to a Baby Boomer in sales.) Managers rarely have these kinds of discussions without the backing and resources of a formal program because it increases employees’ expectations while making it more difficult to actually manage them.

Program guidelines help to define the “how” of recognition and also the “what,” or when it’s appropriate for recognition to be accompanied by an award. And when it comes to awards, meaningful translates into personal choice. Employees like nothing better than an award which they select themselves—as a personal treat or to share with family and friends. Giving employees a vast selection of awards usually requires establishing a formal recognition program with both a design and a delivery mechanism. (No sane manager is looking to run an award warehouse out of a conference room.)

Moving recognition from “hey, why doesn’t our department do lunch today?” to using a standardized structure will make your efforts more equitable, more timely, and more meaningful for your employees. It is a significant step toward making a recognition culture real.
When it comes to recognition programs, **one size does not fit all.** It must be designed to fit each organization’s history, culture, and employees. The best programs begin by embracing the maxim, “know thyself.” Focusing on the following five areas can be invaluable in making a recognition program uniquely yours:

1. **Corporate Values or Principles.** What are the defining characteristics of your organization, or what would you like them to be? Your 5-8 defined values not only guide your company, they will also anchor your recognition program. The behaviors and results that you choose to recognize will stem from these core principles.

2. **Understanding of your Corporate Culture.** When it comes to designing and communicating an effective recognition program, it’s critical to understand your current culture and the history of your organization—mergers, layoffs, leadership, quirks, etc. Significant events or initiatives leave their mark on an organization, and it’s important to understand what yours are. And since nothing happens in a vacuum, it will impact how you communicate your program. When it comes to corporate messaging, most employees have perfect pitch.

3. **Understanding of your Employee Audience.** Where are they located? Do they have access to computers, smart phones, or tablets? Identify part-timers, full-timers, union, non-union, shifts worked, etc. What are the demographics? What is their current mindset? Should recognition be public, private, or both? What insight can be gleaned from employee surveys and exit interviews? For what activities or achievements are employees currently recognized? By whom?

   It is critical to measure corporate culture against employee preference.

4. **Key Behaviors and Results.** If there is any pixie dust in recognition programs, it resides here. While your corporate values are the same for everybody, the key behaviors and results that are worth recognizing are not. Individual departments must translate core values into recognition-worthy behaviors: What does “innovative” look like in procurement? What does “quality” look like in customer service? How can you track, measure, or observe activities? Think about employees’ opportunities to make a difference and the kind of role models that you would like to create. Then, sprinkle away.

5. ** Desired Outcomes.** After your program has been up and running, how will you determine its success? What measures or analytics will you want to review? Participation? Goal achievement? Ideas implemented? “Keeping the end in mind” will guide your program design and ensure that you capture the necessary information to evaluate and enhance your program.

   Researching how other companies operate their recognition programs and following industry best practices are good avenues to guide design and improvements to your initiatives. However, remember what works for others may not work for you. Making recognition yours is fundamental to making your recognition successful.
Make it Basic to Make it Best.

“Good design is good business.” —Thomas J. Watson

In the last 10-15 years, most companies have moved to using an online recognition portal, where employees can view all recognition modules, recognize others, view reporting, and select their own rewards.

Online systems allow companies to respond quickly to developments in the marketplace, using the power of positive reinforcement to drive business goals or underscore new priorities. An online recognition hub enables you to:

- Easily communicate recognition opportunities to all employees, with details about how to participate
- Segment the organization in any way necessary—by department, location, job function—so each audience segment sees only the program modules that pertain to them
- Quickly change program modules or program rules to align with changes in corporate direction
- Send program updates in real-time to all participants
- Incorporate new or existing training and quiz participants online
- Offer 24/7 individual reporting and measurement to participating employees
- Track and control manager recognition budgets
- Show Award Points earned by individual and provide online shopping 24/7
- Access multiple reports by audience segments or by company overall to monitor and improve the program

2. Frequent and Varied Communications.
How will employees learn of the program and be invited to participate? When it comes to recognizing their team members, how will managers go from 0 to 65 mph? How will you get everybody up to speed?

