Episode 005: The Problem with Recognition

Have you ever heard or maybe even felt yourself something to the tune of, "I do 10 things right and never hear a word. I do one thing wrong and never hear the end of it"? Yeah, it's pretty common, and I was a manager producing that exact scenario for at least a decade. Even if you're not like I was, even if you say thank you a lot, there's probably an opportunity to make it more meaningful and effective. So today, we're going to dive into recognition, what the problem is, what some of those common mistakes are, and I'm going to give you a four-part formula so that you can be more effective.

Welcome to Lean Leadership for Ops Managers, the podcast for leaders in Ops Management who want to spark improvement, foster engagement, and boost problem solving - AND still get their day job done. Here's your host, Leadership Trainer, Lean Enthusiast, and Spy Thriller Junkie, Jamie V. Parker.

Well, hello, hello, Jamie here, and I'd like to give a big thank you to everyone who has tuned in to the podcast. Today we are diving into recognition. Look, we all know the Gallup statistic - 66% of US employees are not engaged at work, and that is the best number we've seen in the last 20 years. Did you also know that a Gallup report shows that 70% say they would work harder with continuous recognition?

And yet, according to a Reward Gateway survey, do you know what percentage say they're not recognized enough for their contributions? 82% That's right. 82% say, "I'm not recognized enough for my contributions." Look, we know we're supposed to do this, right? This is just a core basic of respect for people. In fact, we may even think we're doing it or we may even be doing it, and yet a large percent of people don't feel like they're recognized enough. So what gives?

Well, there are some mistakes we make when it comes to recognition. I usually go through five or six or seven of them, but I'm going to focus on the three most common so that we can talk specifically about what to do about it. These mistakes, they show up and they prevent us from giving recognition frequently and effectively. So let's dive into the behavior of recognition. So if you listen to episode two and episode three, then you're familiar with the Transformation Trinity. If you haven't, you can go back and check those out. Today we're working in the behavior circle. So we're looking at the behavior, both the what we do, and the how we do it. So, three mistakes.

Mistake number one, we make it all about rewards or about the program. First off, rewards tend to take things to an extrinsic place, right? So if it's about the gift cards and the pizza party and the dollars you get to spend at the company store, now we're taking it to an extrinsic place. But even if we don't have rewards, when we put everything into a program, it can feel like rewards. It can still take us to that extrinsic place, *and* it causes some other problems too.

You see, programs tend to slow things down, tend to reduce the frequency because we're waiting for the monthly program or the quarterly program, and it feels like to make those changes, then we have to overhaul the whole thing. So here's what we need. We also need recognition every day. Look, I'm not saying go and abandon your programs. I'm not saying stop giving out pizza parties and gift cards. I'm

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simply saying that we can't rely on programs in order to give recognition. We can't rely on them, so let the programs be and also give recognition every day.

Mistake number two is that we're generic. So I want to tell you a story. Cory is a manager at one of my client organizations and he said, "You know, when I was in the military, I had this boss, who would always say, 'Hey, thanks, man' all the time. And at first, it was great and I thought, 'Oh man, he really appreciates me.' But over time when he kept saying, 'Hey, thanks, man', for every single thing, it actually became a running joke. We used to actually joke about it." You see, when we're generic, not only does a team member not know what they're being recognized for - and if they don't know they can't repeat it - but they also don't feel it.

So what we need to do is we need to share the specific behavior. We want to make sure that when we give recognition, we share the specific behavior. We don't want any of this generic business, "Hey, thanks, bud". Now, listen, of course, you can say, "Hey, thanks, bud. Hey, appreciate you. Hey, you're the best." Of course, you can say that, just don't mistake that as being effective. Because we say, hey 82% say they don't feel like they're recognized enough, and perhaps it's because you're too generic when you share appreciation.

Then finally, mistake number three, we're incomplete. It's not meaningful enough. Not only do we often end up with hollow "Thanks, buds" floating around, but we also tend to miss the significance. People value significance. Think back to that Reward Gateway statistic - 82% say they're not recognized enough for what? For their contribution. You see, while sharing the specific behavior is a good start, it doesn't have full meaning and significance unless we also share the contribution, that's when we take it to the next level.

This is some of the secret sauce, my friends. So here's what we need. We share the impact. We want to give recognition every day, we want to share the specific behavior and we want to share the impact because the impact is what makes it matter. It's the "why" it's the "so what?", and people value that.

Mistake number one, we rely on the programs and the rewards.

