

# The Manager's Playbook for Building High-Performing Teams

A practical guide for managers to improve team performance, engagement, and growth.



## Why this playbook exists.

Managers are being asked to deliver performance *and* connection *and* development, but with less time, tighter budgets, and distributed teams.

The [Employee Recognition Trends Report](#) reinforces that recognition is a vital part of improving performance, and yet over half of managers (53%) say budget constraints limit the recognition they give.

With high pressures and expectations, how are managers able to lead well with limited resources?



This playbook is built around five realities managers are facing, with simple systems to handle each:

1. [Motivation & engagement](#) ..... page 03  
Making recognition a habit.
2. [Performance & reflection](#) ..... page 05  
Recognizing what you want repeated.
3. [Connection & culture](#) ..... page 07  
Leading with core values.
4. [Career growth & development](#) ..... page 08  
Advocating for your team.
5. [Budget & impact](#) ..... page 09  
Tracking your progress.

## How to use this guide (15 minutes a week)

We break down each of the five realities into simple actionable steps that you can include into a 15-minute weekly rhythm.

### Your weekly rhythm:

1. **Recognize + reflect (5 minutes):**  
Recognize 2–3 meaningful contributions.
2. **Connect + coach (5 minutes):**  
Check in with each person (outside of regular 1:1s).
3. **Track + measure (5 minutes):**  
Record your and your team's progress.

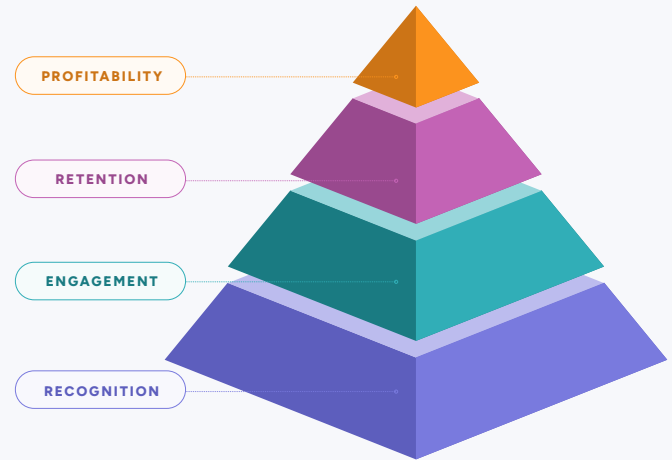
# 1. Motivation & Engagement: Make Recognition a Habit

Recognition is the engine of employee engagement and performance. But recognition only delivers the greatest results when it's easy, consistent, and connected to business goals and values.

When managers have the right tools, reminders, and guidance, recognition becomes a habit, not a task.

**Tip:** Setting recognition goals can help you build a consistent habit of recognition. A good benchmark is two recognition messages per employee, per month.

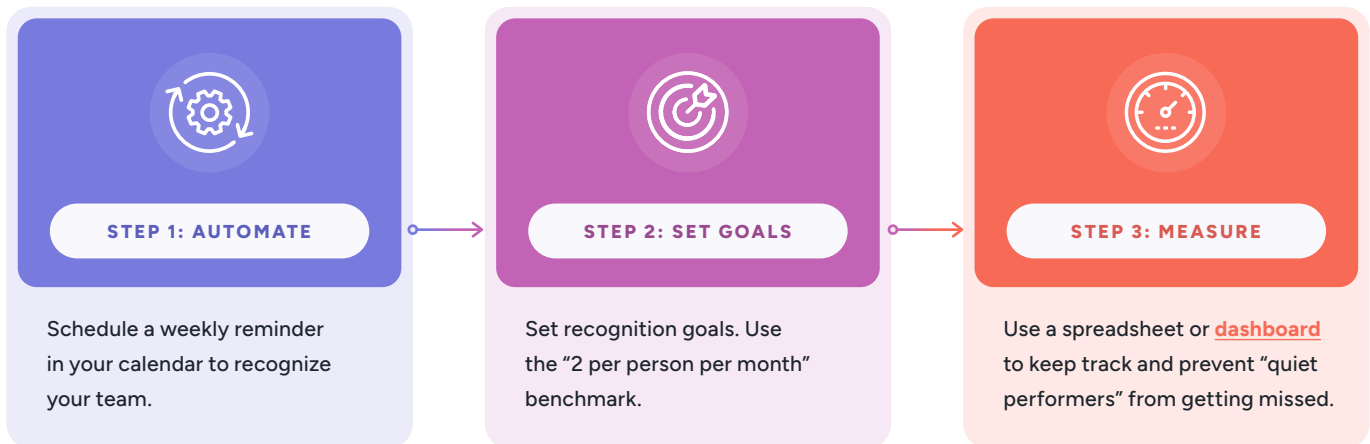
Recognition is a measurable driver of engagement, retention, and profitability.