Creating a thoughtful communication plan will help to establish a program that employees will remember. Even the best program will fail if employees don’t know about it.

- Create a fun and engaging program launch.
  Launch your program with in-person meetings where possible (augmented with conference calls and webinars). Walk through how the program works, distribute a small 3-D item with the program theme and website address, and give everyone a chance to ask their questions so they are clear on what they need to do.

- Remind employees how they can participate.
  Follow up frequently. Review the behaviors/results that will be recognized, share examples of employee recognition at team meetings, and remind employees of upcoming quarterly or annual recognition opportunities.

- Mix it up.
  Take advantage of all communication methods. Post information on your recognition website. Share news on your company intranet. Send text messages. Blast out emails. Make phone calls. Display posters, banners, and signs.

Not everyone responds to a single method in the same way. Using a variety of communication techniques will engage more employees.

3. Relevant Reporting.
An online system has the power to report all the data that you collect. Which information is most useful? What are the key metrics? What information is needed to make strategic decisions?

In order to ensure program reporting is relevant, consider the various audience segments (departments, locations, functions) and the recognition modules or opportunities that are available (peer-to-peer, manager discretionary, service awards, referrals, wellness, etc.). Since homepage real estate is always limited, any dashboard or leaderboard communicates, “pay attention to this… this is a priority.”

4. Basic Training.
Think of a time when someone recognized you—and they fully understood the effort required or the sacrifices made—and you felt appreciated. Or, name the people who have been stand-outs in how they’ve expressed appreciation to you throughout the years. When asked, most people are hard pressed to come up with even one name.

Recognizing a team member or colleague is a skill. If your managers and team leaders don’t have it today, they are not going to get it just by launching a program. In-person training can be reinforced with online resources and quizzes. Or, an application-based “You Make the Call” section can be created to show how to give recognition effectively.

Maybe this is the year to increase awareness among your leaders and help them internalize what can be viewed as a clunky exercise. Incorporating training can help managers become comfortable giving recognition and, as a result, become role models for others.
5. **Globally Relevant.** Recognition is valued throughout the world. However, all recognition programs are not created equally. To effectively recognize and reward employees in a global workforce, you must understand cultural preferences. It is critical that reward options are equitable for all locations. Choosing a partner that can help you navigate these preferences and provide support in-language and in-country is an important first step. Involving leadership at a local level—including Human Resources and Managers—early in the process will provide valuable country-specific intelligence regarding your corporate culture and guide your program design. When it comes to design, make sure that everything is translated and that everyone has access. Start small but think big. The best rollout of global recognition programs typically starts in just a few select geographies. With measurable success, program expansion is easier than you might expect.

6. **Meaningful Awards.** Not every type of recognition or instance of positive reinforcement will have an award attached to it. Sometimes a simple thank-you note will do. Oftentimes, the most powerful form of appreciation and recognition is a simple thank you or public acknowledgement.

However, one of the first rules of recognition is: make the award commensurate with the effort expended or the achievement attained. So when employees invest months in a project or pull out all the stops to help a colleague, it’s appropriate to reward this above and beyond effort—not only with a verbal expression of thanks, but also with a meaningful award.

Q: What makes an award meaningful?
A: Each recipient decides. Only the recipient can determine what’s meaningful to him or her—and it might vary from Millennial to Baby Boomer. That’s why companies give employees a choice from a broad selection of awards rather than arbitrarily predetermining what award is appropriate for each recognized effort or accomplishment.

Even a program with ample funding and executive support can underperform if it isn’t built on the fundamentals. If you want to make your program the best, build it on the basics.

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**Make Changes to Make it Better.**

*“Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning.”*  —Benjamin Franklin

Whether your program is in its infancy, or is well-established, it’s common to fall into the trap of complacency. Instead of running on auto-pilot, begin to evaluate utilization and engagement levels. Set your sights on continuous improvement by asking, “What do best practice companies do?” “How can we make our program even better?”

