

2025 WORKHUMAN GLOBAL
RESEARCH STUDY: ALIGNMENT

Recognition as an Engine for Strategy



workhuman*



Recognition makes priorities visible – and commitment personal.

Every organization wants clear strategic priorities. The challenge is rarely in defining them – it's in helping people to align to them every day, and live them through values and behavior that supports the company's needs.

While most employees can probably articulate your strategic rally cries and big, hairy goals; far fewer can see how they connect to their daily work. The data in this report shows how alignment is driven by connecting individual contribution to shared purpose, in a supportive environment created through recognition.

About the survey

Across 2,500 employees in the U.S., U.K., Ireland, Canada, and Australia, we found those who experience frequent, high-quality, and goal-connected recognition are dramatically more likely to say they understand their organization's values, feel aligned with its strategy, and experience the psychological safety that sustains both.

Key highlights from the research

23%

People who have a recognition program are 17% more likely to understand company values and have **23% higher goal alignment**.

5x

Those whose recognition is linked to strategic initiatives are **5x more likely to feel “very invested”** in company priorities.

129%

When recognition is connected to strategic initiatives, workers are **129% more likely to understand how their work contributes** compared with those whose recognition isn't linked to strategic initiatives.

21%

Employees thanked in the past month report **psychological safety scores 21% higher** than those who haven't been thanked recently.

40%

Employees with high psychological safety are 27% to **40% more likely to understand and align with their company values** and strategic initiatives.

A few definitions: turning strategy into shared direction

Understanding

Understanding is about whether people truly know what the organization is trying to do and how. When employees have real clarity on how their role connects to priorities, values, decisions, and expectations, they're better equipped to focus their energy where it matters most. In this report, understanding relates to whether people can confidently connect their everyday work to the bigger picture.

Alignment

Alignment looks at how well employee effort lines up with the organization's priorities or values. For an employee, it's the difference between knowing the strategy and actively reinforcing it through daily choices and behaviors. When alignment is strong, recognition, goals, and decisions all point in the same direction, making it easier for people to move together. When it's not, even very engaged teams can end up working at cross-purposes.

Values

Values come to life through what organizations consistently recognize and reward. This dimension examines whether employees see company values reflected in real actions — not just words. When values are reinforced through everyday moments, they create shared expectations for how work gets done and what success looks like across the organization.

Initiatives

Initiatives reflect how employees experience an organization's biggest priorities — the strategic initiatives, rally cries, and company-wide goals meant to move the business forward. This dimension looks at whether those efforts feel clear, connected, and credible, or abstract and disconnected from day-to-day work. When initiatives land well, people can see how big goals, like a successful merger or an AI transformation, translate into real expectations, behaviors, and progress. When they don't, even well-intentioned initiatives can lose steam.



Recognition makes organizational values real.

Values are only as strong as the behaviors that represent them. Our survey data finds that recognition is how employees learn which behaviors matter most and translates abstract ideals into lived experience.

17%

Employees at organizations with recognition programs are 17% more likely to understand company values.

Consistent recognition reinforces values.

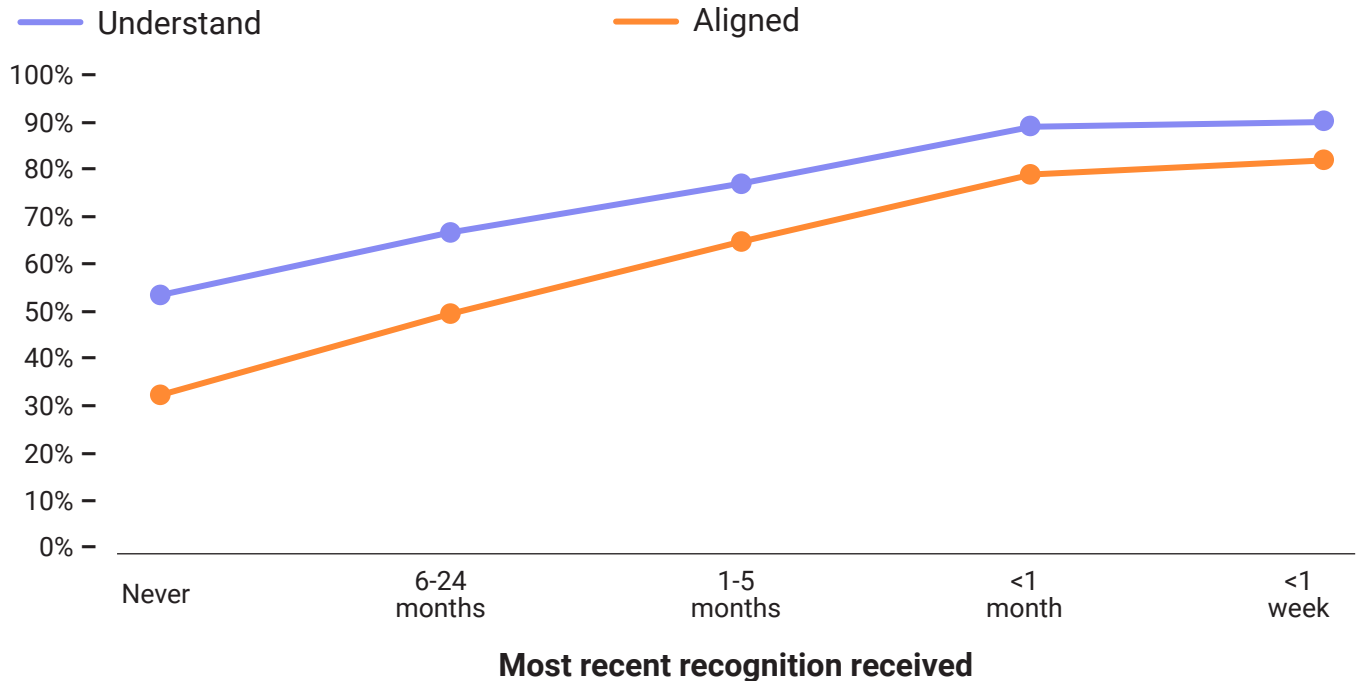
Recency makes a clear difference. Employees thanked within the past week are 67% more likely to say they understand their company values vs. those who've never been thanked – a clear correlation between recognition frequency and impact. Employees recognized recently are also 2.5x more likely to agree that they feel aligned with those organizational values than those who've never been thanked at work.



