

10 Ways to Create a Culture of Encouragement at Work

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Encouragement is essential for employees to feel valued and engaged in the workplace, and leaders and supervisors should always be looking for ways in which they can encourage, affirm, recognize and value their team members. Here are 10 ideas for encouraging and recognizing employees on your campus (we use them *all* here at UNL-IANR!).

1. **Ask Everyone on the Team** – How do you like to be recognized and encouraged? It is important for leaders and team members to learn if team members like to be recognized and affirmed in front of others, or if they prefer recognition behind the scenes. What one individual enjoys may be very different from another. It's critical to find out and then, **DO IT!!!** Make sure you're recognizing people for specific behaviors that enhance performance.
2. **Positivity** – Research documented in the *Harvard Business Review* and *Forbes* magazine shows a positive work culture creates employee engagement, wellbeing and feelings of being valued. Characteristics of positive work cultures include caring for each other, treating each other with kindness and compassion, avoiding blaming others for mistakes, inspiring each other at work, emphasizing the meaningfulness of the team's work, and treating one another with respect, gratitude, trust and integrity. If you're still not convinced positivity is important, don't forget that it improves both an individual's and a team's performance.
3. **Praise It Forward Cards** – Handwritten notes of thanks and affirmation are prized by people and help affirm and recognize them for ways they have helped the team shine. They can post them at their desk to lift their spirits and remind them of how they are valued by others on the team. You can even design your own kudos cards for your team. Make them fun, with encouraging quotes, graphics or snappy sayings.
4. **Focus on You** – Use this powerful activity to build strong team relationships and deeper connections. It focuses individually and positively on each team member's successes, goals, passions and talents. Leaders and team members can use the information shared to recognize a member of the team at little to no cost (e.g., Becky loves dragonflies. Give her a dragonfly card to affirm her contributions to the team.) The questions in Focus on You are research-based and help build trust quickly on a team. They include: Name I Prefer to Be Called, What I Get Paid to Do, Hot Buttons (Passions/Hobbies), One Professional Success and One Work Success, What I Do Best, and One Work Goal and One Personal Goal. Each team member shares, one by one, without interruption. Then,

others can ask them questions after they've shared. You can use creative ways to decide who goes first and next!

5. **Celebrations** – How does your team celebrate success? Celebrations are a way to ensure you stop and are mindful of significant contributions or personal events on your team. Are you on the lookout for things that people on your team are doing well and that are important to celebrate?
6. **Team Huddle/Formation/Line Up** – Teams that touch base with a standing meeting on a regular basis reap great rewards. These are excellent times to encourage and recognize staff for their contributions and to realign staff along the mission, vision and values of your organization. Regular stand ups spike team engagement!
7. **Plays of the Day** – Tell a wow story about someone. Stories are essential to creating a culture of engagement. When someone does something outstanding, tell their story (if you know they like public affirmation). Give “Plays of the Day” during your team huddle or stand up meeting.
8. **Career Investment Discussions** – CIDs are frequent discussions about how a manager can empower employees and encourage engagement. Hold them bi-monthly or quarterly to ask powerful questions of your team members, such as: “Do you have talents, skills or knowledge you would like to use more effectively? If so, how and where?” “What challenges or areas of interest are important to consider for growth in your career?” and “How can I best support you?”
9. **Setting Team Ground Rules** – What are the “unwritten rules” on your team, and do they include things like “no gossip?” Help your team develop a set of written ground rules around how you will treat each other daily in the workplace. Make the activity fun, then write out and hang your Team Ground Rules in the office.
10. **We vs. I – Team Development Days** – Set aside team days to encourage and reinforce it's all about “the team.” Use team building activities to weave your team together, use Focus on You to build relationships and trust, work on a team challenge together, and celebrate, encourage and recognize each other. Teams that set aside time to focus on team development are more productive and higher performing than teams that don't.

By focusing on the positive and encouraging and recognizing employees on a regular, ongoing basis, supervisors can help their employees and their teams be more productive, more engaged and more committed to success.

Becky Carter and Carol Ott Schacht recently presented a [CUPA-HR webinar on strengths-based development](#) (now available on-demand at no cost!), where they shared how, by focusing energy and attention on what's right with people instead of what's wrong, human resources is helping to transform the culture of University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.