Think about ways to increase program functionality and improve the employee experience. The following enhancements and add-ons can be used to make your program more comprehensive, complete, and engaging.

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Add New Modules/Applications

Most recognition programs can be made more meaningful by adding additional modules or applications. What are other organizations now including in their programs?

Peer-to-peer Recognition. These are notes of acknowledgement between co-workers, recognizing someone for living the core values—going beyond job boundaries, coming up with a novel solution, or digging deep and coming through in a pinch. Peer recognition for day-to-day activities is frequent, free-flowing, and does not require management approval. Peer recognition is foundational to any program and is the grease that keeps the company “engine” running smoothly and efficiently. Best-in-class organizations do not attach a tangible award to each acknowledgement, but will oftentimes place those giving and receiving recognition into a monthly sweepstakes for awards, positively reinforcing employees for both demonstrating key behaviors and also recognizing others.

Manager Discretionary Awards. Giving managers the ability to recognize outstanding performance throughout the year is an essential part of talent management and best-in-class recognition programs. Employees should receive positive reinforcement for behaviors that will drive them to optimal results. Companies accomplish this by giving managers tools to recognize employees “in the moment,” using either on-the-spot cards (notes with an award code attached) or online discretionary awards (awarding specific behaviors or achievements with an award of variable range). A little positive reinforcement from management can go a long way in helping a company to achieve its annual goals.

SMART Goals. Every organization is looking for a way to align employees with its key goals. The SMART goal app (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound goals), allows managers to enter individual employee goals into the recognition platform, so they can be easily monitored and tracked by both the employee and the manager during the year. Employees may receive recognition for goal achievement.

Service Anniversary Awards. If they haven’t already, most companies are wrapping their milestone anniversary awards (typically every five years) into their overall recognition program. The broad employee base, now covering at least four generations, values choice over logoed merchandise items pre-selected for them. Often, companies will award employees with both a desk award, which visibly honors their tenure, as well as Award Points that they can combine with other earnings and select an award item that is meaningful to them. Organizations are also extending this recognition to employees at the one-year and three-year marks.

Nomination Awards. Often a best-of-the-best or Outstanding Achiever award is put in place for employees who cannot be awarded based on sales or quota attainment, and must be nominated by management or peers. The recognition platform can provide the mechanism for submitting nominations, reporting which must be reviewed by an award panel, and if desired, notifying achievers. These awards are usually designed for quarterly or annual recognition.
**Learn and Earn.** What is the core subject material that every employee in your division must know? What new product information must sales and service people master? Once people have taken their training courses, how do you ensure that they can apply the information? More companies are including a learning portion in their programs in order to address these concerns. Employees are directed to the relevant material and then asked to take a quiz to test their understanding. Those with passing scores receive Award Points.

**Safety.** Safety initiatives—safety talks, incident-free months, safety training—are being incorporated into recognition platforms. Creating one portal for employees eliminates confusion and also creates an environment where “lesser” awards become more meaningful, because they can be combined with other award earnings.

**Wellness.** Companies that award for wellness efforts (such as accessing nutrition talks, going to a gym regularly, or completing 10,000 steps per day) are including wellness in their recognition platforms. Regular reporting, tracking, and awarding can aid employees in reaching their goals.

**Employee or Business Referrals.** When companies would like to gain visibility for their referral programs—for job candidates or business leads—the logical place is the company recognition platform. When added, qualified referrals increase and employees enjoy receiving Award Points, which can be accumulated with award earnings from their other achievements.

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Add New Functionality

“People who say it cannot be done should not interrupt those who are doing it.” —George Bernard Shaw

Program Accessibility via Mobile. Companies want employees to be able to participate in recognition on their terms and on the go. Due to the proliferation of “smart” tablets and phones, many recognition platforms are now leveraging responsive web design (RWD) to give participants the best program experience on mobile devices. Mobile is a great way for service technicians, manufacturing employees, and salespeople to actively participate.

