



Recognition Without Landmines

How to Reward People Fairly Across Union, Non-Union, Remote and Hybrid Teams

Your Guide Today



ALEX GRANDE 🙌

CEO of Recognize

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/alexgrande/>

Alex's expertise spans people strategy and technology, with a particular focus on aligning culture and day-to-day employee experience. He's a published author in psychology and self-taught web technologist.



Recognition Often Creates More Problems Than It Solves

Organizations invest in recognition programs to boost morale, but the reality is often far different:

Seen as Unfair

Recognition efforts spark grievances and resentment when employees perceive favoritism or inconsistent application across teams.

Manager Resistance

Managers view recognition as "HR homework". Another administrative burden disconnected from their real work, and simply don't participate.

Correlational to Prove ROI

Executives demand measurable impact, but most recognition programs can't demonstrate clear connections to business outcomes.

Why Traditional Programs Are Landmines

Recognition programs fail not because the intent is wrong, but because the design invites problems:

Inconsistent Application

Remote and hybrid employees feel invisible compared to on-site staff who have daily face time with managers.

Lack of Clear Criteria

When the process feels like a black box, trust erodes with union leadership and employees alike.

- ❑ **The Pattern:** Programs designed without considering union contracts, remote work realities, and audit requirements become grievance generators instead of engagement drivers.

A New Playbook Is Possible

You don't have to choose between meaningful recognition and defensible systems. Here's what becomes possible:

Build Defensible Systems

Create recognition programs with clear criteria, approval workflows, and audit trails that stand up to scrutiny from labor relations and legal.

Turn Managers Into Advocates

Give managers low-friction tools that make recognition feel like a natural part of their workflow, not additional homework.

Prove Business Impact

Tie recognition directly to measurable outcomes like safety incidents, customer experience scores, and operational metrics executives care about.

Defuse the Landmines

Your first step is identifying where traditional recognition programs explode. Three predictable failure modes:

1

The Subjectivity Trap

Vague criteria like "exceptional performance" or "team player" invite bias claims. Without observable, specific behaviors, every decision is vulnerable to challenge.

2

The Visibility Gap

On-site staff naturally get more face time and recognition than remote or hybrid workers. This creates perceived inequity that damages trust and engagement.

3

The Black Box

When employees don't understand how recognition decisions are made, lack of transparency fuels grievances and erodes confidence in leadership.

Build a Bias-Resistant Program

Defensible recognition requires deliberate design choices that remove subjectivity and create transparency:

01

Define Objective Criteria

Establish observable, specific behaviors tied directly to company goals and values. "Reduced safety incidents by implementing new protocol" beats "great safety awareness."

02

Create Audit Trails

Document every recognition with clear justification, timestamps, and approvals. Simple systems that track who, what, when, and why provide protection and accountability.

03

Use Low-Lift Prompts

Embed recognition into existing workflows with Slack/Teams prompts and templates. Consistency across locations requires minimal friction for managers.

- 📌 **Union Environment Tip:** Share criteria and processes with union leadership before launch. Transparency builds trust and prevents challenges later.

Link Recognition to Hard Metrics

Executive buy-in requires demonstrating clear connections between recognition and business outcomes:

Connect to Business KPIs

Design recognition criteria around measurable metrics:

- Safety incidents and near-miss reporting
- Production output and quality scores
- Customer satisfaction and NPS ratings
- On-time delivery and efficiency gains

Track Engagement Correlations

Monitor how recognition patterns relate to:

- Team-level performance metrics
- Retention and turnover rates
- Participation in continuous improvement
- Cross-functional collaboration

This is how you build an undeniable business case: When recognition criteria mirror operational priorities, the program pays for itself through measurable performance gains.

Handling Union Environments

Union workplaces require additional considerations to ensure recognition programs strengthen rather than strain labor relations:

Review Collective Bargaining Agreements

Check CBAs for language around rewards, compensation, and working conditions. Ensure recognition programs don't inadvertently violate contract terms or create precedents.

Involve Union Leadership Early

Brief union representatives on program design before launch. Their input helps identify potential concerns and builds collaborative relationships.

Separate Recognition from Compensation

Keep recognition distinct from wage discussions and performance-based pay. Frame it as acknowledgment, not a substitute for fair compensation.

