

Why your people need recognition and appreciation

Recently one of my LinkedIn [posts](#) received an unexpectedly large and encouraging response. The essence that struck a nerve is the idea that *recognition is about what people do*, whereas *appreciation is about who they are*. Encouraged by the LinkedIn crowd, I am expanding in today's Letting Go. Stepping Up. blog and in doing so acknowledge the work of Mike Robbins in his 2019 HBR article.

The difference – and why it's so important

Recognition is about giving positive feedback on performance, on results. Sometimes it is formal: an award, a bonus, a promotion. Or it can be informal: a hand-written note, a word in a meeting. All these methods are worthy and motivating, but there are limits to recognition: [1] it's performance-based and is therefore conditional; [2] it's based on the past, so it's about what someone has already done; [3] it's scarce – there's limited amount to spread around; and [4] it generally comes from the top, e.g. promotions and pay increases.



Appreciation, on the other hand, is about acknowledging a person's inherent value. It isn't about their accomplishments. It's their worth as a human being and a colleague. Appreciation can be shown anytime – by anyone. We all want to know: Am I important? Do you hear me? Do you see me? Do I mean something to you?

In summary, recognition is about what a person does; appreciation is about who they are.

And here's why the distinction is so important. Recognition and appreciation are given for different reasons. It's inevitable that everyone will suffer failures and challenges in their work life. So, if as a leader you focus only on praising positive outcomes, i.e. on recognition, you miss lots of opportunities to connect with and support the individuals in your team – to appreciate them.

How to show appreciation

Showing appreciation is as simple as:

Listening: Listen deeply, play back what you have heard. When they come up to you, put down your phone and put your mouse aside. Give them 100% of your attention. Be fully present.

Telling people what you value about them: Doing this proactively and not because someone did something great. Or because you want something from them. Doing this is a wonderful gift that will affect how your colleagues feel about themselves and their relationship with you.

Checking in: Taking the time to check in and asking, 'How is the job going?' or 'How's your mother doing?'. Make it personal and professional. Show genuine interest in them as a person.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear. Surveys show that 50% of people who feel appreciated by their boss stay longer at their organisation, even though 65% say their boss already shows them enough appreciation. The message is clear: More appreciation is better.

Recognition is appropriate and necessary when it's deserved. Appreciation is important all the time.

More on this topic

✓ [Why employees need both recognition and appreciation](#), Mike Robbins, HBR 2019/11.