



WORKFORCE CONVERSATION GUIDE: A REWARDS & RECOGNITION SELF-ASSESSMENT

Rewards and recognition are important organizational tools for reinforcing positive behaviors and increasing employee motivation. Although monetary rewards have long been associated with employee motivation and performance, meaningful social recognition can also have a positive impact, and often at little financial cost (Stajkovic & Luthans, 2003). Recognition may be an especially important consideration for child welfare agencies, where work is often demanding and emotionally taxing, but resources may be limited. Examining how employees experience rewards and recognition can help identify opportunities to better align practices with what employees value and what the agency needs. In doing so, agencies can strengthen engagement, reinforce their values and mission, and foster an environment where all staff feel seen, valued, and supported.

WHAT ARE REWARDS AND RECOGNITION?

Rewards and recognition refer to the strategies an agency uses to acknowledge employees' contributions, performance, and commitment. Recognition is the act of noticing and expressing appreciation for an employee's efforts or accomplishments; it can be formal (e.g., an employee-of-the-month program or weekly newsletter shoutout) or informal (e.g., verbal praise or a handwritten thank-you note), can come from a variety of sources (e.g., supervisors, peers, agency leadership), and typically works best when delivered consistently, authentically, and in close connection with employee accomplishments (Luthans, 2000). Rewards are the benefits given in exchange for desired behavior or achievement, and can be monetary (e.g., bonuses, pay increases, gift cards) or non-monetary (e.g., additional paid time off, professional development opportunities, flexible schedules). Together, recognition and rewards form a system that, when aligned with agency values and expectations, can reinforce high-quality performance and signal to employees that their work and commitment to the agency matter (Stajkovic & Luthans, 2003).



USING THE WORKFORCE CONVERSATION GUIDE

Workforce challenges are common, but it can be difficult to pinpoint which aspects of the employee lifecycle provide the greatest opportunity for improvement.

This resource is designed as a starting point to dive into your data and understand where you can strengthen your workforce. These workforce conversation guides address topics related to recruitment, performance, and well-being. Each one provides a list of questions intended to prompt your workforce team to consider what they know, what information is missing, identify possible trends, and question what the data mean.

These resources are designed to help you assess your needs. It is recommended that you work through each one, as workforce challenges are interconnected (see [Key Takeaways from Phases of the Child Welfare Employee Lifecycle](#)). For example, your retention problem may be directly linked to your recruitment sources. We encourage you to pull together a team, meet regularly to work through the questions, and ask yourselves “why” you are doing something in a particular way. The amount of time this process takes varies, but at the end of it, you should be able to identify where to invest your time and resources.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN THE ASSESSMENT?

This review should be conducted by a team to ensure different perspectives are at the table. The team should include representation from those who design, administer, and experience rewards and recognition practices. Thus, you will want to include people in the following roles:

- Human resources (HR) managers
- HR analytics staff
- Administrative support
- Finance/compensation and benefits staff
- Child welfare agency leaders
- Child welfare managers/supervisors
- Child welfare caseworkers/social workers
- Training and development managers
- Union representatives (if applicable)

External workforce experts can offer a valuable outside perspective and greater knowledge of the research on motivation, recognition, and reward design to prompt additional questions and guide the agency toward evidence-informed solutions.

WHAT SHOULD WE LOOK AT?

Gather information from a variety of sources, including:

- Recognition and reward program policies and procedures
- Compensation and benefits structures, including how pay increases, bonuses, and other monetary rewards are determined
- Budget allocated to recognition and reward programs, and how it is distributed across roles, units, or demographics
- Longevity, tenure, and service-award program records
- Performance review data and its connection to recognition or reward decisions
- Participation and usage data from any peer-to-peer or platform-based recognition programs
- Employee feedback (e.g., from surveys, focus groups, exit/stay interviews) on perceptions of:

Appreciation

Recognition

Rewards

Fairness

Preferences regarding how recognition is delivered (e.g., formal versus informal, public versus private)

- Supervisor training materials related to recognition
- Internal email communications or newsletters, and whether and how recognition is communicated through these channels



After information is gathered, the team should be thoughtful about where it is stored and how it is shared to ensure individual employee information is protected. It is best to use aggregate, deidentified data.

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD WE EXPLORE?