Percent who agree:
I understand
my organization's values



Percent who agree:
I feel aligned with
my organization's values

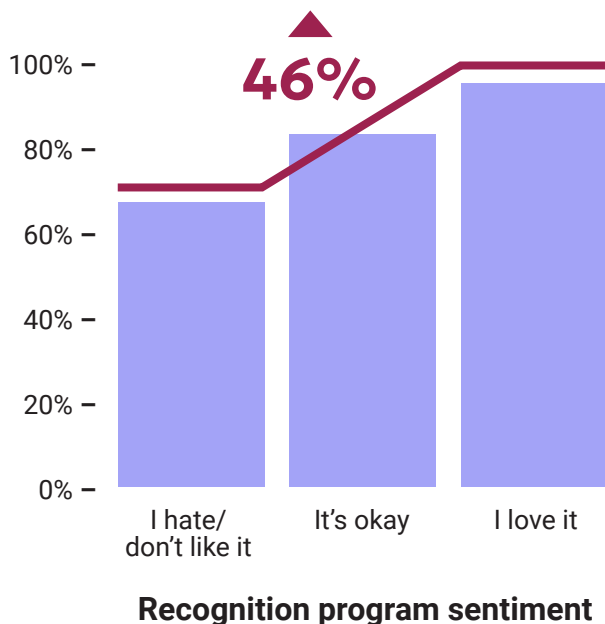


Recognition program quality impacts values.

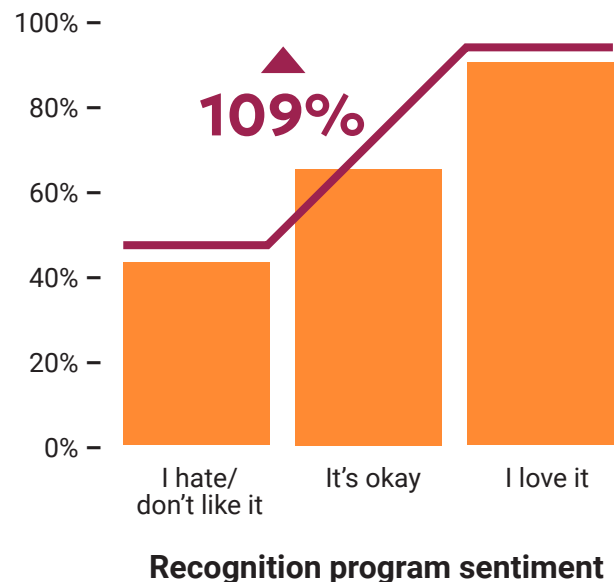
When employees love their recognition program, 95% also say they understand their company values. That understanding rate drops 46% among those who dislike or hate their program.



Percent who agree:
I understand my organization's values



Percent who agree:
I feel aligned with my organization's values



Together, these findings show that recognition frequency, quality, and recency form the behavioral infrastructure of culture. Every “thank-you” is a micro-moment of cultural reinforcement and a way of saying, “This is who we are and how we work.”



Recognition brings strategic initiatives to life.

Strategy fails when employees can't see themselves in it. This year's survey found that recognition gives strategy a pulse by rewarding contributions that advance organizational goals.