Ensure Equitable Access

Apply consistent criteria across all employee groups. Document that union and non-union employees have equal opportunities for recognition.

Making It Work for Remote and Hybrid Teams

Distance creates recognition challenges, but intentional systems can ensure fairness across all work locations:

Digital-First Delivery

Use platforms that work equally well for on-site, remote, and hybrid employees. Recognition should never require physical presence.

Track Location Distribution

Monitor recognition patterns by work location. If remote workers receive significantly less recognition, intervention is needed.

Normalize Virtual Recognition

Make digital recognition the standard, not the alternative. Public Slack/Teams acknowledgments create visibility that benefits everyone.

Local Region Considerations

Ensure recognition opportunities don't favor specific regions or time zones. Asynchronous systems prevent "out of sight, out of mind" bias.

Reducing Manager Burden

Managers won't sustain recognition practices that feel like additional work. The key is radical simplification:



Meet Them Where They Work

Integrate recognition into Slack, Teams, or email—tools managers use every day without requiring separate logins or platforms.

Provide Templates

Give managers pre-written examples tied to your criteria. Remove the "what do I say?" barrier that stops recognition before it starts.

Use Prompts and Reminders

Gentle nudges like "Any wins to celebrate this week?" make recognition feel like a natural workflow checkpoint, not homework.

Target: Recognition should take managers less than 2 minutes per instance. If it's more complex than that, adoption will fail.

Check <https://recognizeapp.com/cms/articles/10-sample-recognition-appreciation-messages> for ideas.

Building Your Audit Trail

When grievances arise or audits happen, documentation protects your program and your organization:

Capture the Essentials

Every recognition should record: recipient, recognizer, specific behavior, criteria/value aligned, date/time, and any approvals required.

Track Distribution Patterns


Generate reports showing recognition by department, location, work arrangement, tenure, and manager to identify and address disparities.

Enable Pattern Analysis

Look for trends over time: Are certain groups consistently underrecognized? Do specific managers need coaching or support?

Retain Records

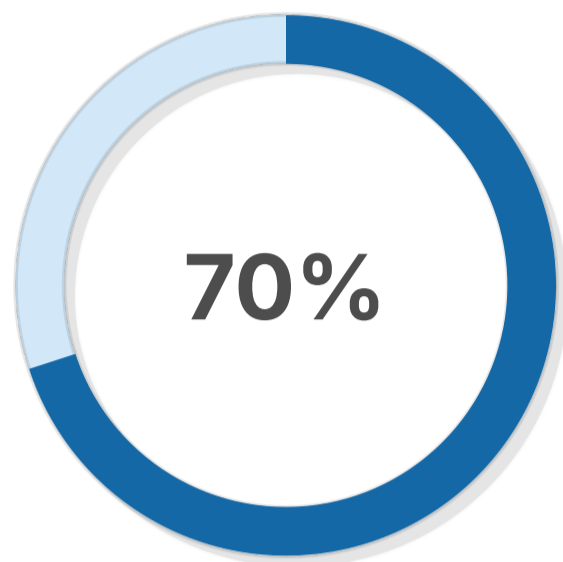
Maintain historical data for compliance purposes. Many organizations face questions about past practices during contract negotiations or legal proceedings.

 **Labor Relations Insight:** The best defense against grievances is data showing consistent, equitable application of clear criteria across all employee groups.

Measuring What Matters

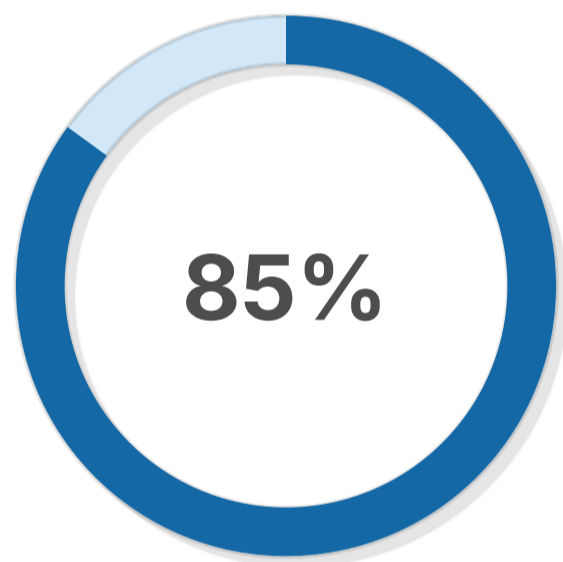
Track metrics that demonstrate both program health and business impact to maintain executive support:

Program Health Metrics



Manager Participation

Percentage of managers actively giving recognition



Employee Coverage

Employees receiving recognition quarterly



Average Frequency

Recognitions per employee per month

Business Impact Metrics

- **Safety Performance:** Correlation between recognition and incident rates
- **Quality Scores:** Recognition tied to defect reduction or quality improvements
- **Customer Satisfaction:** Link between recognized behaviors and CX metrics
- **Retention:** Turnover comparison for recognized vs. non-recognized employees
- **Productivity:** Output changes correlated with recognition patterns

Implementation Roadmap

A practical 90-day rollout that balances speed with sustainability:

Days 1-30: Foundation

Define objective criteria tied to business goals. Brief union leadership and gather feedback. Select and configure technology platform. Create manager templates and resources.

Days 61-90: Scale

Roll out organization-wide with lessons learned. Establish regular reporting cadence for leadership. Create manager recognition leaderboards and best practices. Schedule quarterly program review with stakeholders.

1

2

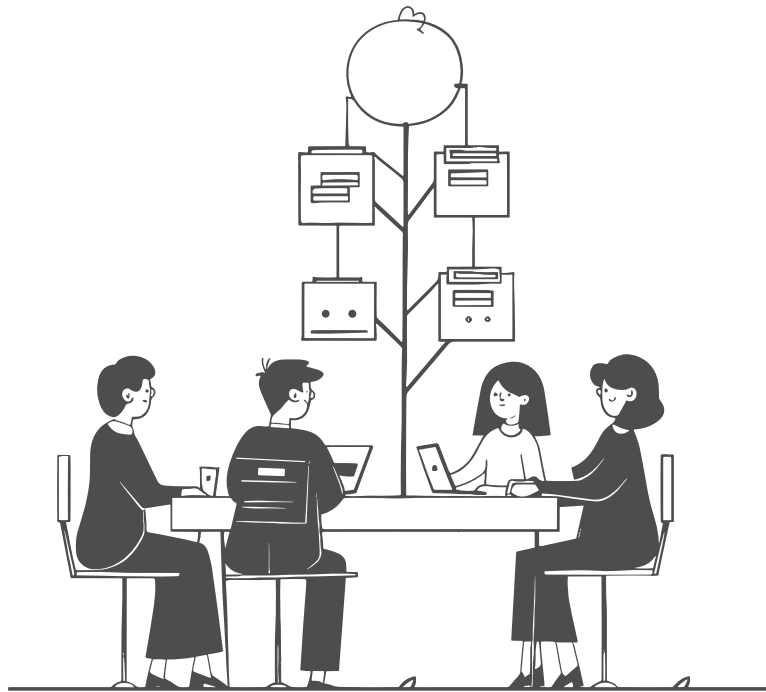
3

Days 31-60: Pilot

Launch with 2-3 departments or locations. Provide intensive manager support and coaching. Monitor data for early patterns and issues. Adjust criteria and processes based on feedback.

Critical Success Factor: Start narrow with clear criteria, then expand. Avoid launching 20 recognition categories on day one.

Ready to Scale Manager Impact?



Culture scales when the right behaviors become easier to repeat than to ignore. Recognition systems remove friction from everyday leadership, multiplying manager effectiveness across your entire organization.

Next Steps:

- **Stay Connected**

Follow **Recognize** on LinkedIn for ongoing insights on manager effectiveness and people operations:



<https://www.linkedin.com/company/recognizeapp-com>

Register for "**The Engagement Lab: 30-Day Experiments Managers Can Run Without Waiting for HR**"

February 18th at 2PM ET/11 AM PT here:

https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/7817695381392/WN_Py51X5Y_RMCF02WayZuaRQ#/registration

Visit RecognizeApp.com