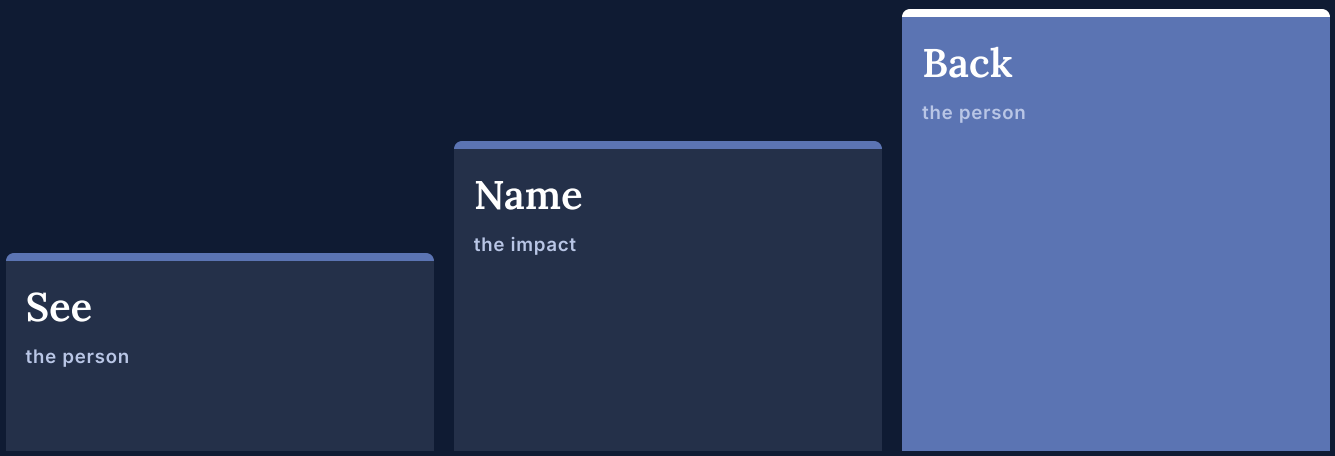
Herrera
HR GROWTH PARTNERS

MANAGER FIELD GUIDE

RECOGNITION THAT STICKS

“Great job” isn’t a strategy. *Here’s what people actually remember.*

How managers in growing companies build appreciation, recognition and trust into everyday work, with no big budget required.



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A NOTE BEFORE YOU START

Most managers believe they show appreciation. Most employees don't feel it often enough. That gap is where good people start looking elsewhere.

Growing companies can't always match big-company pay. They can make people feel seen, valued and supported every week, which costs very little and is one of the strongest reasons people stay.

This guide is for founders and managers, especially first-time managers. It's short on theory and long on things you can say and do tomorrow.

Peter Herrera

Founder, Herrera HR Growth Partners

SECTION 01

The recognition gap

A 2025 study of 1,000 employees and 1,000 employers by Lighthouse Research & Advisory shows how wide the gap is, and how much it matters.

40%
of employees say their company gives them opportunities for frequent appreciation and recognition. 60% say it doesn't.

30%
feel their work is appreciated on a regular basis. Half feel appreciated only sometimes, and 20% don't feel the appreciation they deserve.

2x
Employees with frequent recognition are twice as likely to be happy in their role with no plans to leave.

1 in 2
employees say monthly recognition from their direct manager is enough to make a meaningful difference.

It comes down to the manager

HOW EMPLOYEES DESCRIBE THEIR MANAGER	RECEIVE FREQUENT RECOGNITION
"My manager helps me perform at my best"	**77%**
"My manager tries, but is too busy"	18%
"My manager is just going through the motions"	4%

Source for all figures on this page: Lighthouse Research & Advisory, 2025 Culture, Performance & Recognition Study.

> **The takeaway**
> This isn't a software or budget problem. It's a habit problem. People aren't asking for daily applause; they're asking for consistent, specific attention from the person they report to.

Employees who get frequent recognition are also **4x** more likely to say their manager helps them perform at their best, and **2x** more likely to describe their culture as functioning and supportive.

SECTION 02

Three things people need

Appreciation, recognition and trust are often treated as the same thing. They aren’t, and each one needs the others.

APPRECIATION

See the person

Valuing someone for who they are: their steadiness in a hard week, the way they welcome new people, their judgment. It isn’t tied to a result.

The question they’re asking: Do you see me?

RECOGNITION

Name the impact

Acknowledging what someone did and why it mattered: the client saved, the problem solved, the teammate helped.

The question they’re asking: Do you see what I did?