## Recognition Impact Pyramid

*The majority of organizations now treat recognition as a measurable performance system.*

## Do this: 🖱️ Build your recognition loop



## How to write a meaningful recognition message:

1. **Personalize it**  
(make it specific to them)
2. **Recognize the effort**  
(the time, skill, and collaboration required)
3. **Acknowledge the impact**  
(how it helped the team/org)



## Use these templates:

"Hi **[Name]**! I really appreciated how you **[what they did]** on **[project/moment]**. It helped **[who/what it helped]** by **[impact]**. Thanks for showing **[value/behavior]**! It truly made a huge difference."

"Shoutout to **[Name]** for **[specific action]**. It made **[result]** so much easier/better for **[team/customer]**. Appreciate you, always!"

"I noticed you **[what they did]** — and I don't want it to go unnoticed! It took **[effort/skill]**, and it really helped **[impact]**. Thank you so much for always putting in 110%, even on the small things."

"A huge thank you to **[Name]** for **[specific action]**! That's a great example of **[value]** in action, and it helped us **[impact/result]**. I'm always grateful to have you on our team!"

"**[Name]**, thank you for jumping in to **[helpful action]**. It kept things moving and made it easier for **[person/team]**. Really appreciate how you **[behavior]** and are always willing to help!"

## 2. Performance & reflection: Recognize what you want repeated

The flywheel effect occurs when small wins accumulate over time, creating momentum that keeps your recognition strategy flowing organically. When you're equipped with the right tools, and make

recognition part of your team's culture, you'll see the positive behaviors reinforced in your team.

### Do this: 🖱️ Recognize effort and outcome

Even when results aren't final, recognize values-aligned effort. Take the time to call out moments of the behaviors you want to see more of.

By **facilitating** recognition often and **showcasing** it to keep it visible, you **motivate** more of the behaviors and values you want to see in your team.



### Do this: 🖱️ Use reflective recognition for better 1:1s

Instead of guessing what mattered, ask:  
*"What have you been working on that you're proud of?"*

*"What's been the hardest part of your job lately?"*

This ensures that the recognition you give as a manager resonates with the recipient and has the desired motivating effect.

## High performers vs. low performers

**High performer:** Consistently delivers the right outcomes, meets quality standards, and does it in a way that strengthens the team (reliable follow-through, good judgment, strong collaboration).

**Low performer:** Isn't "someone having an off week". It's a pattern of missed expectations (missed deadlines, rework, unclear ownership, inconsistent communication, or not meeting role standards) even after priorities and success criteria have been made clear.

To support improvement for low performers:

1. **Set expectations** and start by making "what good looks like" concrete. Set specific goals, examples, and timelines.
2. **Remove barriers** (add training, tools, clearer scope, pairing/mentorship) and coach in short cycles with frequent check-ins.



3. **Reinforce progress** by recognizing the behaviors you want repeated. Document agreed upon next steps so accountability feels fair and transparent.

It's important to note that a low performer is also likely to be mentally checked-out, unmotivated, and at-risk of leaving.

## Do this: 🖱️ Retention risk check (private, manager-only)

List names at risk + 1 action you'll take (growth, workload, recognition, clarity).

_____	→	_____
_____	→	_____
_____	→	_____
_____	→	_____

If performance doesn't improve despite clarity and support, escalate early for additional help to protect the rest of the team's workload and morale.

### 3. Connection & culture: Lead with values

Connection doesn't happen by accident. It happens when employees feel seen, supported, and safe.

Regular weekly check-ins are a practical way to build trust, reduce stress, and strengthen problem-solving. Especially when managers keep conversations consistent, open, and tailored to the person.

#### Do this: 🖱️ Follow this weekly 1:1 structure

##### Before the meeting:

- Review last notes so you can follow up on what was discussed last time.
- Set a light agenda (well-being + workload), but stay flexible.
- Start warm with a quick, casual opener to create a welcoming atmosphere.

##### During the meeting, ask about:

- Well-being: "How are you feeling lately, inside and outside of work?"
- Workload: "How do you feel about your current workload?"
- Support: "Do you feel supported? What can I do to help?"

##### Close strong:

- Summarize actions + timelines (what you'll do, what they'll do, by when).
- Reinforce an open door (they can come to you between check-ins).
- Book the next check-in to keep communication consistent.



💡 **Tip:** 70% of a team's engagement is directly influenced by their manager (Gallup).

#### Do this: 🖱️ Turn values into a repeatable project system

Use this simple sequence when kicking off a new project:

1. Outline project goals + KPIs
2. Align goals to corporate values
3. Define the behaviors that demonstrate those values
4. Recognize those behaviors as they show up

This helps support a "culture by design" vs a "culture by default."

