

Motivating People

Research: A Little Recognition Can Provide a Big Morale Boost

by Shibeal O'Flaherty, Michael T. Sanders, and Ashley Whillans

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Summary. As organizations large and small face the twin challenges of increasingly strained budgets and burned out workforces, what can managers do to keep employees engaged — without breaking the bank? In this piece, the authors share new research on the power of symbolic awards such as thank you notes, public recognition, and certificates. They find that these simple interventions can significantly improve employee motivation, but clarify that to maximize their effect, it's essential to customize these rewards to your unique context. Specifically, the authors draw on prior research to highlight five key

considerations for managers looking to implement symbolic awards: the most impactful messenger, the best timing, whether to make it private or public, attention to detail, and the importance of starting small. While these interventions are no substitute for fair monetary compensation, especially when cash is limited, symbolic awards can go a long way to demonstrate your appreciation for your employees and keep spirits high. [close](#)

As we enter into the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic, frontline public sector workers such as healthcare professionals, teachers, and social workers are under more strain than ever. At the same time, organizations in every industry are being forced to downsize and restructure, meaning they've got less cash in the bank to support an increasingly burned out workforce. In these trying times, what can managers do to keep their employees motivated?

To answer this question, we conducted a series of studies in collaboration with the non-profit What Works for Children's Social Care, examining the impact of light-touch, cost-effective interventions designed to promote the overall happiness of social workers. While many organizations (especially in the private sector) have traditionally used monetary incentives to boost employee morale and performance, recent research suggests that *symbolic awards* — interventions such as congratulatory cards, public recognition, and certificates — can significantly increase intrinsic motivation, performance, and retention rates. As such, we were interested in measuring the impact of symbolic awards that demonstrated the organization's appreciation and respect for employees without offering cash incentives.

While past research has started to outline these benefits through surveys and lab experiments conducted with college students, most of the field research on this topic has been conducted in the private sector. That work is helpful, but it may not be fully applicable to the non-profit and public sector organizations that employ many of the frontline workers most impacted by the pandemic. Research suggests that employees in fields such as health care, social work, and education tend to be more motivated to do work that has a positive

impact on others, to place a higher value on social recognition, and to be less motivated by salary than their private sector counterparts, meaning that financial incentives may be less effective and symbolic recognition may be especially important to support these workers.

To better understand the effectiveness of symbolic recognition for public sector employees, we ran a study looking at the impact of sending social workers personalized letters of appreciation to their home addresses. We randomly assigned half of the social workers to receive letters from their direct managers, while the other half did not receive a letter.

The letters contained two sentences of positive feedback: The first sentence was selected from a menu of options such as, “your work has consistently had a positive impact on the children you work with” and “your continued dedication and hard work makes children and families in the region better off every day,” and the second sentence was written by the manager themselves. In this way, we ensured that the letters were reasonably standardized but still personalized.

What did we find? One month after this simple intervention, the social workers who received a letter reported feeling significantly more valued, more recognized for their work, and more supported by their organization than those who didn’t receive a letter. There were also positive (though not quite statistically significant) impacts on subjective wellbeing, belonging, intrinsic motivation, and sickness absence rates for social workers who received letters.

In addition, prior research suggests that helping employees feel more valued and supported is important not just for those individual employees’ wellbeing, but also for the organization as a whole. Studies have shown that when employees are more satisfied with their organization, they are more productive and less likely to leave, and that recognizing and empowering employees can increase motivation and improve performance across the organization.

Clearly, symbolic interventions can be effective. But to maximize their impact, it's important to customize these efforts to your organization's unique context. Research suggests that there are a few key factors managers should consider when trying out low-cost symbolic awards:

The Messenger

One of the most important considerations is *who* the award will come from. Management should consider where there might be current gaps in feedback — perhaps employees do not interact much with the beneficiaries of their work, or with senior leaders in their organizations — and should prioritize notes of appreciation from these groups. Especially when interaction is limited due to remote work, studies suggest that positive feedback from key stakeholders is likely to be particularly essential to keep socially-driven employees motivated.