TRUST

Back the person

Being consistent, following through and having their back when things go wrong, not only when they go right.

The question they’re asking: Will you support me?

WHY YOU NEED ALL THREE

- **Appreciation without recognition** feels warm but vague
- **Recognition without appreciation** feels transactional
- **Either one without trust** isn’t believed. People wonder what you want from them

WHAT IT’S WORTH

Employees whose manager helps them perform at their best are **7x** more likely to feel regularly appreciated, **3x** more likely to say they have the resources to do their job, and **2x** more likely to feel they belong. Companies with a supportive culture are **54%** more likely to see better retention and **71%** more likely to see productivity gains.

Lighthouse Research & Advisory, 2025.

Appreciation has to fit the person

Ordering pizza for the team feels generous, unless someone has an allergy, doesn’t eat meat, or would rather not be celebrated in a group. Ask before you assume. That question is itself a form of appreciation.

SECTION 03

Recognition that lands

The difference between recognition people forget and recognition they repeat to their family is about thirty seconds of thought.

A simple formula: what, why, what's next

1. What you saw

The specific action, close to when it happened.

2. Why it mattered

The effect on a customer, a teammate, a goal or one of your values.

3. What's next

Where they could take it, or what it says about their growth.

INSTEAD OF	TRY
"Great job on the launch."	"You caught the pricing error the night before launch and stayed to fix it. Customers never saw it, and it saved us a very awkward week. I'd love you to lead the launch checklist next quarter."
"Thanks for your help."	"When Maria was stuck on the Henley account, you spent an hour walking her through it. She closed the renewal on Friday. That's exactly the teamwork we talk about."
"You're doing well."	"Your reports have gone out on time and error-free for three months straight. Finance noticed, and it's why I trust you with the board deck."
"Appreciate you!"	"You've been the calm voice on this team through a rough quarter. People notice it, and I do too." (appreciation, not tied to a result)

> **Six marks of recognition that sticks**
>
> **Specific** about what happened. **Timely**, within days, not at review time. **Personal**, delivered the way that person prefers. **Connected** to real impact. **Tied to your values**, so it teaches what good looks like. **Forward-looking**, so it builds confidence for what's next.

Ask how people like to be recognized

Some people love a shout-out at the all-hands. Others would rather crawl under the table. Ask during onboarding or a one-on-one, and keep a note.

Five questions to ask each person

1. Do you prefer recognition in public, in private, or in writing?
2. What's a recent time you felt really appreciated at work? What made it land?
3. What kind of reward means most to you: time off, a new challenge, learning, something tangible, or just a thank-you?
4. Who else's opinion matters to you here: a peer, a senior leader, a customer?
5. Is there anything you'd rather we not do, like a birthday announcement?

Recognition that backfires

MISTAKE	WHY IT HURTS	INSTEAD
Only praising results	Overlooks the effort and behaviors that create them	Recognize how the work got done, too
Always the same people	Others feel invisible, especially behind-the-scenes roles	Track who you've recognized this month
Generic or automated	"Great job" notifications feel like a box being checked	Add one specific sentence
Too late	Saving it for the review loses the moment	Within a few days
Praise sandwiched around criticism	People stop trusting the praise	Keep recognition and feedback separate
Uneven for remote staff	People you see in person get more credit	Use written and video channels deliberately

Recognition and fairness

Recognition shapes who gets visible projects, promotions and raises. If it consistently skews toward one group, it becomes a fairness problem, and potentially a legal one. A quick quarterly look at who's being recognized keeps it honest.

SECTION 04

Trust: the foundation

Trust is built slowly, one interaction at a time, and it can be lost in a single decision. Only 45% of employees say they feel well supported by their manager; 17% say they get very little support (Lighthouse, 2025).

BEHAVIORS THAT BUILD TRUST

- [ ] Do what you said you'd do, and say so when you can't
- [ ] Show up the same way on a hard day as on an easy one
- [ ] Tell the truth, even when a softer version would be easier
- [ ] Thank people for bad news and raised concerns
- [ ] Admit your own mistakes first
- [ ] Explain the "why" behind decisions
- [ ] Back your people publicly; give hard feedback privately
- [ ] Notice when someone is struggling, and ask

BEHAVIORS THAT ERODE IT

- Cancelling one-on-ones regularly
- Taking credit, or sharing blame downward
- Reacting badly to bad news, so people stop bringing it
- Different rules for favorites
- Surprises at review time
- Saying "my door is always open" and then being too busy
- Talking about one employee to another

A SMALL MOMENT, A BIG DIFFERENCE

When someone seems off

> *"You haven't seemed like yourself this week. Is everything okay? No pressure to share, but I'm here if there's anything I can do."*

Then listen. Don't pry, and don't diagnose. If they share something personal, like a health or family issue, keep it private and let HR help with any leave or accommodation options.

