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Why Your Boss Wants to Know Your Love Language

Free tacos, shopping sprees and words of appreciation are just some of the ways employers are desperate to show they care.

By Emma Goldberg

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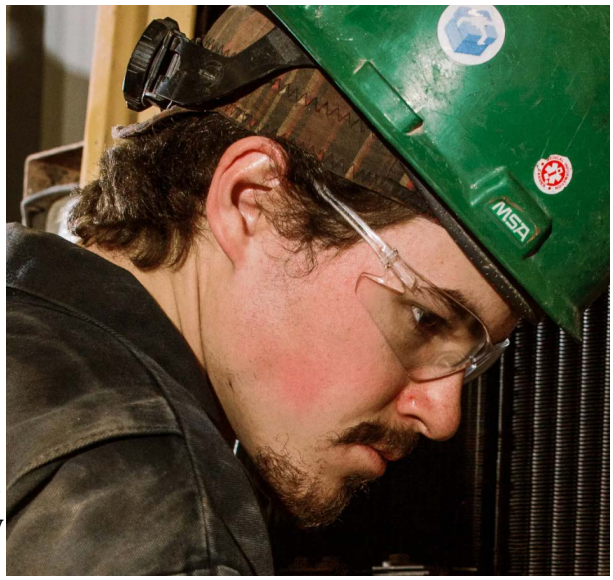


It's a question that plagued Shakespeare, Hallmark, Sappho and Taylor Swift, and these days it has even reached the workplace with surprising urgency: How do you show someone you care?

There's a mining company in South Dakota that has sought an answer with a bold approach. The miners of Pete Lien & Sons, in Rapid City, S.D., spend their days drilling, blasting and loading shot rock into trucks. Their hard hats protect them from flying debris. But they also serve a subtler purpose: Each hat has a colorful sticker whose icon symbolizes either quality time, words of affirmation, acts of service or gifts — what are broadly known as love languages.

Love languages, a method of understanding how people prefer to give and receive affection, were introduced in a 1992 self-help book by the marriage counselor Gary Chapman. These categories were later adapted for the workplace by Dr. Chapman and the psychologist Paul White and became "languages of appreciation." How the 400 miners and mineral processing workers at Pete Lien & Sons grew invested in the lexicon is a story of family strain.

When the company's head of corporate development, Sam Brannan, was struggling with her marriage in 2016, she took a quiz that identified her love language as acts of service; her husband's was quality time. The results ushered in a new era of domestic peace — after she persuaded her spouse that the survey was more than what he called a "Cosmo quiz." Then Ms. Brannan learned that the assessment had been remade for businesses, a discovery that propelled her work force into uncharted emotional terrain and led to an invitation for Dr. White to visit their headquarters.

"When this first started you could see the eye-rolling," said Tucker Green, 48, a plant employee who likes words of affirmation. "We're a mining operation, and the touchy-feely thing isn't something men are generally comfortable with. But it's become so much a part of what we do. I'm a believer."

New employees at Pete Lien & Sons wouldn't be faulted for thinking that love languages belong in the mines like a hard hat belongs at the dinner table. And for many years, teaching workers across industries that it was important to know whether their colleagues preferred compliments or free coffee would have sounded to managers like New Age nonsense, vestiges of the yoga industrial complex.

Pete Lien & Sons employees prepared a concrete form that would be poured and assembled into a wall. A green hard hat sticker shows that its wearer prefers quality time. Matthew Defeo for The New York Times

But in recent decades, employers have learned that they have to supplement paychecks with other sources of motivation, especially when they're asking workers to spend long hours on the job and when there's a labor shortage. Workers want reassurance that their bosses and teammates like them. The benefits of appreciation are manifold: lower turnover, fewer days missed, even a reduction in on-the-job accidents. Two-thirds of workers in a 2017 survey said that they would probably leave their jobs because of a lack of appreciation, according to the staffing firm Office Team.

Recognition doesn't pay rent, but it can make late shifts easier to tolerate.

"When I started working back in the day, your paycheck was supposed to be your recognition," said Chris Brennan, a performance specialist for the human resources firm Insperity who has spent nearly two decades in H.R. But employers now know the financial benefits of praise: "It's the goose and the golden egg," he said. "You have to treat people well for them to want to do more for the organization."