Mistake number two, we're generic. And Mistake number three, we're incomplete - we don't put in enough meaning. The way we overcome these mistakes is by building our skill and our habits - our behaviors at reinforcing feedback. Let me ask you this. If you were doing something that was helpful to either others on the team, or it was helpful in getting the team closer to achieving true north goals, or it was helpful in creating or enhancing value for the customer, would you want to know? Of course, you would, right?

Well, reinforcing feedback is when we recognize helpful behaviors that we would like to see repeated, that we would like to see more of. And here's what's great about reinforcing feedback, it is quick, it takes about 30 seconds. It's effective because we include the specific behavior and the impact of the behavior. It's purposeful, because we choose the behaviors that make a difference. And it's a skill you can learn

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and practice to make it just part of your everyday leadership. In fact, I'm going to give you the four-part formula right now.

Number one, it's in present tense. Number two, we share the specific behavior. Number three, we share the impact of the behavior. And number four, we close with a casual, quick, close. So your four-part formula:

1. In present tense
2. Specific behavior
3. Impact of behavior
4. Casual, quick close

I recently led a group through a spark improvement behaviors challenge, where they learned and practiced reinforcing feedback specific to improvement behaviors. So not even just general behaviors, but very specifically to improvement behaviors. What are the improvement behaviors we want more of? And here's what some of them said. "I realized that I do this at home, even just last night with my daughter, but I forget to do it at work and need to recommit and build it into my daily habits." Someone said, "I love the optional add on that connects the behavior to a current priority and ties everything together so it all feels cohesive. I'm excited by the idea that if I'm consistent and frequent in giving reinforcing feedback, then I might actually not have to give correcting feedback as often.

And finally, someone said, "You know, it hit me like a ton of bricks here in this particular session. You see, we typically focus all our energy on correcting feedback to fix poor behaviors. We spent all our energy trying to learn how to do that and how to give correcting feedback and how to fix poor behaviors, but by learning how to give feedback effectively with reinforcing feedback first, two things happen. First, we're reducing the risk while we're learning. Because when I'm learning how to give correcting feedback, when I screw it up, the consequences could actually be pretty impactful. When I'm learning and fall down and get back up, how to give reinforcing feedback? The consequences aren't as impactful. I can learn, I can fall down, I can get back up, and so it's easier to practice and build that skill."

And he said, "Plus, setting the foundation will make learning correcting feedback easier. So when it's time to add in correcting feedback, I'm actually going to be able to learn it faster and fall down less and have less of a negative consequence when I fall down, because I'm going to have this foundation already." He said, "It hit me like a ton of bricks, we're doing it backwards. We're focusing all our energy on developing our managers on the correcting stuff, and we need to start here first."

Here's the thing. Since we're practicing Lean continuous improvement, the reality is that we're always working on improving something. Since we're in Ops Management, we always keep raising the bar. We hit a goal consistently? Cool, let's raise it. It's never good enough. So there is constant awareness of the things we aren't doing well. Constant. So that feeling, "I do 10 things right and never hear a word, but one thing wrong and never hear the end of it", it's real. Maybe you're like me. Maybe your natural space is to

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focus on the problems and you forget to share appreciation and recognition and you get caught up on the gaps that need to be closed. Maybe you're like me, or maybe you're not like me. Maybe saying thank you comes naturally and you do it all the time. But because we have this constant awareness of the things that aren't going well, and because we sometimes make those mistakes we talked about, like the generic, "Thanks, bud", people still feel like they aren't recognized enough for their contributions. Reinforcing feedback is the way we change that, *and* it's a responsibility of leadership. Mastering this skill, it's not a "nice to have", it's a core component of effective leadership. It's a must-have.

So let's recap. 70% of people say, "Hey, I would work harder with continuous recognition." Yet 82% say they're not recognized enough. We have a problem. Three of the most common mistakes we make is that we rely on rewards and formal recognition programs, we're generic and we're incomplete. We don't provide enough meaning through our recognition. The way we change that is reinforcing feedback, giving reinforcing feedback every single day. Reinforcing feedback is when we recognize helpful behaviors we'd like to see repeated.

So what do you do next? Well, number one, pay attention to when and how you share appreciation or give recognition today. Going back to that Transformation Trinity we talked about in episodes two and three, let's dig into the behavior - the what you do, and the how you do it. And check yourself, how are you on frequency? What does your frequency of giving recognition look like?

If you're interested in bringing a reinforcing feedback challenge to your organization, head over to ProcessPlusResults.com and book a call.

We'll pick up the conversation next week.

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