77%

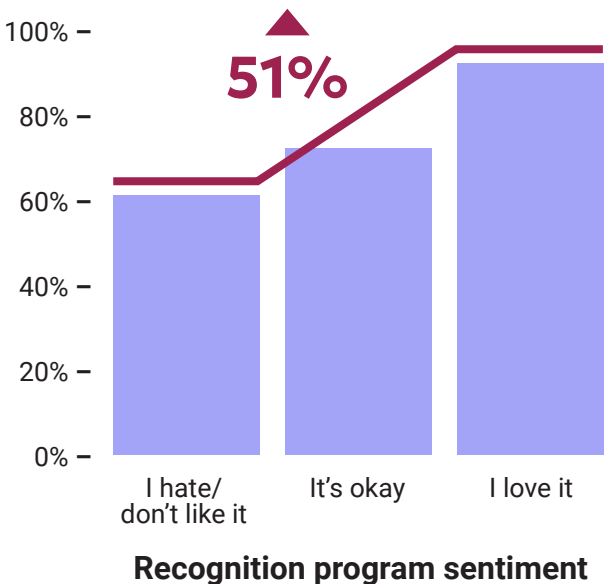
of employees say they understand their organization's strategic initiatives.

Great recognition builds strategic clarity and goals alignment.

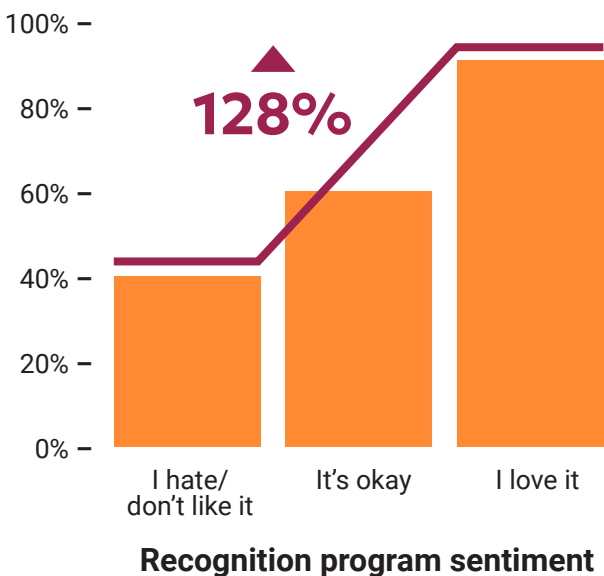
The number of employees who say they understand their company's strategic initiatives diverges considerably depending on whether or not people like their recognition experience.



Percent who agree:
I understand my organization's strategic initiatives



Percent who agree:
I feel aligned with my organization's strategic initiatives



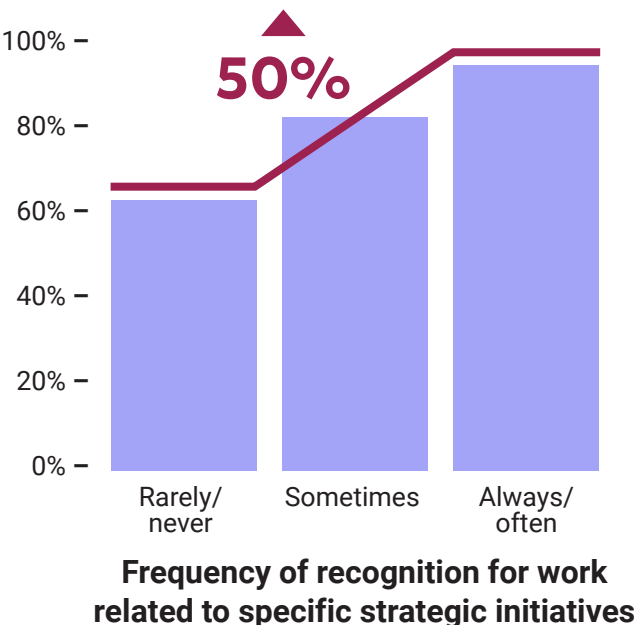
Aligning recognition to strategic initiatives adds to understanding.

When employees are always or often recognized for work tied to strategic initiatives, 93% say they understand those initiatives. That number falls to 62% among those rarely or never recognized for goal-related work.



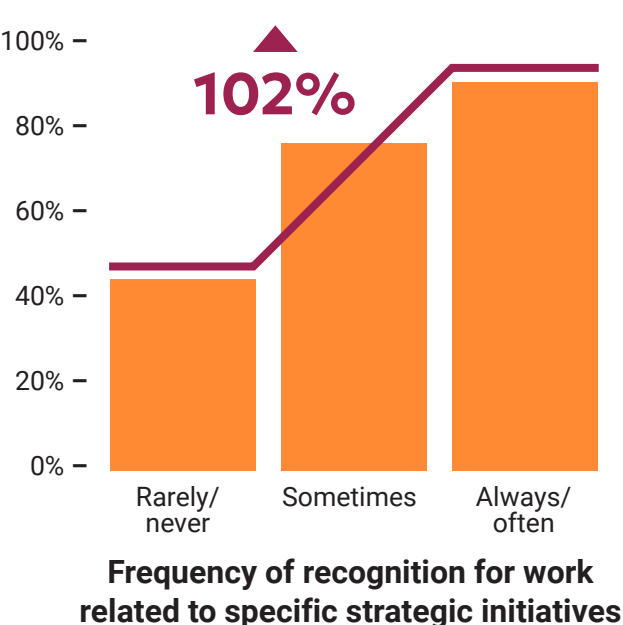
Percent who agree:

I understand my organization's strategic initiatives



Percent who agree:

I feel aligned with my organization's strategic initiatives



Recency reinforces alignment to goals for both givers and recipients of recognition.