Social Recognition. With growing numbers of Millennials in the workforce and the explosion of social media, more companies are integrating social recognition functionality into their programs. “Message boards” offer employees the opportunity to comment on and “like” the recognition acknowledgements sent to others, like Facebook. Studies show that Millennials want and expect feedback from their managers and peers—more than other generational groups. The social component of online message boards reinforces the behavior of recognizing others and aids in creating a vibrant work community.

Audience Segmentation. In large organizations, it makes sense to segment audiences, so when employees access their recognition portal, they are not only gaining access to programs for which they are eligible, but they are also receiving the content tailored to their specific needs. Content relevance increases engagement. Segmentation is also helpful in measuring utilization and participation rates comparable to other participant groups.

Gamification. Studies show that utilizing the gaming elements of chance, urgency, task completion and variable ratio reinforcement drives engagement. Many companies are using gaming elements to reinforce key behaviors, drive learning and goal achievement, and introduce fun (e.g., MotivAction’s The Big Deal, Spin & Win, Question of the Day, etc.).

Employee Dashboards and Leaderboards. Companies are now placing individual dashboards and team leaderboards on an individual’s home page. When employees log onto the recognition site, they see their key program metrics front and center. The immediate feedback drives engagement and performance.

Spurt Programs. Some organizations are layering a short-term sales program on top of their existing recognition program, to drive specific results, increase referrals, or increase sales, etc.

Communications. In this world of the sameness of electronic messaging, companies are now including some old school methods, using brochures and environmental, like banners, floor clings, table tents to communicate...whatever it takes to stand out from the crowd.

Events. In order to inject new life into an existing recognition program, many are now rewarding top achievers with events—existing corporate events or public events, such as concerts, sporting events, or races. Companies find that for a nominal investment, they can increase program awareness, create excitement, and drive participation.
To Make it Meaningful, Make it Multi-Generational

“Many people know so little about what is beyond their short range of experience. They look within themselves—and find nothing! Therefore they conclude that there is nothing outside themselves either.” —Helen Keller

A key development in today’s workplace is the changing face of the workforce. College grads and people starting in entry level positions can find themselves working with colleagues who are their grandparents’ age. Meanwhile, Baby Boomers may report to managers their grandchildren’s age.

The impact of the multi-generational workforce has caused uncertainty in terms of human capital management, as companies are challenged with understanding how global demographic shifts are impacting human resource decisions in a global economy. However, what is certain is that this generational confluence has resulted in swings in employee attitudes and work styles.

For HR practitioners it is important to understand the values, beliefs, and priorities of each generation to ensure your employee recognition program is fulfilling the needs of workers of all ages. To do this:

- Take a census of your employee population and analyze generational distribution
- Make your recognition program accessible through a variety of channels and media to accommodate different communication and participation preferences
- Institute managerial training on generational characteristics
- Provide tools and mechanisms to capture “voice of generation” and use input and feedback to implement changes to address cohort needs
- Focus on workplace and cultural commonalities rather than generational differences

Managing intergenerational dynamics—in addition to attracting and retaining talent—is a critical issue for all companies. Leveraging employee recognition can be helpful in managing and minimizing any effect of generational conflict while contributing to enhanced productivity, engagement, and growth. Make your program multi-generational and you’ll make your program more meaningful for all employees.
When employees are engaged, your organization is **stronger, healthier, and more productive**.

Building a culture of recognition requires organizational alignment, expertise, and the right technology. Our team of recognition professionals, paired with our award-winning software, can turn employee engagement into a strategy, and ultimately a culture of caring. We draw on our experience—and the latest technology—to help you design effectively, communicate smartly, train appropriately, track accurately, and deliver successfully.

*Request a demo to learn more about MotivAction and how we can help you to leverage your recognition efforts.*
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About MotivAction

We’re a performance improvement company with a single purpose: to help our clients achieve MORE. Through employee engagement, recognition, and training, we help our clients do more, sell more, and learn more. And that adds up to more results. We know how to inspire employees, managers, and leadership. And we think you’ll like our knowledge, creativity, and passion. In the end, we are focused on one thing—your success.