

The Ultimate Guide to Gratitude in the Workplace

How to Leverage Employee Recognition and Appreciation to Build an Engaged, High Performing Organization



It's been a tough couple of years, and many employees have felt an impact on their [mental health](#) and wellbeing as they deal with both internal and external stressors. [HR leaders are struggling](#) too, as they try to support employees emotionally while also answering to executives on issues like low morale, poor employee performance, and increased turnover.

When employees' batteries are constantly being drained at work, they start to slow down — and if they never get charged, they'll eventually turn off altogether. Sometimes, a simple gesture of gratitude or a sincere thank you for their efforts can give employees the boost they need.

Our work environments, in person or virtual, are just networks of interconnected relationships. Showing gratitude in the workplace is about nurturing those relationships, and showing people their contributions are meaningful, valued, and important.

In this guide, we'll walk through how to build a culture of gratitude in your workplace, covering why gratitude is important, the difference between recognition and appreciation, the state of employee recognition today, and how to leverage software to build an employee recognition program that inspires and motivates.



Why Gratitude is Important

In [positive psychology research](#), gratitude is frequently cited as a driver of greater overall happiness. Cultivating a sense of gratitude can help people feel more positive emotions in their day to day lives, improve their health, increase their resilience and ability to adapt to difficult circumstances, and build strong connections and relationships with others.

What are the benefits of gratitude in the workplace?

- **Increased engagement:** Organizations that recognize their people inspire real connection.
- **Higher productivity:** When employees feel celebrated and valued, they're more excited to work.
- **Better retention:** A positive recognition strategy boosts morale and breeds loyalty.
- **Greater motivation:** Regular appreciation gives people fresh purpose and momentum.
- **More satisfied customers:** Employees who are openly praised earn higher loyalty and satisfaction scores.
- **Stronger connections:** Remote teams feel more connected when positive feedback rolls in.



Recognition and Appreciation

What's the difference?

Cultivating a culture of gratitude in the workplace is not as simple as saying “thank you” more often. Before we dive in, let's first acknowledge that there are multiple elements of building a culture of gratitude, and that they serve different purposes.

Recognition is tied to what a person *does*.



RECOGNITION

Recognition is positive feedback or gratitude that is based on an employee's results or performance — in short, it is tied to what someone *does*.

Examples of situations where recognition may be given include an employee landing a high profile customer, finishing a critical project, or meeting a sales target.

Recognition can be done in a formal way, through an award, promotion, raise, bonus, etc. It can also be done informally, through a verbal or written thank you.

When recognition is given in a timely manner, it can be very impactful and motivating — everyone likes to feel recognized for their achievements and contributions!

But focusing solely on giving recognition is limiting, as it is conditional on an employee's performance. It's also scarce — because it is conditional on an employee's performance, there are only certain moments when it can be given. Focusing only on recognition may overlook employees who are working hard but perhaps not achieving targets or milestones just yet.



Appreciation focuses on who a person *is*.



APPRECIATION

Appreciation, on the other hand, focuses less on accomplishments and more on an employee's inherent value. While recognition focuses on what a person *does*, appreciation focuses on who they *are*. Appreciation is valuable because it gives you the opportunity to recognize and celebrate individuals in a way that isn't directly tied to results or outcomes.

Appreciation can also tap more into intrinsic motivation. Let's say, for example, that an employee decides to take the initiative to learn a new skill that will help them improve a process or workflow in their daily work. Although this behavior may not be directly attributable to a tangible outcome such as a target reached or a deal closed, the employee's curiosity and drive to experiment

and improve processes is still something that should be commended. Showing that employee appreciation for their problem-solving attitude sends the message to that employee that their mindset and the way that they apply it in the workplace is valued. This appreciation, although it may be as simple as a verbal thank you, can go a long way in making the employee want to continue to show up in that way.

Research shows that a little appreciation can go a long way in the workplace — [81% of employees](#) said that they are more motivated to work hard when their boss shows appreciation for them, and [53% of employees](#) said that receiving more appreciation from their manager would make them want to stay longer at the company.