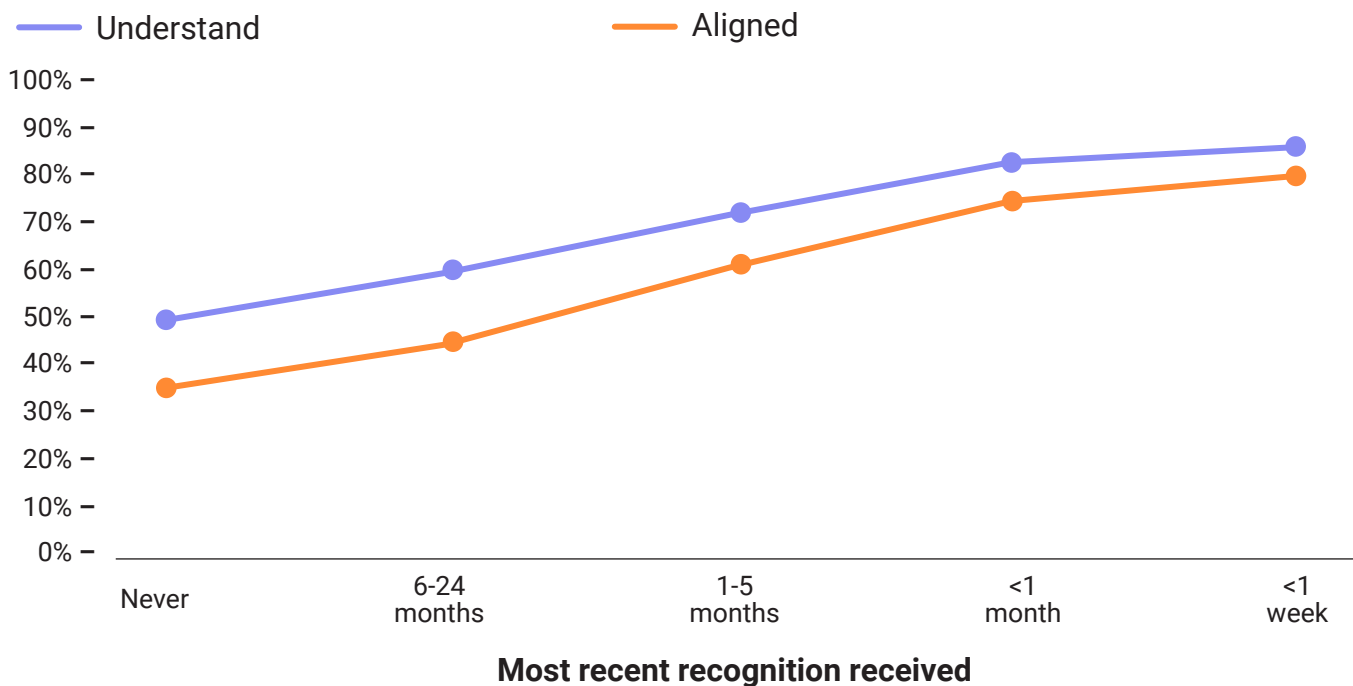
Being recognized helps to reinforce both understanding of and alignment to strategic initiatives. When employees were recognized in the last week, chances of understanding strategic initiatives rose 72% (50% to 86%) and alignment with those goals rose 122% (36% to 80%). We see the same pattern for employees who have given recognition to others.



Percent who agree:
I understand my organization's strategic initiatives



Percent who agree:
I feel aligned with my organization's strategic initiatives



Together, these patterns tell a simple story: When recognition is connected to strategy, people remember it. Every recognition moment becomes a communication channel for priorities – a way to translate strategic plans into shared human stories and experiences.



Recognition bridges the gap from understanding to alignment.

Understanding what matters is one thing; feeling personally invested in it is another. This year's survey found that recognition bridges that gap, transforming comprehension into commitment.

23%

Employees in companies with a recognition program are 23% more likely to feel aligned with organizational goals.

Make strategy visible through recognition.

When recognition connects peoples' efforts to organizational goals, those goals feel more personal and easier to understand. This connection also strengthens their personal commitment to those goals.

Employees who like their program, receive goal-linked recognition, and are thanked more recently show dramatically higher levels of personal investment in strategic initiatives.

129%

When recognition is tied to strategic initiatives, 96% say they “know exactly how my work ties in,” vs. 42% when it’s rarely or never tied to strategic initiatives – a difference of 129%.

5x

Personal investment grows more than 5x when recognition can be connected directly to strategic initiatives. (86% say they are very personally invested when recognition is always connected to strategic initiatives, vs. only 15% when it is rarely or never connected.)

