



The Value of Acknowledging Your Internal Client's Good Work

Law Department Management

Skills and Professional Development





CHEAT SHEET

- **More flies with honey.** Positive recognition has four elements: it is (1) an intentional (2) acknowledgement of (3) someone's actions, (4) along with the impact of those actions on you and others.
- **In your head.** By following the five steps of the "positive recognition mindset," in-house counsel can incorporate positive recognition into everyday interactions.
- **Positivity in practice.** The most effective positive recognition comes when it is specific, genuine, impactful, and part of a deeper conversation.
- **Baby steps.** Given that lawyers are primarily focused on writing, it may be easiest to begin your experience with positive recognition by drafting emails to those you want to acknowledge.

Let's be honest. At one point or another in our in-house careers, each of us has faced situations where our internal business partners have consciously or unconsciously avoided dealing with us. The consequence to our organizations can be severe. When the legal department is excluded from conversations, we miss opportunities to reduce risk, find better business terms, or explore new business ventures. In this environment, the subtext of every in-house lawyer's job description should include the duty to "find better ways to engage internal business partners."

As lawyers for our organizations, we are rarely the final "deciders." Rather, we are advisors who have to find ways to get our clients to adopt our recommendations. This requires persuasion and leadership.

There's an old Southern expression that "you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar." When we each think about our own experiences, we should recognize that we usually want to work with people who make us feel good about ourselves, rather than those who create doubt or scold us. Management and leadership research demonstrates that leaders who deploy positive recognition have much higher rates of engagement and success within organizations. So let's talk about what positive recognition is, define its essential elements, and outline how you can make this technique yours.

What is "positive recognition"?

Positive recognition is a fundamental pillar of leadership. Too often, we interact with people as "human doings" rather than "human beings." We think of people as their job function, their most recent work product, or their access to information. We focus on their failings, but not on their successes.

Positive recognition has four elements: it is (1) an intentional (2) acknowledgement of (3) someone's actions, (4) along with the impact of those actions on you and others. Connecting the dots between "observable behavior" with its "significance to you and or others," makes the recognition valid and personal, and creates a perception of authenticity. What makes some recognition "positive" is grounded in elementary brain science. Hopefully all of us have had the experience of being thanked

or even praised for a job well done at work. When that happens, it signals neurotransmitters to activate the brain's instant rewards system by releasing dopamine — the hormone that makes us feel naturally happy, and creates a halo effect of wellbeing. The halo effect that's created when dopamine is released (1) increases our appetite to replicate the activity that was the stimulus for the recognition, and (2) serves as a catalyst to share the experience with others. When we feel good about ourselves, we engage our work colleagues with increased levels of drive and excellence because we want to do it again for that “feel good reward.”

The theory of the dipper and the bucket

Tom Rath and Donald Clifton's “How Full is Your Bucket?” summarizes the essential dynamic of the optimal workplace where coworkers and leaders alike provide ongoing recognition and praise of others.

Each of us has an invisible bucket. It is constantly empty or filled, depending on what others say or do to us. When our bucket is full, we feel great. When it's empty, however, we feel awful.

Each of us also has an invisible dipper. When we use that dipper to fill other people's buckets, by saying or doing things to increase their positive emotions, we also fill our own bucket. Alternatively, when we use that dipper to dip into others' buckets — by saying or doing things that decrease their positive emotions — we diminish ourselves.

Like the cup that runneth over, a full bucket gives us a positive outlook and renewed energy. Keeping every drop in that bucket makes us stronger and more optimistic.

An empty bucket poisons our outlook, saps our energy, and undermines our will. That's why every time someone dips from our bucket, it hurts.

We face a choice every moment of every day: We can fill one another's buckets, or we can dip from them. It's an important choice — one that profoundly influences our relationships, productivity, health, and happiness.

The implications for in-house lawyers are clear. If you want better engagement with your internal clients, then make them feel good about engaging with you. This is more than avoiding being the “Department of No.” It requires you to focus consciously on looking for daily accomplishments and meaningfully recognizing them. For many of us, this will require developing new work practices.

The positive recognition mindset

Developing your powers of positive recognition requires intentionality and practice. We suggest the following five steps for incorporating positive recognition into your interactions with your business partners:

1. **Pay attention to the person in front of you.** In the midst of meetings, chats, and emails, what if we pulled our faces away from screens and simply paid attention to others as human beings? Too often, lawyers may approach client interactions as a series of problems to be solved. Start asking yourself: “What does this person need from me as a person, regardless of the present situation?” According to developmental psychologists, this is the start of empathy. This mindset makes it easier to formulate positive intent and fill up another's

bucket.