We need both.

Recognition and appreciation both have their place in the workplace, but they have different goals and effects. Research also shows that employees perceive recognition and appreciation differently – companies report a [23% increase](#) in productivity when employees feel recognized for individual achievements, but a [43% increase](#) when people feel valued in their organizations. Imagine the impact that consistent recognition and appreciation can have on an organization!



Benefits of Employee Recognition

We know by now that gratitude makes people feel good — but recognition *specifically* has the power to reward and drive high engagement and performance. How?

IT MOTIVATES EMPLOYEES TO BE HIGH PERFORMERS.

Recognition offers the ability to call out high performers and raise the bar for others. Recognizing and rewarding employees for great work shows their peers what success looks like at your organization or in a specific role. This is an excellent motivator for the entire team to level up and create a culture of high performance. Furthermore, cultivating a culture of gratitude that celebrates employees when they accomplish goals or when they go above and beyond makes them feel valued, which in turn helps them develop stronger emotional bonds and loyalty to the organization, which also fuels high performance.

IT REINFORCES COMPANY VALUES AND SHOWS WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE.

Investing in employee recognition gives leaders in the company a chance to call out what the company values look like in practice. Let's say, for example, that one of the company values is "Embrace Curiosity". If an employee asks thoughtful questions and presents a new idea they want to try, they could be publicly recognized for embodying the value of "Embrace Curiosity". Recognizing this employee would not only make them feel appreciated, it would also remind the rest of your team that this company value exists, and that they too can be rewarded for embodying it and finding ways to incorporate it into their work.

IT IMPROVES LOYALTY AND RETENTION.

When employees feel recognized and appreciated, they are more likely to stick around. In fact, [research from IBM](#) showed that intention to leave is twice as high among employees who do not receive recognition (51%) compared to those who do (25%). Investing a little bit of time and effort into recognizing and appreciating employees can actually save a lot of time (and money) down the line.



The State of Employee Recognition Today

Ok, so we know that employee recognition and appreciation are important. Why do we need a whole guide about it?



Because employee recognition and appreciation is still not something that most companies have nailed.

Consider these statistics:

- [44% of employees](#) switch jobs because they are not receiving adequate recognition.
- Organizations with recognition programs had [31% lower](#) voluntary turnover than those without recognition programs.
- [52.5% of employees](#) want more recognition from their immediate manager.

To make matters worse, the lack of employee recognition and gratitude is contributing to an erosion of trust between employees and their leaders. [SHRM reported](#) that 90% of employees who received recognition or appreciation from their boss in the past month indicated higher levels of trust in their manager. Of the employees who received no recognition, only 48% reported that they trust their manager.

Lack of recognition and appreciation isn't the only problem organizations are facing today. Some organizations are trying to incorporate more gratitude into the workplace and company culture, but are going about it all wrong. Recognition and/or appreciation that is perceived to be insincere can actually have a larger negative impact than no recognition at all. If leaders are giving recognition or appreciation that feels forced or ingenuine, employees may experience a heightened sense of skepticism, distrust, etc.

Some examples of types of recognition that could be perceived as inauthentic include recognition that is:

- **Forced**, where leaders or employees are required to express recognition whether they want to or not
- **Disconnected**, where the recognition is coming from someone that the recipient does not work with directly or have a working relationship with
- **Impersonal**, or feedback that feels like it has been copied and pasted and doesn't specifically call out what the individual did to warrant the recognition
- **Surface level**, or recognition that sounds nice but isn't backed up by actions that support the employee's wellbeing and growth



Types of Recognition

When talking about employee recognition, it is important to recognize that there are many different types of recognition, and they all have different impacts. Some of the different types include:

Top-down recognition, or recognition that is passed down from superiors to their employees. It's always nice to be recognized by our superiors and receive affirmation that we are doing a good job. This is what most people tend to think of when they think of employee recognition, but focusing only on top-down recognition means missing out on all the other ways recognition can flow.

