



Cadmus Compass Series: Leading your organization in times of change

Celebrating success: building a culture of recognition

By Kelly Stuck, Senior Specialist, Cadmus

Years ago, I saved a comic strip for the 'not so good' days. It's an office scene, and the worker says to his boss, "I don't feel like I'm being recognized." The boss replies, "You got paid, right? Consider that two weeks of positive reinforcement."

Recognition is a funny thing in the workplace. It's often defined as the act of acknowledging people, but the details around recognition are not simple, straightforward, or universal. Why should people be recognized at work? How should recognition be given? Shouldn't people be internally motivated and not seek external validation?

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Motivation: internal vs. external validation

Motivation is a fascinating concept, especially when we consider the balance between internal and external validation and how it intersects with recognition. Ideally, we want individuals to be internally motivated, driven by their own goals and aspirations. However, as humans, we crave connection, recognition, and the feeling of being seen. And

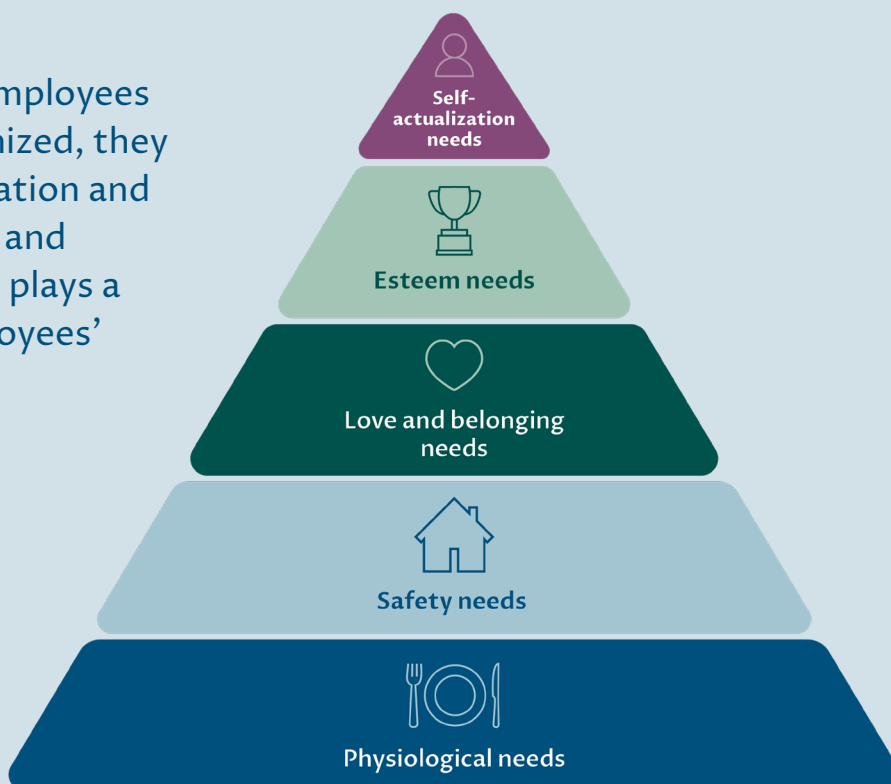
this is unique to each person. This external validation—in the form of recognition—plays a crucial role in overall motivation and satisfaction, as well in establishing a workplace culture of valuing and appreciating everyone's contributions.

Psychology supporting recognition: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Understanding Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a psychological theory proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943, can help create an environment that supports and motivates individuals. It is often depicted as a pyramid with five levels, each representing different human needs. The theory suggests that people are motivated to fulfill basic needs before moving on to higher-level needs. These five levels include:



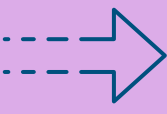

- **Physiological needs:** basic survival needs like food and shelter.
- **Safety needs:** security and protection.
- **Love and belonging needs:** social relationships and connections.
- **Esteem needs:** self-respect and recognition from others.
- **Self-actualization needs:** personal growth and achieving one's potential

In the workplace, when employees feel respected and recognized, they can move to self-actualization and tend to excel in creativity and productivity. Recognition plays a vital role in fulfilling employees' needs, leading to higher levels of engagement and performance.



Understanding what motivates your team




To effectively recognize and motivate your team, it's essential to understand what drives everyone. I've found that four key drivers motivate most people:

			
Money	Recognition	Growth	Purpose (meaningful work)
Financial incentives like salary increases and bonuses.	Non-monetary rewards such as certificates/ awards, recognition during a team meeting, etc.	Learning new skills through professional development opportunities; advancing to higher positions within the company.	Working on projects that align with the individual's values and interests.

Understanding what motivates individuals on your team helps you tailor recognition efforts to individual preferences. Generational differences contribute to how people like to be recognized, so be sure to check in with individuals on your team to help boost overall engagement and retention.

Recognition: a high-ranking need

Recognition often ranks high on the list of what employees value. Here are a few ways to help your team feel seen and appreciated, especially during challenging times:

	Private mentions	A simple, heartfelt acknowledgment can go a long way. The key is to go beyond the "good job," and be as specific as possible. Remember that recognition is not 'one-size fits all' and not everyone appreciates public recognition.
	Public appreciation	Celebrate achievements in team meetings or company-wide communications. If you are not personally familiar with the work, ask someone who is to make some personal remarks or quote client kudos.
	Awards	Formal recognition through awards or certificates. Even during a time of limited budgets, consider simple awards programs, not tied to financial incentives.



TIP:
Ask your team members to rank order these key drivers to understand what motivates them: Money, Recognition, Growth, Purpose (Meaningful Work). Schedule one-on-one time with them to discuss it further. Everyone is different. A leader's role is to learn how to support, motivate, and recognize their staff.

Celebrating people

During times of uncertainty and disruption, temper the tone of celebrations, but never skip acknowledgements and honoring the good work that's happening. It's important, not just for your organization's productivity and growth, but to the people on your team. Here are a few ways to connect with and celebrate your team:

- **Communicate:** Regularly meet with your team and share accomplishments broadly. Provide constructive feedback or coach privately to maintain trust and respect.
- **Talk but mostly listen:** Listening to your team members shows that you value their input and care about their experiences.
- **Peer awards:** Encourage peer-to-peer recognition to foster a supportive and collaborative environment. Simply asking employees to spotlight what other team members do well can be very meaningful.
- **Small wins:** Celebrate small victories to keep morale high and maintain momentum. Sometimes the small wins are what matter most.
- **Authentic connections:** Tie recognition to human connections, not just organizational roles. Show up authentically and make recognition personal.

Recognition, done effectively, helps create a workplace culture where people want to work together to achieve common goals.

By understanding what motivates your team and why recognition is important for individuals and your organization, you can create a workplace where employees feel valued and contribute their best. Recognition is not just about awards or public praise; it's about making people feel seen, appreciated, and even celebrated for their unique contributions—more than just two weeks of 'positive reinforcement' in the form of a paycheck.

Kelly Stuck is a senior specialist at Cadmus, focusing on communications and change management within its strategy and transformation service area. With over 20 years of experience, she leads successful communications, engagement, and technology adoption efforts for private sector and federal clients. Kelly is a strategic, innovative, and effective leader, skilled at seeing the big picture while identifying and expertly executing tasks. She is known for sparking positivity and laughter, fueling creativity and fun at work. Kelly holds a master's degree in business administration from George Mason University and a bachelor's degree in business marketing from James Madison University.

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