Episode 008: Ask Jamie - Your Recognition Questions

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.

So when I planned this Recognition series, it was going to be a three-part series. However, I received several questions from listeners so I am adding one more episode. I'm Jamie, and today I will share with you questions and answers on topics like watering down the recognition, getting stuck on the four parts, integrating reinforcing feedback into other recognition efforts, and "What should we really recognize?" All right, you ready? Here we go.

Question number one. "If you give too much recognition, doesn't it water it down and make it not meaningful anymore?" Here's my answer to that. Maybe there's a point at which that happens. I have just never seen anyone get there. In my experience, the level of meaning and impact of recognition isn't reduced or watered down by frequency. Instead, it's watered down and reduced by things like this: A lack of specifics, where we just say, "Hey, thanks, bud", but we don't say what we're thankful and grateful and appreciative for. What is the specific behavior? It's watered down and impact is reduced when we fail to tie it back to why it matters. And we say, "Yeah, thanks for doing this", but so what? People want to be recognized not just for their behaviors but for their contribution. And since people want to feel valued for their contribution, we need to help connect the dots for why what they're doing matters - what is that contribution?

I also see it watered down and the impact reduced for things like not being purposeful or relevant. Maybe there's a lack of awareness and we thank the wrong person, or there was this team effort and we think that only one person played the primary role. And so we thank that one person and we don't acknowledge the team effort. Maybe we thank somebody for some of the small things, but we fail to notice the things that they do that have a real big contribution and impact. So we want to just pay attention, make sure we have awareness, and that we're relevant and purposeful in how we share appreciation and recognition.

And finally, recognition is watered down or not meaningful when it's inauthentic - when we're doing it because we're supposed to, but not because we mean it. When we do it in a way where it comes across as this rote, hey, I just say, "Thanks, bud" or hey, yeah, I always say the same thing, "Appreciate all you do". And now I don't make it personal. It's not authentic. It just has become a habit of something I say. And at first, like Cory in one of the previous episodes, he said, "Hey, at first I thought it was like, 'Man, this is great. This guy really values me. But after a while, I realized he just says that all the time.'" And so it came across as inauthentic.

Here's the thing. In more than 15 years of multi-unit management and three years of partnering with Ops leaders, I have never met a manager who I thought needed to tone down the recognition. There were some that I thought came across inauthentically. There were some that I thought were disconnected. There were some that I thought did it poorly in a way that wasn't really meaningful, and there were plenty

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of times where it just sounded hollow, but never once to have I thought, "Wow, this person just gives way too much authentic and effective recognition. They really need to tone it down." I haven't seen it.

Okay, second question. "Doesn't following the four-part formula reduce authenticity?" In my experience, no. The four-part formula does not reduce authenticity because the formula walks you through how we can create more meaning, but it's not a script - it should still sound like you. So you're still going to be really purposeful in sharing what you're recognizing, right? What do you see that's important for people to do? And why does it matter? The specific behavior and the impact from your perspective, this should be your voice, these should be your words. When we add on these other two components - the using present tense and the casual, quick close, they're part of the formula that helps you keep it impactful to driving future behaviors, and keep it quick-moving so it's easy for you to incorporate into your everyday.

So when you use this formula, you should still be giving reinforcing feedback from the heart. It should still be your voice and it should still be authentic. Now, here's why often you struggle with it or it feels a little weird at the beginning is because we haven't been doing it this way in the past, right? And so we have these old habits that we're actually trying to transition into giving reinforcing feedback in a way we haven't done it before. So at first, it may feel awkward, and you will need to practice consistently for a week or two or three to help it flow [seamlessly] for you. But once you get it, it will completely change your relationships, and you'll be surprised how automatic it becomes for you.

Okay, third question. "So this whole four-part reinforcing feedback thing, am I supposed to say that every single time? Because that just seems like overkill and like it would be a barrier to me sharing at a frequent level." Great question, and no, you do not have to use this every time. You absolutely can still say thank you, and leave it at that. And you should still have whatever formal rewards and recognition programs you use. We're not scrapping those. The key in this conversation is that we can't rely on those exclusively Sure, sometimes we're in a meeting or we're walking down the hall, something just happens and it makes sense to just say, "Hey, thanks for that." Sometimes that's going to happen. That's okay. We're not saying don't do it, you need all four parts. The main thing is that if we are relying on just the thank yous and just the rewards and recognition, then we're limiting the impact. We're actually holding ourselves and holding our teams back if we don't also incorporate reinforcing feedback into our recognition routines.

We want to be able to do this in the every day. This is why the four-part formula is built the way it is, is because it is something that you can learn with just a little bit of practice. And you can actually incorporate it into your everyday. So it doesn't mean if you're like, "Hey, you know what? I'm just thinking on the spot and I don't have the time to think about what is the behavior and the impact, and so I'm just not going to say thank you. I don't have enough time to plan for that." That's not what we do. We still say thank you. We just, at the beginning, we deliberately practice. We go out and we specifically deliberately practice this formula so that it starts to integrate. And now we're still sometimes just saying thank you, and then sometimes we're actually adding the specific behavior and the impact. Now it's more meaningful. Now it's

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actually going to change the future. It's something we incorporate, not something that we limit and we only share appreciation in this way.