Peer recognition, or recognition given from one employee to another. Getting recognition by a teammate, or even someone lower in the organizational chart, can have just as much impact as getting recognition from a boss. This type of recognition is also vital for building and strengthening relationships and bonds within the organization.

Anonymous recognition is recognition where the giver of said appreciation remains unknown. This type of recognition is less common, but can be a great way to pass along recognition that feels authentic, as the receiver will know that the giver is not only giving the appreciation to seem benevolent.



Social recognition, or recognition that is given in front of others, whether in person like in a meeting, or asynchronously, via a tool like Slack. Social recognition can be very powerful, as it gives other employees a glimpse into what behavior is being recognized and rewarded, motivating them to model those behaviors in turn. In one study, [84% of employees](#) said that social recognition had a measurable impact on their engagement.

Private recognition, or recognition that is passed from the giver to the recipient with no audience. This can also be done in person or asynchronously in a tool like Slack, but in a 1-on-1 meeting or private message. Private recognition may be more impactful with some employees who are shy about receiving praise publicly.



Structured recognition, or recognition that is more formal and comes in the form of established programs or structures. This type of recognition is expected and happens at predictable times. One example of this type of recognition is celebrating an employee's work anniversary and highlighting what they have accomplished over the past year. Structured recognition is more likely to be top-down.

Unstructured recognition, which is less formal and comes up more organically than structured recognition. While this type of recognition is more spontaneous, leaders can still intentionally carve out space for this type of recognition to occur. An example of this would be starting a meeting by asking each team member to give a shout out to another team member for something great they did that week. Unstructured recognition is more likely to include peer-to-peer recognition.

Employee Recognition Best Practices

✓ Specific — Tailored — Timely — Connected

No matter what type of the above types of recognition you are engaging in, there are some general best practices for giving employee recognition.

Be specific.

If you send a generic, copy-and-pasted message to show recognition or praise to an employee, it will very likely come across as inauthentic and forced. Employees want to know exactly what they did well — and being specific increases the likelihood of them continuing that behavior in the future.

Tailor your approach for each employee.

Not every employee prefers to receive recognition in the same way. Some employees want the fanfare in a public channel, whereas others are totally happy to receive a thank you note in a private message. Managers should take the time to get to know their direct reports and how they prefer to be recognized.

Be timely.

Don't wait for a performance review to let employees know what they are doing well. Recognition should be given as soon as possible to strengthen the recipient's connection to positive behavior.

Connect it to values.

Connecting recognition to company values makes it easier for teams to work towards the same vision. If you can connect recognition to one of the company's values, you will bring that value to the forefront of the recipient's mind (as well as anyone else who witnesses the recognition), reinforcing that it is valuable to the organization.



Employee Recognition and Appreciation Examples

Want to get better at giving recognition and appreciation but feeling a bit stuck? Use this page as a cheat sheet with some examples of what to call out. All of these examples are pulled directly from [High Fives](#) given on the 15Five platform to and from 15Five employees.



RECOGNIZE EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE

“ You are continuing to push past your own activity records each week and are staying so consistent. It’s so inspiring to see the impact that you’ve made on some of your prospects through their positive feedback in calls. You’re doing the dang thing - keep it up & keep it movin’!”

“ Awesome work helping to organize our content strategy and get everyone aligned. This will make such a big impact.”

“ You closed 107 cases last week! That is around 20 cases a day, on top of maintaining excellent QA scores, you have been really productive this last week. Thank you for working hard during this busy time!”

“ Congratulations on an awesome & extraordinary start to Q4. Love seeing all the effort you’ve been putting in pay off with a tremendous pipeline contribution here in the first month! Thanks to each of you for the effort you’re putting in to make that happen. It’s a highly coordinated effort with a lot of moving parts and you all are making it work well!”

RECOGNIZE GOOD MINDSET

“ I appreciate you taking the time to drive a positive growth mindset with other SDRs! I have had multiple folks mention that you’re leading the charge on redirecting unhelpful negative energy to results-focused and growth conversations! Thank you! I appreciate all you do!”