From that understanding has sprung a recognition economy, which takes many forms: "employee of the month" plaques (and associated free parking spots), holiday chocolates, indoor food trucks. Those perks have become harder to distribute during the pandemic, with some people working from home, and many also trying to build more emotional distance between themselves and their jobs. But high turnover rates and low unemployment have reminded managers that their efforts to motivate workers are sorely needed, just when they're toughest to execute.

So businesses are devising inventive methods of giving long-distance recognition. (Especially this week: Friday is National Employee Appreciation Day.) They are offering customized candles, shopping sprees, companywide shout-outs and quarterly days off. McKinsey recently hosted a "thank-a-thon." O.C. Tanner, a software company, invites workers' family members to Zoom meetings celebrating their achievements. Sunglass Hut's employees sent 137,000 messages last year on its internal appreciation platform, Sunspired. The gifting company &Open asks its employees to send each other taco emojis over Slack, offering a lunch voucher to the five people with the most tacos at the end of the month.

The bottom-line benefits of workplace affirmation have perhaps never been so widely confirmed and creatively interpreted. But affirmation typically benefits workers who are more vocal about their accomplishments or those who are able to drop family or other personal obligations to pick up last-minute professional tasks. And the stakes of recognition aren't just about improving people's moods but about who gets advancement opportunities and the higher pay that comes with them.

"Being affirmed and recognized can build confidence," said Mr. Brennan, who has advised clients to reward their highest-performing workers by inviting them to be "C.E.O. for a Day," which means giving full-company presentations and even dressing like the chief executive. "I've seen it turn someone from being staff into a leader."

Executives who emphasize recognition have often learned from periods in their careers when they felt underappreciated. Take Evan Wilson, chief experience officer at Meritrust Credit Union in Wichita, Kan., who spent his earliest office years wondering why no one seemed to notice the extra hours he put in at a regional bank.

He now swears by Dr. White and Dr. Chapman's "The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace," adapted from the love languages. Mr. Wilson asks all of his direct reports to take the assessment. And he responds by leaving his office door open for the employee whose language is quality time, for example. He also asks managers at the firm to rate themselves on how good they are at giving recognition, on a scale of one to ten, and suggests that those struggling rely on the languages for a boost.

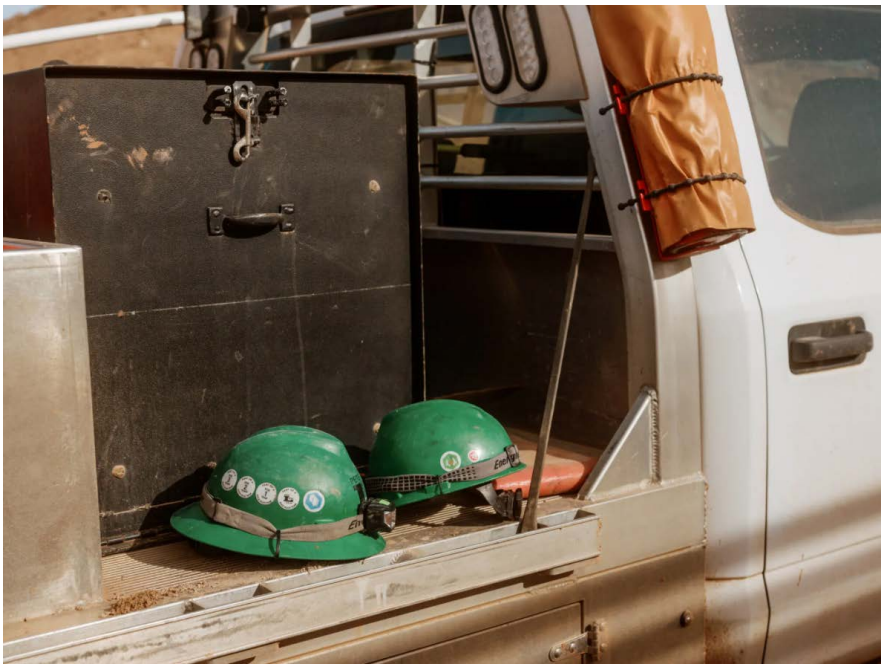
"The problem with appreciation is it's like a bucket that leaks," Mr. Wilson said. "It's the role of the leader to recognize 'I'm the one who needs to bring that encouragement.'"

