ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN ACTION
Enhancing Team and P2P Recognition: Two Practical Studies for Better Recognition Program Design

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Effective design of team-based and peer-to-peer (P2P) recognition programs often results in exceptional results, highlighting the significant role that targeted recognition strategies play in enhancing employee engagement and organizational outcomes. In this edition of *Academic Research in Action*, we explore two recent papers that address these themes, and which offer recognition program designers specific and practical advice.

The first study is based on team-based recognition in fast-food franchises. It underscores the importance of fostering a collective acknowledgment system that boosts employee morale and effort, directly contributing to improved customer satisfaction and financial performance.

The second study reports on research on P2P recognition leaderboards and explores how different ranking choices – recognition given versus received – impacts helping/citizenship behaviors among employees. It reveals that emphasizing recognition given, which aligns with fostering gratitude and prosocial norms, enhances helping behavior, whereas recognition received in these conditions can diminish intrinsic motivation and sincerity.

The Effects of Team-Based Recognition on Employee Engagement and Effort: A Field Study

by Adam Presslee, Greg Richins, Sasan Saiy & Alan Webb, May 2022

This study examines the effectiveness of team-based recognition programs in fast-food franchise restaurants, a setting characterized by highly interdependent tasks and low employee engagement. The research investigates whether non-monetary, team-based recognition can positively influence employee engagement and effort, extending benefits to customer satisfaction and financial performance. Conducted over twelve weeks at six Canadian fast-food locations, employees received non-monetary recognition every two weeks based on performance metrics. The results supported the hypothesis that team-based recognition increases both engagement and effort.

The fast-food industry, given its team-oriented yet low-engagement nature, presents a rich context for testing such interventions. Team members must coordinate efforts to maintain service quality, making team-based recognition suitable. However, challenges like repetitive tasks and lack of career advancement in the industry often lead to disengagement. The researchers hypothesized that recognition could counteract these issues by enhancing employees' sense of value and their connection to the team and the company, thereby boosting engagement and effort.

The researchers assessed team performance and engagement levels prior to and during implementation of the recognition program. Employees were informed that recognition would be awarded based on achieving superior "customer satisfaction and service efficiency." The rewards included a hand-crafted thank you card signed by both management and the local restaurant manager, accompanied by a gift-wrapped, locally sourced organic chocolate bar. These tokens of appreciation were personally delivered to each person on the team by a member of management.

Employees showed significantly increased engagement during the program compared to the pre-program period, indicating a direct positive association. Engagement also helped to boost effort, showing that it had additional positive effects.

The adoption of a team-based recognition program [is] associated with significant improvements in employee engagement and effort … extend[ing] to customer satisfaction and financial performance.

Beyond improving these employee metrics, the program was linked to positive customer satisfaction and financial performance outcomes. As was the case in these experiments, engaged employees who exhibit more effort often deliver better service, enhancing customer experiences. This reflects in metrics like improved customer satisfaction indices and financial performance measures such as sales growth.

The study contributes to scant literature on team-based recognition, demonstrating its efficacy, particularly in environments where measuring individual performance is impractical. It corroborates prior findings about non-monetary recognition's motivational power but shifts the focus to team dynamics, showing that collective acknowledgment aligns well with team-based work settings.

Despite promising findings, the study acknowledges limitations such as the lack of a control group and the program's short duration. Nevertheless, this research highlights the potential of team-based recognition programs to foster a more engaged and productive workforce, suggesting that organizations, particularly those with team-centered tasks like fast-food chains, can benefit significantly from adopting and refining such initiatives.

Peer-to-Peer Recognition Leaderboards and Employee Helping Behavior

By John H. Evans III, Adam Presslee & Alex Vandenberg, Aug. 2022
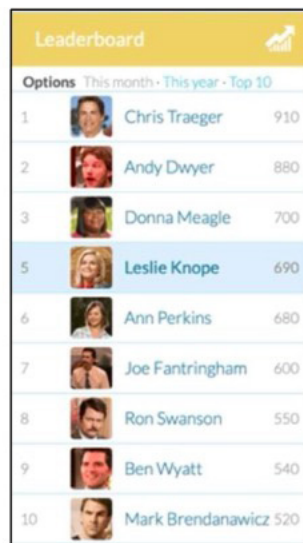
In today's workplaces, peer-to-peer (P2P) recognition programs frequently use leaderboards to encourage employee engagement, specifically focusing on helping behavior. This study investigates how these leaderboards affect helping (i.e., citizenship) behavior based on whether they rank employees on recognition given or received.

The experiment involved 135 participants in groups, where they decided how much to help and recognize peers in four leaderboard conditions:

1. No leaderboard

2. Recognition received

3. Recognition given

4. Both types simultaneously

The findings show that ranking employees on recognition received reduces helping behavior, possibly due to decreased intrinsic motivation and perceived insincerity of help offered. Employees might focus more on improving their own standing rather than genuinely helping others, resulting in less sincere interactions and less reciprocal recognition.
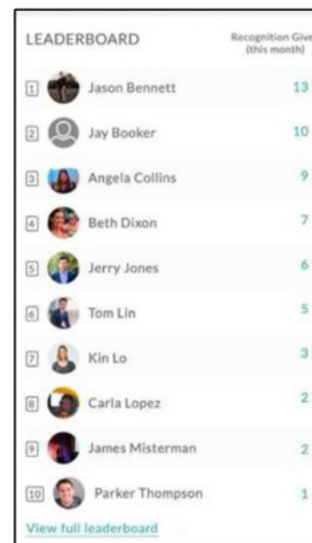
Recognition Received Leaderboard	**Recognition Given Leaderboard**

The Motivation Minimizer	**The "Help" Heightener**

Images courtesy: bucketlistrewards.com

Conversely, leaderboards based on recognition given enhance helping behavior by fostering a culture of gratitude and prosocial norms. Recognition given nurtures an environment of frequent, sincere acknowledgments encouraging more helping and positive peer interactions. By aligning recognition with gratitude, employees feel appreciated and motivated to reciprocate.

These insights are vital for firms using leaderboards in P2P recognition programs. Although leaderboards are cost-effective tools for boosting engagement, the choice of ranking criteria is crucial; firms should prefer recognition given over received to cultivate a supportive community. This aligns with surveys indicating that a substantial portion of employees seek more recognition and cite lack of appreciation as a reason for workforce transitions.

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> **82% of current employees wish they received more recognition at work, 41% of current employees want more recognition from their coworkers, and 79% of former employees who have quit cite a lack of appreciation as the major reason for leaving.**

From a practical standpoint, businesses must critically assess their P2P recognition designs to optimize for desired outcomes: fostering cooperation and minimizing competition that might undermine teamwork. These findings suggest that fine-tuning leaderboards to focus on positive reinforcement can significantly improve workplace dynamics and employee satisfaction.

The study also opens avenues for future research. While anonymity was used in the experiment, real-world implementations often have identifiable interactions. Research could explore how non-anonymous environments impact the effectiveness of leaderboards. Additionally, expanding studies to include real-world tasks could provide deeper insights into how leaderboard structures influence productivity and team dynamics.

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These studies emphasize that careful design and strategic implementation of recognition systems are crucial. While team-based recognition demonstrates the power of collective celebration in traditionally low-engagement environments, the leaderboard study highlights the nuances of individual motivation and the potential pitfalls when recognition is perceived as self-serving. Together, they suggest that organizational recognition programs must be thoughtfully tailored to promote genuine engagement and collaborative work cultures.