“ I really appreciate your thorough and consistent follow-through. Considering all of the roadblocks, unique customer situations, coach preferences, and personalities - you are always the calm in the storm ready to listen and take responsible action. Your technology/time hacks are also very welcome! 🙌 ”

“ Thank you for your flexibility and encouragement this week. And for listening to me constantly ramble. I appreciate how you move quickly on important action items and challenge the team to work together consistently.”

RECOGNIZE GOAL ATTAINMENT

“ CONGRATS on hitting the goal! The grind that you executed on in October did not go unnoticed, and frankly, it really inspires me! Keep it up!!”

“ You blew the Q3 collections goals out of the water! I see all the hard work, careful conversations with customers, information digging, countless emails and tickets, and patience that went into those results. So proud of this team.”

“ Congrats on bringing home several critical hires this week! It has been a stellar Q3 - give yourselves a pat on the back!”

Creating an Employee Recognition Program

So far we've covered why employee recognition is important, the state of employee recognition today, different types of recognition, and some best practices for giving employees recognition.

But how do you take the ability to give impactful recognition at an individual level and amplify it at the organizational level? How do you build out structures that increase employee recognition without making it become too stale and forced?

In times of the past, organizations had to rely on some pretty outdated methods of employee recognition. But the workplace has undergone many changes in recent years, and with those changes has come the ability to leverage technology to build an effective and successful employee recognition program.

Build the Business Case for Recognition

First, you must secure leadership buy-in. The best way to start that conversation is by showing the business value of recognition and show how focusing on employee recognition can impact real business outcomes.

Here's a great example: According to [SHRM](#), a 2022 study by the Achievers Workforce Institute found that almost 2/3 of employees said feeling "meaningfully recognized" would reduce their desire to job hunt, and 57% said feeling recognized would reduce the likelihood they'd take a call from a headhunter. Incorporate stats like this from trusted sources to strengthen your case.

It also helps to outline how an employee recognition program could address some specific business problems that leadership is already trying to solve, such as turnover, low engagement, etc. And if you're asking for budget dollars to implement a new HR SaaS software to administer your program, explain how the potential benefits outweigh the costs.



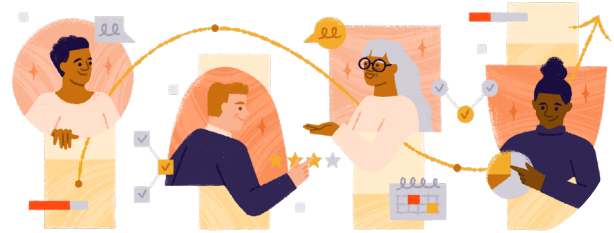
Need a little extra help getting executive buy-in for employee recognition and other strategic HR initiatives?

Get [15Five's Executive Buy-in Playbook](#), where we walk you through how to get executive buy-in for strategic HR initiative and give you tips on how to frame and present your pitch.



Leveraging Employee Recognition Software

Gone are the days of hoping that managers in your organization are vocally recognizing their employees' accomplishments or writing them thank you notes — a method that is hard to track.



Of course, in the hybrid world of work, there are many new avenues for delivering recognition, including over Zoom calls and in Slack channels or email. But relying solely on these informal methods still leaves a lot out. Plus, recognition is a critical driver of employee engagement, and in order to improve employee engagement through recognition, the HR team needs to have some visibility into the recognition that is occurring throughout the organization.

Today, employee recognition software makes it easy to make employee recognition and gratitude a core part of the company culture in a way that is operationalized, trackable, and scalable. Employee recognition software also helps to hold managers accountable to contributing to building a true culture of recognition and gratitude.

According to [a study by Gallup](#), technology plays three critical roles in enhancing the power of recognition:

1. Technology gives people leaders a nudge.

“The reality is busy people often need to be reminded or nudged to recognize others,” said Chris French, executive vice president of customer strategy at Workhuman. “Technology can be used to remind managers to look for opportunities to recognize employees and also to illustrate what effective recognition looks like.”