These questions are designed to help you determine how well you currently meet key criteria for effectiveness. Where the answer is “no” or “it depends,” use the question as a starting point for identifying gaps, priorities, and potential improvements.

Formal recognition and reward programs

- Does the agency have one or more formal, structured recognition programs (e.g., employee-of-the-month, annual awards, milestone or longevity awards)?
- Are the processes for nominating and selecting employees for formal recognition and rewards clear, objective, and equally accessible across all roles, shifts, and locations?
 - If performance review data are used to inform these decisions, are the underlying review tools and processes considered reliable and fair? Do the resulting ratings accurately reflect true performance levels, rather than being inflated or biased?
- Do formal recognition programs acknowledge a variety of contributions (e.g., outstanding performance, innovation, teamwork, leadership, customer service, years of service)? If not, what important contributions are currently overlooked and need to be added?

Informal recognition practices

- Do supervisors and leaders regularly offer informal recognition (e.g., verbal praise, handwritten notes, public acknowledgment in meetings) for day-to-day good work (e.g., employee contributions, improvement, collaboration, extra effort)? Is informal recognition timely, specific, and tailored to the employee?
- Do supervisors have the training and tools they need to recognize staff meaningfully and consistently? Are there systems in place (e.g., a peer-to-peer recognition platform, a shared channel for shout-outs) that make it easy for supervisors and employees to give informal recognition?
- Does the agency foster a culture in which recognition and appreciation are part of everyday work? Are employees given regular opportunities to celebrate individual and team successes, share accomplishments, and acknowledge one another's contributions?



Rewards

- Does the agency offer monetary rewards such as bonuses or merit-based pay increases?
- Does the agency offer any non-monetary rewards (e.g., additional paid time off, flexible scheduling, professional development funding, wellness benefits, preferred parking)?

Employee perceptions

- Are there structured processes in place (e.g., surveys, focus groups, exit/stay interviews) to gather employee feedback on how recognized and appreciated they feel?
 - Do employees feel that recognition and rewards align with their effort and quality of work?
 - Do employees understand how recognition and reward decisions are made, and do they perceive the process as fair and free of favoritism?
 - Are rewards aligned with what employees value and find motivating?

Data, evaluation, and continuous improvement

- Are recognition and reward data reviewed periodically to identify gaps or disparities?
 - Are rewards and recognition distributed evenly across employee groups (e.g., by tenure, role, unit, demographic characteristics)?
- Is the return on investment of reward programs evaluated, for example, by examining whether participation is associated with engagement, performance, or retention outcomes?
- Are employee suggestions used to inform changes to recognition and reward practices over time?

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Congratulations on examining your agency's reward and recognition processes. Gathering this information is just one step in examining agency practices that impact the workforce. After you work through the questions above, you may identify a few areas for further consideration. For example, your team may realize that informal recognition varies widely by supervisor, or that recognition and rewards are not distributed consistently across divisions or work units. Digging deeper into these aspects can help your team identify potential causes and solutions.

Once you have identified key strategies to implement, consider presenting your findings to your management team for their input and feedback. Management may also need to discuss available resources (e.g., time, money, and people) before selecting or creating a recognition or reward intervention to help address the challenges identified.

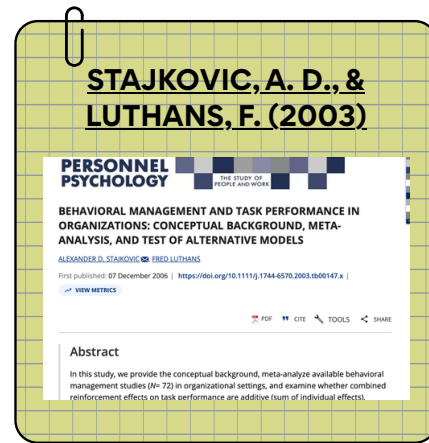
As agency needs and the broader environment shift over time, it is important for your agency to be responsive to those changes. This exercise should be repeated every few years, especially if employee survey results or feedback suggest challenges with how good performance and longevity are recognized and rewarded.



REFERENCES

Luthans, K. (2000). Recognition: A powerful, but often overlooked, leadership tool to improve employee performance. *The Journal of Leadership Studies*, 7(1), 31–39.

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