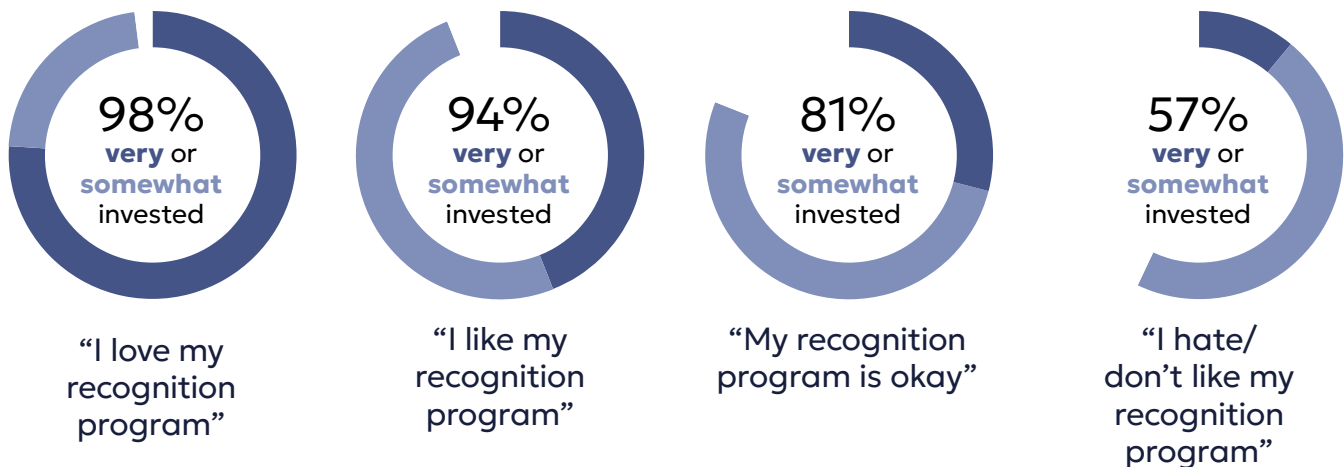
3.5x

Timing matters too. Employees who’ve been thanked within the last week are 3.5x as likely to be very personally invested as those who haven’t been recognized in six months or more. (59% vs. 17%)

Engagement comes full circle

Employees who like their recognition program are dramatically more likely to feel personally invested in their organization's strategic priorities. When people love recognition, they are 7x more likely to say they are very invested in organizational goals.

Investment in company's strategic initiatives



Together, these findings show that recognition is the clearest way to turn organizational strategy into personal purpose. Every well-timed, meaningful "thank you" reinforces both the why and the how of company goals – creating a direct, emotional connection between everyday work and shared success.



Psychological safety is a multiplier.

Recognition can be a profound catalyst for alignment, but none of this works without a foundation of trust. Psychological safety – the belief that it’s safe to speak up, take risks, and be one’s self at work – is what allows alignment to stick.

21%

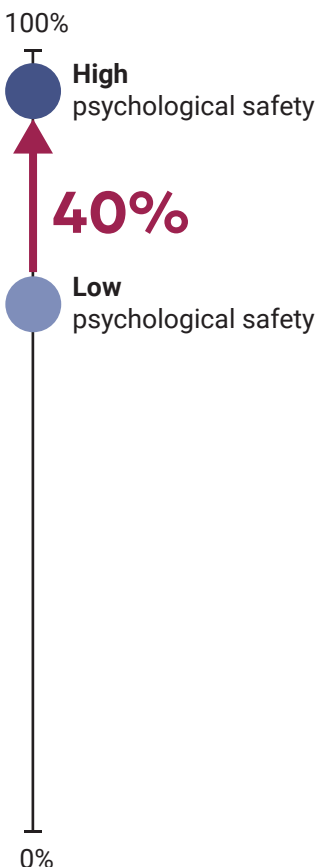
Employees who recently received recognition have a 21% higher psychological safety score than those who didn’t.

Feeling safe at work builds foundational understanding.

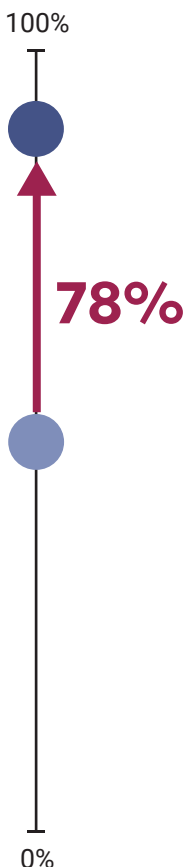
In our data, employees with higher psychological safety were 40% more likely to say they understand company values, 78% more likely to feel aligned with them, 44% more likely to understand strategic goals, and 79% more likely to feel aligned with those goals. And as our research has shown year after year, recognition is one of the most reliable ways to build that foundation.