2. Technology can help “elongate” recognition moments.

“It becomes not just one moment but many moments elongated over time,” French said. “Research shows that the reminder of the moment triggers the same area of the brain as the actual recognition moment itself.”

3. Technology allows you to measure recognition data.

An employee recognition platform makes it easier to collect and analyze data about recognition patterns in organizations. “That data allows you to see any bias in recognition practices, for example, so you can have more-equitable practices going forward,” French said.



There are plenty of options for employee recognition software out there, and your organization's culture and needs will determine which is best for you. But here are some things to look for:



The ability to tie recognition to goals and values.

Recognition has a lot more impact when it is directly tied to a goal or a company value, as it helps frame the recognition and provide context. Good employee recognition software will make it seamless to connect recognition to goals and values. Maybe, for example, the software allows you to load your company values into a drop-down menu and toggle through the values to select one every time you give feedback. Or maybe your performance management software has a comment feature for goals where managers can leave feedback and give recognition that is directly linked to the goal being discussed.



A dashboard for analytics.

As an HR leader, you can get a lot of valuable insights from employee recognition software. Which team members are receiving the most recognition? Which department is giving the most recognition? Who is managing the team that is receiving the most recognition collectively? All these questions and more should be questions you can answer through the analytic functionality of your employee recognition software. Having access to this type of information will give you greater insight into what managers/teams are fully embracing and embodying a culture of gratitude, and which managers/teams might need a little extra nudge.



The option to integrate with your communication tools.

Where do most conversations happen in your organization? Is it via email? Slack? Teams? Some other channel? No matter where your employees spend the most time, your employee recognition software should be able to meet them there. Good employee recognition software should sync with your existing tools so that employees can get alerts and notifications when specific actions are taken. At 15Five, for example, we use High Fives, and have a synced Slack channel so that whenever a high five is given on the 15Five platform, a Slack alert is also sent in our High Fives channel for everyone to see.



Making Rollout Successful

Choosing an employee recognition software is only the first step. When it comes time to roll out an employee recognition program and accompanying software, here are some things to keep in mind.

Identify recognition champions in the company.

These champions are the people that will help develop, promote, advocate for, improve, and reinforce the recognition program and the usage of whatever tools are introduced. You can grant these champions early access to the platform, and keep them engaged by holding regular standups to discuss how to support them and how to improve the program.

to give recognition and praise. Then, make sure that internal champions are highlighting all the ways recognition can be given.



Answer questions from the beginning, including:

- What type of behaviors will be rewarded?
- How will we reward these behaviors?
- How often should recognition be given?
- Who should recognition come from?
- Where should recognition take place?

Establish multiple channels of recognition.

As we've mentioned, not everyone prefers to give and/or receive feedback in the exact same way. While it is important to develop answers to the logistical questions raised above, it is also important to keep in mind that there should be more than one way that recognition can be given in the organization. Think about how to create multiple paths for employees and leaders to follow

Embed recognition into existing processes.

As mentioned before, getting an employee recognition platform or tool that can integrate with the main communication tool your organization uses is a major plus, as it makes it a lot easier to meet employees where they are while still taking advantage of all the data and insights that a platform has to offer. When rolling out a recognition program and tools, look for opportunities to integrate it wherever possible into existing processes. For example, do you have a fulfillment partner that you use to send company swag to new hires? You can likely use that to fulfill rewards as well. Or, do you have an icebreaker question at the beginning of each meeting? Maybe you try a "gratitude reflection" icebreaker and prompt employees to share one thing, or one coworker, they're grateful for that week.



Frequently measure the program's effectiveness.

Determine how you are going to quantify the success of your program. Will you measure employee engagement before and after rolling it out? Maybe you will send a survey 6 months after launching to get feedback? Or maybe you will chart turnover over the course of a year after launching to see if it decreases?