2. **Clean your filters!** If you look at car's air filter, after thousands of miles, the volume of caked on dust and debris are indicative of how long it's been since that filter was last changed. Similarly, over time we create our own stories about the people we work with, and store them in an invisible filter. Unless we take the time to regularly clean our filters, our vision will be clouded by the past. So take the time to ask yourself: Are my assumptions about a person still valid? Do my beliefs limit or enhance possibilities with this person right now? Am I focusing on their current behavior or past beliefs? How can I create space for new and potentially positive experiences? How can I hit the reset button with this relationship, and begin to give them the benefit of the doubt?
3. **Get clarity about your intent.** Notice your initial reaction when someone proffers a compliment. Do you spontaneously and confidently think "Thank you, I know!" or are you like many of us who have learned to brace ourselves for what's coming next — typically bad news. We've learned to listen for the "but" or "however," assuming that the real truth will now be spoken. To help mitigate that for the recipient of your recognition, consider your intent. What's your motivation for giving them recognition or praise? Do you want to motivate them? Inform them? And for what purpose? In the absence of knowing your intent, the other person will likely try to guess it and fill in the blanks with their own filter. More often than not, they'll likely be wrong! Authentic compliments and recognition are more believable when you're clear about your intent.
4. **Megaphone others' accomplishments:** Water cooler talk and emailing among colleagues has made a sport out of criticizing others behind their backs. Imagine if an audit was conducted of workplace email with coworkers. What percentage of these would be positive vs. critical messages? As an in-house attorney, you may see individual contributions in a way others may not. You also have the power to change the balance of positive versus negative messaging about your colleagues. So why not invest in spreading positive gossip in the workplace? You will gain a reputation as someone who sees the value in others and, as a result, others will want to work more closely with you.
5. **Become the master giving recognition and praise.** How often do we make the choice to let someone know we appreciate them? What gets in the way of our doing that more often? In their resource book "Encouraging the Heart," authors Kouzes and Posner suggest a number of reasons: (1) We assume that outstanding performance is part of the job, and therefore they are "just doing their job." (2) We believe that because they are professionals or adults, they don't need recognition as motivation or drive; they should know that they've done something well. (3) If we give them recognition it could become an emotional experience and I don't want to be seen as vulnerable, especially if we're in a public workplace setting.

When exercising your choice to give praise, do you hear any of these excuses? If we invert them, they can become the impetus for us to make the choice on a regular basis:

- For most of us, excellence is a personal value. It's our qualitative differentiator and it takes work! Being recognized for excellence demonstrates that the valuator is aware of what it takes.
- While many of us say we don't need recognition to motivate us, isn't it ironic that when we receive acknowledgement and praise, we like it? For a period of time following the dopamine rush, we experience a fuller engagement with tasks and people.
- There are no absolutes on how or where to deploy recognition, but knowing your audience helps. There's no requirement that praise needs to be a public event, in fact many of us would welcome an email that acknowledges what we did and the positive impact it had as a result. Of course, copying their one-up manager is also a best practice. Lastly, giving

recognition is an emotional experience, after all we feel good when we do something toward another's sense of well-being!

Positive recognition in practice

What's the most meaningful recognition you ever received at work? What made it so? Odds are the recognition contained some or all of these elements:

- It was specific to you;
- You knew the impact it had on others;
- It was genuinely delivered (You knew the intent of the giver);
- The recognition led to a deeper conversation that explored common values; and,
- You knew what you needed to do more of/less of.

Meaningful recognition goes well beyond a pat on the back, fist bump, and "atta girl," whose lasting impact is ambiguous and whose intent is often questionable. When we choose to give recognition, our intent is clear. We seek meaningful expression, and that's often where we are stopped in our tracks. "What do I say?" "How do I say it?" "How do I say it without coming off as patronizing or insincere?"

At the risk of sounding too formulaic, we introduce a framework for giving recognition/acknowledgement that is meant to be an easy starting point. Over time you can make it your own by using words and phrases that are more natural to your style of communicating:

Four elements for recognizing another person

- What did the person do?
- How did that impact you?
- Why are you acknowledging this?
- Now what?

What did the person do?

Acknowledge their behavior/actions. Describe the behavior — what did you actually hear them say or see them do? Don't judge it.

How did this impact you?

Tell them how you felt (glad, appreciative, connected, relieved, etc.,) or what it caused you to think, assume, or believe, or what new perspectives and insights you gained as a result.

Why are you acknowledging this?

Tell them why this matters to you. Share with them why you are acknowledging this. What might be a shared value that brought this to light?

Now what?

What could this acknowledgement potentially lead to? Is there anything that you want the receiver to

do with the recognition or feedback?

Here are two examples of using the framework at a good, better, and best level:

Good

“Thank you for inviting me to your strategy planning meeting today. I believe we spent our time well, particularly since you provided me with some important questions in advance.”

Better

“Thank you for inviting me to your strategy planning meeting today. I appreciate your thoughtfulness in providing me with questions in advance so that I could be properly prepared, which is important to me.”

Best

“Thank you for inviting me to your strategy planning meeting today. I appreciate your thoughtfulness in providing me with questions in advance so that I could be properly prepared, which is important to me. Based on my experience at the meeting, I think we’ve created a great start at collaboration — for both of our departments. I’m looking forward to our follow up.”

Good

“Great job in completing the negotiations with Company X. I appreciate your partnership in crafting a good solution.”

Better

“Great job in completing the negotiations with Company X. I don’t think we could have gotten to the same result without your thoughtful leadership. I appreciate working and learning with you through the process.”