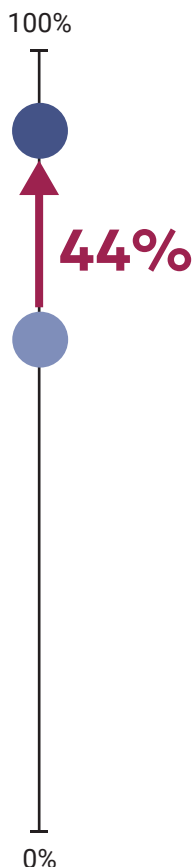
Percent who agree:
**I understand
my organization's
values**



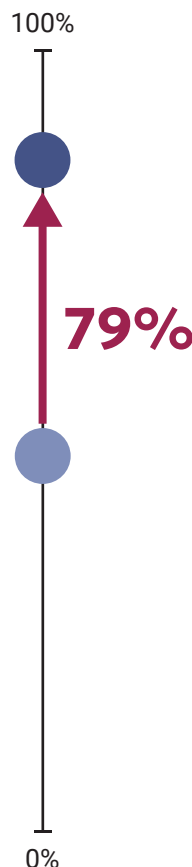
Percent who agree:
**I feel aligned with
my organization's
values**



Percent who agree:
**I understand my
organization's
strategic initiatives**



Percent who agree:
**I feel aligned with
my organization's
strategic initiatives**



Psychological safety also fuels commitment and day-to-day direction.

When psychological safety is high, people feel more personally invested and can see exactly how their work drives priorities.

We asked respondents:

- **When your organization sets a strategic initiative or top priority, how personally invested do you feel in helping achieve it?**
- **How well do you understand how your day-to-day work contributes to your organization's strategic initiatives and top priorities?**

Employees who reported feeling invested in strategic initiatives had a mean psychological safety score of 3.79, compared to 2.93 among those who weren't invested. Those who knew exactly how their day-to-day work contributed to goals scored 3.89, versus 2.88 among those who didn't see the connection.

Psychological safety score for those who are and are not **invested in their organization's strategic initiatives**



Psychological safety score for those who do and don't **understand how their day-to-day work contributes to their organization's goals**



1 2 3 4 5
Psychological safety score (1-5 scale)

Ultimately, psychological safety is where these alignment drivers can either stall out or accelerate. Recognition plays a role in helping make employees feel safe to speak up, ask for help, and share ideas – and in turn, a strong sense of safety is necessary to ensure employees feel clear and empowered to execute on company values and goals.



What creates psychological safety in an organization?

Psychological safety doesn't come from policies or statements alone. It's shaped in everyday moments – how people are treated, whether effort is noticed, and how safe it feels to speak up, ask questions, or make mistakes. In this survey, we also looked at the role of giving and receiving recognition in creating psychological safety, and how it helps people feel supported, respected, and confident enough to do their best work.

Recognition and gratitude as signals of safety

Looking at recency of giving or receiving recognition, we found that when employees have been recognized recently, they are significantly more likely to report high psychological safety vs. those who have not. Similarly, the act of thanking people correlates with higher psychological safety.

But verbal thank-yous, powerful as they are in the moment, can fade quickly. Managers get busy, people fall through the cracks, and without infrastructure, the psychological safety that recognition creates erodes within weeks.

Psychological safety score for those who **gave recognition recently and not recently**



Psychological safety score for those who **received recognition recently and not recently**

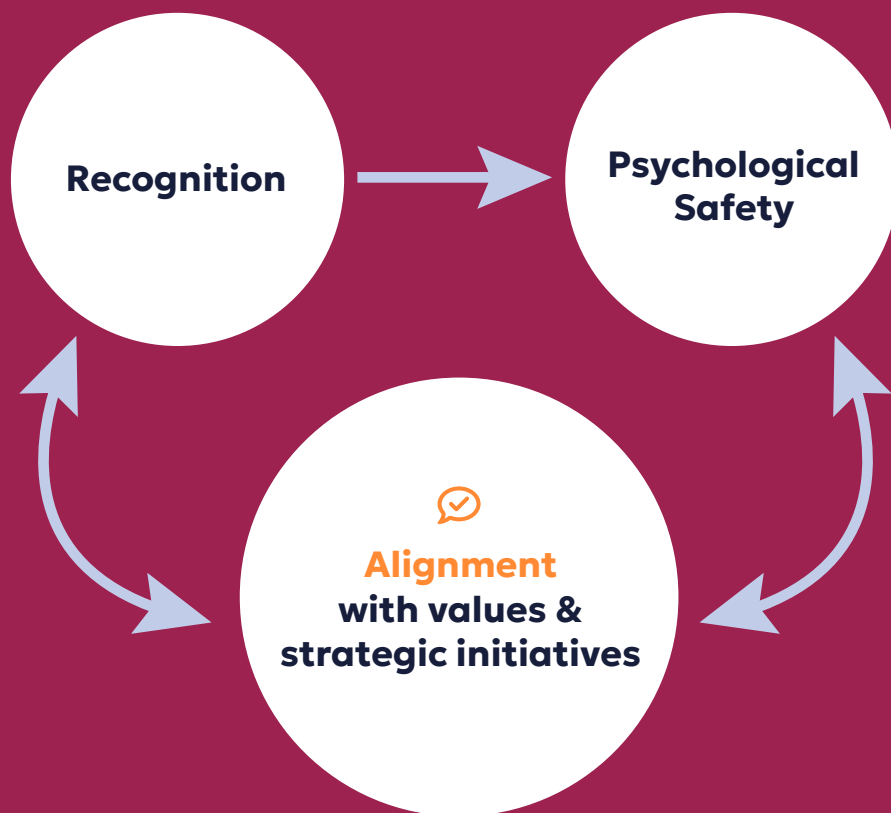


Our past data reinforces these observations. In 2023, we found that employees without a formal program experience sharp declines in psychological safety as time passes. A recognition program creates a culture of gratitude that sustains psychological safety even when individual moments of appreciation fade – and when that program is strategically designed to connect recognition to company values and goals, psychological safety becomes the foundation for alignment itself.