When you get it wrong

Every manager breaks trust sometimes. Repair it quickly: name what happened, own your part without excuses, say what you'll do differently, and then do it. A sincere repair often builds more trust than never slipping at all.

Source: Lighthouse Research & Advisory, 2025.

SECTION 05

Make it a habit

Programs come and go. Habits stick. Here’s a simple rhythm any manager can keep.

Every week

- Hold your one-on-ones and keep them
- Give at least one specific thank-you
- Ask, “What’s getting in your way?”

Every month

- Recognize each direct report specifically at least once
- Check who you haven’t recognized lately
- Share a win with your own manager, by name

Every quarter

- Talk about career goals with each person
- Ask how they like to be recognized, if anything’s changed
- Review fairness: who’s getting visible work?

Team practices that work in small companies

Shout-outs at the weekly meeting

Five minutes where anyone can thank anyone, with the specific “what” and “why.”

A recognition channel

A dedicated chat channel for peer thanks. Leaders should post, react and occasionally share highlights at the all-hands.

Values stories

Open each all-hands with one real story that shows a company value in action.

Customer love, passed along

Forward customer praise to the person and their manager the same day.

Remote and hybrid teams

- Recognize in writing, where the whole team can see it, with the person’s permission
- Use the first minutes of video calls for wins
- Rotate who presents to leadership, so remote staff are visible
- Send something physical now and then: a note in the mail goes a long way

Meaningful recognition on a small budget

COST	IDEAS
Free	A handwritten note. A specific thank-you in front of their peers. A message from the founder. A note to their family about the extra hours they put in. Letting them present their own work to leadership.
Low cost	Lunch with the founder. A book or course they've wanted. A gift card chosen for them. Their pick of the next project.
Bigger moments	An extra day off after a hard push. Conference attendance. A spot bonus for exceptional work. A promotion or expanded role when it's earned.

Gift cards and most non-cash gifts are taxable wages, except small, occasional items like a team lunch. Check with your payroll provider.

Where technology helps, and where it doesn't

A recognition tool can remind managers, make peer thanks easy and help remote teams. Among employees who are happy at their company, just under half (49%) say their workplace tools really help them perform better (Lighthouse, 2025). But a tool can't create sincerity. Use it to support the habit, not replace it.

Start tomorrow

Think of someone on your team who consistently shows up, solves problems or quietly helps others. Instead of "great job," tell them specifically what you noticed, why it mattered, and ask how you can better support them. That's all three: appreciation, recognition and trust, in two minutes.

Train your managers on this

Most first-time managers were promoted for doing great work, not for leading people. A one-hour session on recognition and one-on-ones, plus a simple monthly reminder, pays for itself quickly.

HOW YOU'LL KNOW IT'S WORKING

- Pulse survey: "I've been recognized for good work in the last month"
- Fewer regretted departures
- Stay interview answers mention managers and recognition
- Recognition is spread across roles and teams

SECTION 06

How I help

Strong managers are the biggest driver of whether people stay. As your fractional HR partner on a monthly retainer, I help you build them, cycle after cycle.

- First-time manager training: one-on-ones, feedback, recognition and hard conversations
- Values that show up in daily work, not just on the wall
- Recognition practices sized for your team and budget
- Engagement surveys and stay interviews, with a plan to act on them

20+ years of HR leadership	**4 industries** financial services, healthcare, hospitality and tech	**2 companies** where I built HR from scratch	**1 to 250** employees: the companies I serve



ABOUT PETER HERRERA

I've spent more than 20 years leading HR in financial services, healthcare, hospitality and tech. I was the first HR leader at a five-venue hospitality group, and later built the HR function at a tech company. I started Herrera HR Growth Partners to give founders senior HR partnership without a full-time hire. I'm based in Chicago and work with growing companies across the U.S.

SOURCE

1. Lighthouse Research & Advisory, 2025 Culture, Performance & Recognition Study (1,000 employees and 1,000 employers), reported in "Beyond Recognition to Impact," 2026.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Great people, stretched managers? *Let's build the habits.*

A free intro call to talk through your managers, your culture and what's driving people to stay, or go.

FREE 20-MINUTE INTRO CALL

What you'll leave with

- A read on where your managers need the most support
- Two or three low-cost practices to start this month
- How a monthly retainer would work for a company your size

No pitch deck, no obligation. If you don't need me, I'll tell you.

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