Timing

It is also important to think about *when* the symbolic gesture is likely to make the biggest impact. For employees whose daily workflows have become increasingly stressful and unpredictable during the pandemic, daily recognition of the impact of their work could well be effective, while in other environments, daily feedback may start to feel forced or repetitive. In addition, research on the *Fresh Start* effect suggests that recognizing your employees can be particularly impactful at key temporal landmarks. For example, a thank you note sent at the start of a new quarter or positive feedback delivered at the conclusion of a major project can serve as a booster shot of motivation when employees need it most.

Make It Public

Private feedback is appropriate in some situations, but public recognition — such as awarding certificates during a team meeting — can often be a cost-effective way to motivate the entire team. Public recognition can feel more impactful to the recipient, and it can also boost motivation among all employees, including those who aren't

recognized themselves. In one field experiment, when thank you cards were publicly awarded to the three top performers in small work groups, researchers found that performance increased not just for the top performers who received the recognition, but for all members of their group. This may be because witnessing a colleague receive accolades could compel other employees to improve their own performance to measure up. However, another study found that recognizing employees publicly led to negative social comparison that reduced performance among non-awardees — so it's important to consider both the positive and negative signals that public awards can send to employees, and adapt your messaging accordingly.

Details Matter

Your employees can tell the difference between a rushed job and genuine appreciation. To make sure your symbolic interventions are well-received, it is important to pay attention to the details. For example, in our studies, the letters of appreciation were signed in ink by a direct manager and mailed to employees' homes. A blanket email would no doubt have been much less effective. Another study found that employees were significantly more productive after receiving a physical, non-monetary gift than when they received small financial gifts. Employees reported feeling more valued when they could see that their employer took the time and effort to choose, purchase, and wrap the gift, and so they increased their own efforts in return.

Start Small

Perhaps most importantly, instituting symbolic awards shouldn't feel like a daunting, Herculean task. The whole point of symbolic awards is that they're cost-effective (typically free!), easy to implement, and can go a long way when done right. If you're not sure where to start, try one of these low-lift ideas:

- Write a short, personalized note expressing gratitude for an employee's recent good performance.
- Publicly recognize an employee's contributions in your next team meeting.

- Hold a morale-building meeting to celebrate your team's successes.

Effective symbolic awards must be designed with a specific workplace context in mind. What might be effective in one environment — such as for social workers, teachers, or among public-sector employees more generally — might not translate to other contexts. Furthermore, our research should not be misconstrued to suggest that symbolic awards could take the place of fair monetary compensation. Indeed, in many cases, research has shown that financial incentives can be an effective motivator.

But especially when budgets are strained, non-cash rewards offer an appealing and effective alternative to traditional incentives. Moreover, research has shown that even when funds are available, financial rewards can sometimes come at a cost to the organization's culture. For example, one study found that in some public sector organizations, merit bonuses actually reduced motivation and morale due to a widespread perception that the performance levels needed to earn the incentive were nearly impossible for many employees to achieve.

In contrast, our research suggests that simple, symbolic interventions such as thank you notes can also make a real impact — without the potential downsides of cash rewards, and with little to no cost to the employer. During these exceptionally challenging and stressful times, a bit of appreciation can go a long way.

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Shibeal O' Flaherty is a PhD student in Public Policy at King's College London, and a Researcher at What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC). Her research applies behavioral science to improve public-sector employee well-being, and she is currently co-leading a research program at WWCSC called 'Happier, Healthier Professionals' to improve the happiness,

productivity and retention of public-sector workforces across England.

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Michael T. Sanders is a Reader (Associate Professor) in Public Policy at King's College London, Chief Executive of What Works for Children's Social Care, and Academic Lead for the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education. His research focuses on the use of experimental methods to improve public services and outcomes and equalities for young people.

Ashley Whillans is an assistant professor in the negotiations, organizations, and markets unit at the Harvard Business School teaching Negotiations and Motivation and Incentives courses to MBA students and Executives. Her research focuses on the role of non-cash rewards on engagement and the links between time, money, and happiness. She is the author of *Time Smart: How to Reclaim Your Time & Live a Happier Life* (Harvard Business Review, 2020).