The alignment flywheel

Taken together, this data reveals a clear human system for alignment:

1. Recognition drives psychological safety.
2. Both drive better understanding and alignment to organizational values and strategy.
3. Aligned employees give recognition more frequently and have higher psychological safety.



Recognition is the signal that keeps culture and strategy synchronized and makes people feel more psychologically safe in the organization.



Seeing alignment in real time with recognition data

If recognition is the signal that shows employees what matters, Human Intelligence® is what makes those signals visible to leaders.

Human Intelligence offers insight into alignment.

When recognition moments are frequent, authentic, and tied to purpose, they also generate human data and insight – something we call Human Intelligence – which gives leaders awareness of how work gets done, where connection thrives, and how strategy becomes culture in motion.

The language of recognition, what people are being celebrated for, how often, and by whom – is the raw material for a new kind of organizational intelligence, showing people how their work is aligning to company strategic initiatives and showing leaders how those initiatives are being actioned in real time, and by whom.

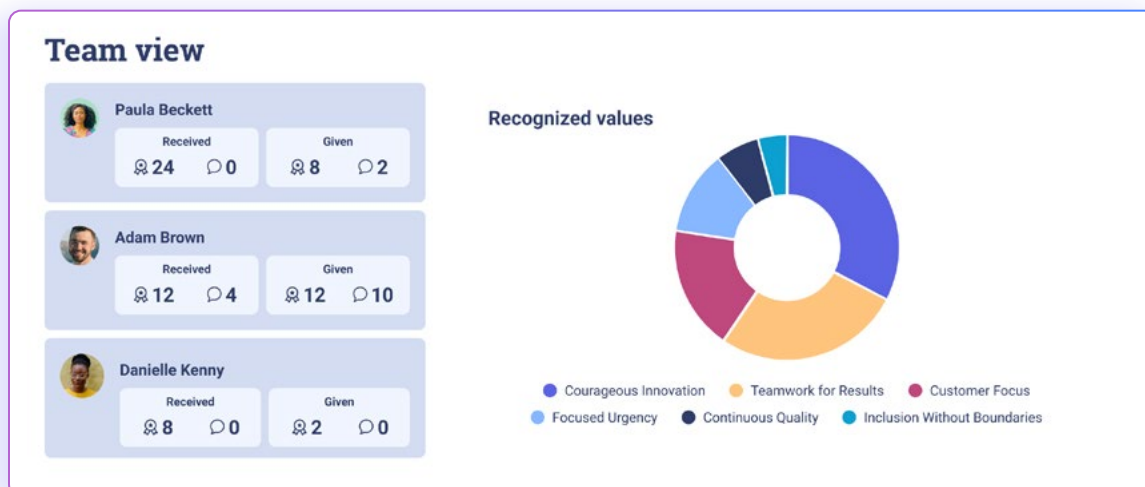
Human Intelligence turns everyday recognition into real-time culture analytics.

Recognition data shows leaders how values and goals are being lived. Instead of waiting for annual surveys or anecdotal feedback, employees and their leaders can now see, week by week:

- Which values are being recognized most often by whom – and which need reinforcement
- How recognition is connected to strategic initiatives
- How that alignment differs across individuals, teams, departments, or regions

Introducing Topics

Topics is a new component of Workhuman's Human Intelligence that uses natural language processing (NLP) to read the language in a recognition message and surface where work already maps to your values and priorities. It turns everyday "great job" moments into a live signal of what's advancing strategy, and where you need to adjust, visible from the Culture Hub or our Advanced Analytics dashboards.