The appreciation bucket was especially leaky during the pandemic. "The politically correct answer is that we think it's important all the time," said Mr. Green, the employee at Pete Lien & Sons. "But the real answer is that there are times when there are bigger things going on in the world and it becomes more important for us to relay appreciation."

"I've gotten more thank-you cards in the last few years than I have almost any other time," he added.

Recognition has long been an Olympic sport of sorts to Rajeev Kapur, chief executive of the marketing firm 1105 Media. When he was a manager at Dell in 1995, he spotted a red neon light on sale at Spencer's, which he started plugging into his employees' desks when they had a strong week of sales.

"You could turn off the siren part and just have the revolving light like one you'd see on top of an ambulance," Mr. Kapur said. "It's like, 'Hey, you know, Terry got a big deal, he's on fire this week, he's the number one salesperson.' Boom, you go put that thing on his desk and it's like, 'Oh man, that's awesome. I want to get that next week."



Here, a blue sticker indicates a preference for words of affirmation; the green sticker stands for quality time. Matthew Defeo for the New York Times

He calculated a substantial return on investment: “It doesn’t cost you that much,” he added. “Maybe ten dollars for the light.”

With Mr. Kapur’s employees now working remotely, he had to determine how a flashing red light could take a virtual form. Managers at his company are required to surprise one employee each month with a perk, like a $50 gift card for a massage. Each company division recognizes an employee of the quarter and employee of the year, acknowledgments that both come with a certificate and financial bonus of some $500 or more. Every week Mr. Kapur sends out an email with the subject line “This Week In Good News,” or T.W.I.G.N., highlighting staff accomplishments.

Social psychologists ascribe the need for appreciation at work partly to what’s called self-determination theory, which suggests that people need not only external sources of motivation, like money, but also “intrinsic” sources that come from within, like joy and confidence, which can get a boost from a supervisor’s praise.

But praise is not evenly distributed among different worker demographics. A Stanford study of performance reviews published in 2020 found that men were more likely than women to be given “standout” descriptions like “genius” or “game-changer.” They were also more likely to be depicted as “ideal workers” who prioritized professional over personal responsibilities. These perceptions, the researchers noted, most likely make it easier to justify promotions.

Anne Genduso, a career coach, counsels dozens of women who feel undervalued in the office. Many of her clients find that their bosses’ praise skews toward the male colleagues who flaunt their workplace wins. “Employee of the month,” it turns out, sometimes goes to the employee who all but campaigns for it. Ms. Genduso has also watched companies hand out compliments that feel empty to workers who just want recognition of the challenges they’re facing in juggling professional and family care responsibilities.

“Getting your plaque on the wall is hollow if they’re not living it by actually being flexible, respecting work-life boundaries,” Ms. Genduso said. “Those are much deeper in appreciation than, ‘Hey we’re going to throw you a pizza party and put your name on the wall.’”

Some executives and coaches, including Ms. Genduso, are hopeful that the disruptions the pandemic has brought to the recognition economy could yield long-needed change. Instead of publicly rewarding some workers with certificates at the expense of others, bosses could remember to call and affirm each employee one-on-one.

And managers maintain that sensitive forms of recognition have to start with listening to workers, staying attuned to their needs. In other words, asking: What’s their language of appreciation?

At Pete Lien & Sons, the miners know immediately what their co-workers value by looking at each other's hats. Though taking the "languages of appreciation" assessment is voluntary, about 91 percent of the workers have completed it. And managers are seeing the results.

There used to be tension between the maintenance employees and workers at the mineral processing plants, Ms. Brannan said, especially when conveyors broke in the middle of the night and the maintenance staff had to wake up to make repairs. Now the plant employees know how to signal gratitude for that effort — by brewing a fresh pot of coffee, for example.

The miners have learned the specific types of affirmation their teammates want. The "quality time" types want friends to walk up the running boards of their trucks with a personal message of thanks. The "acts of service" people might want their colleagues to take tasks off their hands. For the "gifts" people, there's always Snickers bars.

The managers heaped praise on Dr. White's tools when he visited their office. He enjoyed the positive feedback: His love language is words of affirmation.