All right., final question for today's episode. "I do believe that people deserve to be recognized but aren't the basic expectations like showing up to work on time taking it too far?" Well, here's my answer. I guess it depends. Are you appreciative of people showing up at work on time? Does the act of showing up at work on time have a helpful or positive impact for the team? If so, then I don't think it's taking it too far. Now, would I give reinforcing feedback to every person who shows up at work on time every day, day after day after day? No, and I don't think that's what you're talking about either, but think about some scenarios - a team member has struggled with timeliness. You talked with her about it and asked her to take action to arrive at work on time. She follows through on the ask. Before, she was 50% tardy, right? 50% of the time she was late. And then she got better and now she's only late 15% of the time. Yeah, she hasn't achieved your zero percent tardiness goal yet but you can tell she's working on fixing the problem. You can tell she's taking action - you asked her to work on something, and she's working on it. So how about then?

When she arrives at work on time in that scenario, would you consider giving her reinforcing feedback? I know I would because I want to acknowledge the effort she's making to improve and to arrive at work on time. And I probably will even give that reinforcing feedback more than once. Maybe when she starts to make improvement, then when she continues to improve and progress. And maybe she's been doing really well, we're a few months down the road but she had a couple of days where she slipped up, but she got back on track without you even having to say a word, right? Sure, I may want to give reinforcing feedback for that because it's not just this, "Hey, let me go and celebrate and recognize for the going above and beyond." We are giving reinforcing feedback for the helpful behaviors we would like to see repeated. And in this case, this is a scenario where the team member has struggled in the past and I do want them to continue this because it is helpful. I don't want to have to go down a road of more correcting feedback or disciplinary processes. Then you know what, let's help them out. Let's reinforce the positive and the helpful behaviors.

Here's another scenario on the same topic, right? So let's say you have a team member who is so dependable you never have to wonder whether they're going to show up on time or whether she'll be late. Maybe she even has a long stretch of perfect attendance. Maybe she doesn't just walk in the door on time but she walks in the door and she jumps right into her work and you can count on her. Here's somebody who's not like our first example. So she was at 50% late and having to work on it. This is somebody that doesn't even have to work on it. You never even have to address it ever. How about then? Is it too much to give her reinforcing feedback every now and then for her arriving at work on time? It is impactful, and it's a good thing. And it's awesome that I don't have to worry about it. I might even say, "Hey, thanks for arriving at work on time. It helps me know that I can go on doing my job without ever having to worry about it. I never have to wonder about whether you're here."

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All right, let's take a different spin on this and say, "What's another basic expectation we have?" How about following standard work procedures? That's something we expect, right? And the question is, how does it work for us now? Does everyone who's trained on every standard work procedure follow it consistently? Probably not. And especially if you're progressing along a Lean journey where standard work may be a newer concept for the team, or at least the way you're defining, documenting it and using it now. Standard work is a foundation for improvement. So before, [they] maybe thought it was just a micromanaging way you were trying to force them to do it your way. But now, you're engaging the team in defining and documenting standard work, and you're engaging the team in using standard work as a way to create opportunities for continuous improvement so we can see where the waste is, so that we can see how we can create better flow. Standard work is a foundational element of how team members work but in these scenarios, don't we want to give reinforcing feedback around it?

Here's what I usually recommend: make a list of key helpful behaviors that you want to see more of, and that specifically help your team achieve current goals. Create a habit for seeing those. Go out specifically, "I am going on a hunt looking for these." And then also just add in other helpful behaviors you catch throughout the day. But make sure you have a list of those key healthful behaviors that you want to see more of, and that will help you achieve your goals.

All right, here's the thing. There is not a hard and fast right and wrong answer to all of these scenarios. Here's what I do know. Despite every effort and attempt that we have made up until now, 82% of team members say they aren't recognized enough for their contributions. For most of us, we have opportunities to improve - to improve how effectively we recognize contribution so that people feel valued, and to improve how effectively we recognize specific helpful behaviors, so that we get more of the behaviors that move us toward our goals. For me, reinforcing feedback has been the simplest, easiest way to improve on both the people side of leadership and the results side of leadership. So let's talk about what's next.

Here's what we talked about in this four-part series:

- Episode five - the current problem with recognition and how we can use a four-part reinforcing feedback to close the gap.
- Episode six - how beliefs play a role in our recognition efforts.
- Episode seven - you've heard directly from Eric on how he's changed by practicing reinforcing feedback.
- And in this episode, I answered some questions I've heard throughout the series.

So what's next for you? Here's your one next step. I want you to make a definitive decision on whether you will begin practicing reinforcing feedback. And I mean, definitive. It should be a "hell yes" or "hell no". No "maybes". No, "I'll try". No, "I'll see if I can squeeze it in." If your answer is no, that's fine. It allows you to release this topic from taking up space and energy, and you can focus on what you're saying yes to. You can always come back when you're ready. If the answer is yes, then it should be a "hell yes". It should be a commitment. It should be something where you are driven to take action. So go back and

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re-listen to the episodes, determine your vision of what it could look like, figure out what your current state is, and then start practicing and iterating your way toward your vision. Figure out how you can build your skill in a way that works for you. I'll talk with you next week.

You've been listening to Lean Leadership for Ops Managers with me, your host, Jamie V. Parker. If you're interested in developing your team to effectively recognize contributions through reinforcing feedback, I have virtual and on-site programs that can be customized to your needs, and you'll start to see results in just three weeks. You can email me at jamie@processplusresults.com or click on the "Schedule a call" button at my website, processplusresults.com.