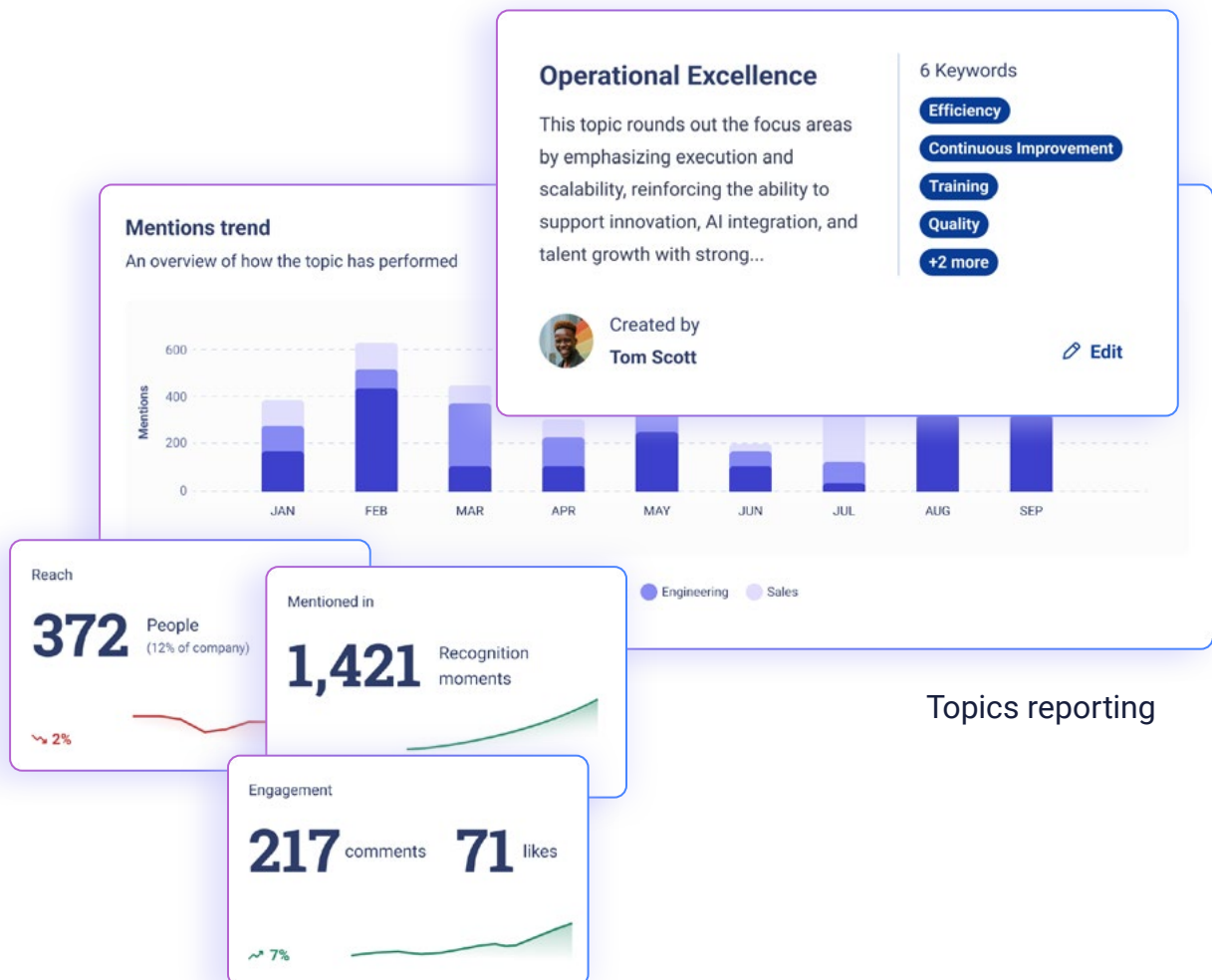


Culture Hub reporting

In practice, it means leaders can instantly answer questions like:

- Are people recognizing each other for behaviors that drive forward our strategy?
- Which goals are gaining traction – and which need more visibility?
- Are our cultural values being lived out in the day-to-day?

With Topics, alignment to strategic initiatives instantly becomes something you can see, measure, and strengthen in real time. It's the missing feedback loop that connects recognition activity to business priorities – giving leaders a living picture of how strategy, culture, and behavior align.





Building alignment through appreciation

One through line is evident in this year's research. The story of alignment is really the story of visibility. You can't manage what you can't see – and until now, most organizations couldn't see culture or commitment happening in real time. Recognition changes that.

What our 2025 data makes clear

1. Recognition is the behavior that teaches strategy.

When appreciation is frequent, recent, and tied to priorities, understanding of values/goals jumps and “very invested” rates multiply up to 5x.

2. Quality matters more than presence.

Where people love the recognition experience, understanding of initiatives is ~30 points higher than where they don't.

3. Timing changes outcomes.

Employees thanked within the past month report psychological safety scores 20% higher – and higher psychological safety translates to increases of 27% to 40% in understanding and alignment with company values and goals.

4. Goal-connection personalizes commitment.

When work is recognized in the context of strategic initiatives, understanding soars 129%.

5. Psychological safety is the multiplier.

High psychological safety means 40–80% stronger understanding and alignment – and the highest personal investment in company success.

6. Giving lifts the signal too.

People who both give and receive recognition report stronger understanding and commitment than those who only receive.

Next steps for organizations

1. Reinforce what matters.

Encourage recognition and feedback that highlight contributions advancing core values and priorities.

2. Keep it current.

Make appreciation a continuous rhythm, not a campaign.
Timely recognition strengthens connection and clarity.

3. Raise the quality bar.

Coach people in real time to give recognition that's specific, authentic, and clearly linked to impact.

4. Create visibility.

Look for ways to make recognition and cultural signals more transparent through feeds, dashboards, or forums where people can see their own and other people's alignment in motion.

5. Learn from the data.

Analyze the language and patterns in recognition to understand where strategy is resonating and where reinforcement is needed.

6. Close the feedback loop.

Share insights with teams, celebrate the bright spots, and use what you learn to guide future communication and goal setting.

The data is clear.

When values, goals, and recognition are visible in one connected, supportive system, alignment stops being a quarterly conversation and becomes an everyday reality.

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