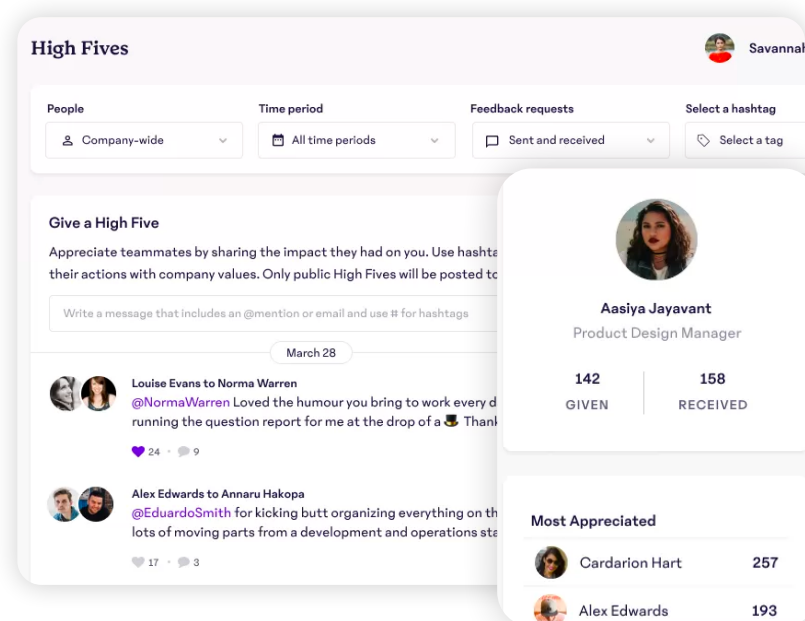
You can use all of these methods, and more. Ideally, you have performance management software so that you can quickly gather data and insights on things like engagement, goal attainment, etc. all in one place. With these insights, you will be able to adjust your program where necessary to attain maximum impact over time.

Emphasize direct and consistent communication with managers.

As we know, managers are a critical driver of employee engagement, and they can and should play a key role in making an employee recognition program successful. Department managers will play a major role in not only rolling out and promoting the initial launch of a program, but maintaining its success over time. Be sure to equip your managers with all of the information they need to promote the program, answer questions about it, and bring it to life on their own teams. Furthermore, use software to track recognition levels by team, so that you can jump in to provide further support and assistance to managers whose teams have lower participation levels.

Elevate Employee Recognition with 15Five

Highly-engaged, high-performing organizations make showing appreciation an important part of work. At 15Five, we make doing so easy through [High Fives](#). High Fives empower employees at all levels to appreciate teammates by sharing the impact that they've had. Hashtags can be used to align actions to company values, making High Fives a great way to resurface your organization's values and keep them top of mind.



Employee recognition works best when it is part of a comprehensive performance management strategy — and our High Fives feature integrates seamlessly with other features and services that give your recognition efforts lasting impact.

In [check-ins](#), employees can surface their wins and High Fives that they've received over the last week for their manager to see. They are also prompted to give High Fives themselves, so they can pass

on the recognition and contribute to building and maintaining a culture of gratitude.

And in the [Best-Self Review](#), High Fives that the employee has received throughout the time period that is being reviewed are surfaced, giving the manager insight into all of the different ways that employee has accomplished goals, helped other team members, and gone above and beyond.



Want to learn more about how 15Five can take your employee recognition program to the next level and cultivate a true culture of gratitude in your organization?

[Schedule a Demo](#)

[Try 2 Weeks Free](#)



About 15Five

15Five is the holistic performance management company. 15Five equips HR teams with a complete, single-platform solution to improve manager effectiveness, drive high performance and engagement, and increase retention. By combining easy-to-use software with coaching, manager training, and a thriving professional community, 15Five's approach provides HR leaders with everything they need to achieve their strategic people objectives. 15Five offers a full suite of products including 360 performance reviews, in-depth engagement surveys, robust goal & OKR tracking, and weekly manager-employee feedback tools like 1-on-1s and pulse ratings. Together, all of these enable HR leaders to continuously measure engagement and performance within the flow of work and then empower their managers to drive change from the bottom up. HR leaders at over 3,400 companies, including Credit Karma, Spotify and Pendo rely on 15Five's software and services to make their talent a growth driver. For more information, visit www.15five.com.