Best

“Great job in completing the negotiations with Company X. I appreciate that you clarified the “bad cop” role you wanted me to play in the negotiations. It enabled me to support your strategy for concluding the negotiations quickly. I don’t think we could have gotten to the same result in the deal without your leadership. I look forward to working with you in the next deal.”

Conclusion

Of course, making “positive recognition” your own requires practice. So we close with two challenges for you to get you started. First, given that lawyers are so focused on writing, you may find it easiest to start your practice in email. Tape the four elements of recognizing another person somewhere on your desk, and set a goal of sending five emails this week that incorporate all four elements. By the time you draft your fifth one, it will seem a lot easier, and we bet that you will receive positive feedback from the communication. Next, plan on going into two meetings this week with the intent of providing positive recognition. Write out the four elements in advance, and make sure they are

included in the conversation. You can practice with your assistant, your business partners, or your supervisor. Although it might feel artificial at first, the positive response will make it feel more natural as your confidence grows. Lastly, pay attention to the emotional (dopamine) kick you get when you do this. Don't let it go to waste, and savor its halo effect before you head into your next meeting.

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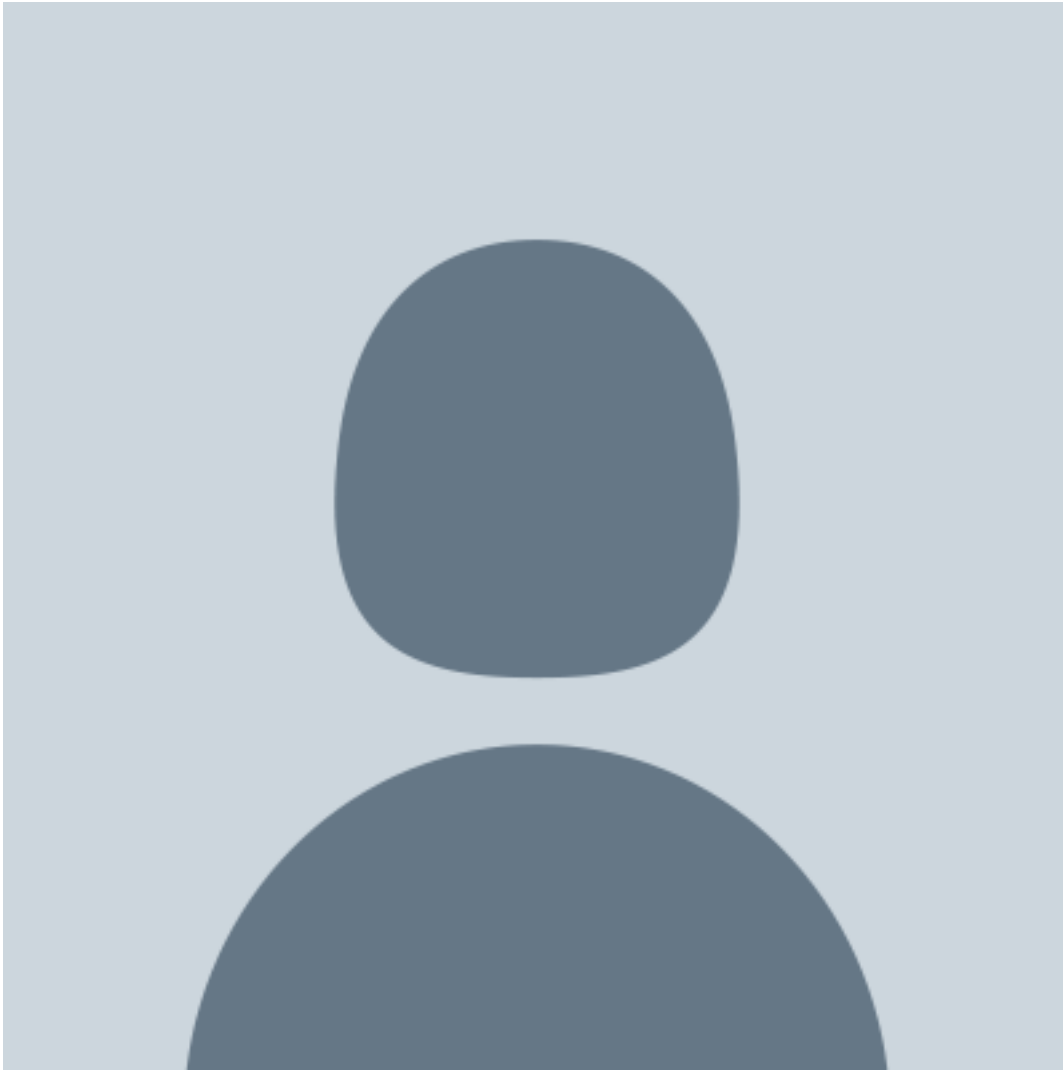


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Rob Falk is general counsel of Truth Initiative and a member of ACC's board of directors. This article represents the personal views of the authors and is not attributable to their employers. He contributed the sidebars on individual diversity action plans and cultural agility growth charts.

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