**Culture by default:** Allowing the culture to evolve without guidance often leads to a disjointed and ineffective workplace atmosphere.

**Culture by design:** A proactive, designed approach involves deliberate actions to create a cohesive and supportive environment that aligns with the organization's strategic goals.

## 4. Career growth & development: Advocate for your team

Career development is one of the strongest trust-builders in a manager–employee relationship because it signals, “I’m invested in you, not just your output.”

When managers make time to talk about growth (where someone wants to go, what skills they want to build, and what support they need), it turns the relationship into a partnership rather than a task list. That clarity reduces uncertainty, increases motivation, and gives employees a practical reason to stay engaged.

Career development works best when it’s specific and shared. Employees reflect on goals and gaps, and managers respond with concrete support, alignment, and checkpoints so progress feels real, not vague.

### Do this: 🖐️ Adopt a simple career development structure

Use this framework with a team member who has expressed interest in career development:

#### Step 1) Dream Job (where they’re aiming to be)

*Where do you see yourself at the pinnacle of your career?*

*What does success look like to you?*

*How does your dream role fulfill you?*

*What will be your greatest achievement?*

*Why are you the right person for this role?*

#### Step 2) Reflection (strengths + gaps)

*What are your current strengths and expertise?*

*What is your favorite part of your current role?*

*Do you have opportunities for growth?*

*What are your biggest challenges or roadblocks?*

*What are the areas you would like to improve?*

#### Step 3) Growth Plan (training, added responsibility, support, measurement)

*What skills, knowledge and experience are required to obtain your dream role?*

*What training and development will you do?*

*What added responsibility can you take on in your current role?*

*What other experience do you need?*

*How can your manager better support you?*

*How will you measure your progress?*

#### Step 4) Tracking Progress (milestones + checkpoints)

*Milestone objective (this will help you reach your dream job).*

*Why does this objective make sense (how will this help you reach your dream job)?*

*What are your actionable steps to complete this objective?*

*When do you want to complete this objective?*

Your progress checkpoint(s) with your manager will be on.

## 5. Budget & impact: Track your progress

When resources are tight and people are spread thin, the smart move isn't trying to do more with less but rather spending time and resources where it has the most impact.

When you can see what's on track, what's stalled, and who's overloaded, you can make smarter tradeoffs and prioritize the work that matters most.

It also creates fairness and clarity: teammates know what "good" looks like, contributions don't get missed (especially in hybrid settings), and you can back up requests for resources.

### Do this: 🖱️ Track 3 metrics that executives care about

Every organization will have different metrics they care about, but these 3 are critical no matter what industry you're in: **employee retention, productivity and engagement**. These 3 all directly contribute to business outcomes and performance.

1. **Retention:** If high performers are leaving (or you're constantly backfilling), the team isn't healthy – no matter how good the short-term output looks. Use the Retention Risk Check on page 6 to help.
2. **Productivity:** This is your goal attainment (delivery against priorities or KPIs). Executives ultimately care whether the team is delivering what matters and on time, and at quality. Is your team completing its goals that are also directly impacting the overall business strategy? If the answer is a consistent yes, then productivity is high in your team.
3. **Engagement:** Use the 3-2-1 Engagement Check

### Ask 3 pulse questions:

(you could incorporate these into weekly check-ins):

- **Energy:** "How's your energy at work this week?"
- **Clarity:** "How clear are your priorities?" "Do you know what's expected of you?"
- **Support:** "Do you have what you need to do your job well?"

### Collect 2 signals:

(behavioral & overall vibes). Things like:

- **Participation:** who speaks/contributes the most in meetings, channels, retros, etc. (trend: engaging in conversations or just answering).
- **Follow-through:** commitments met/work moving (trend: steady vs slipping). Remember: you're tracking trends, not judging individuals!
- **Time-off:** more sick/personal/vacation days or time-off requests can be a sign of burnout or disengagement.

### Take 1 action:

(and say it out loud). Every week, choose one small move based on what you learned:

- Clarify the top 3 priorities
- Remove one blocker
- Recognize a specific behavior/result
- Adjust workload/renege a deadline
- Schedule a growth conversation

### Then close the loop:

"Based on the pulse this week, here's what I'm doing: \_\_\_\_\_."

Track this weekly for 4 weeks and watch the trend. Remember: never ask for pulse feedback unless you're willing to take action. That's what builds trust and keeps response rates honest.

# Manager Scorecard for High-Performing Teams (Monthly)

Use this scorecard each month to help keep track of your and your team's progress.

<b>Team:</b>	<b>Manager:</b>	<b>Month:</b>	<b>Team size:</b>
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**How to score:** Using a 1-5 scale (1=not complete/poor quality, 5=complete/high quality), give a score based on your responses for each row and total your score. High scores indicate a low-risk, high-performing team.

Metric	Description	Score
1) Motivation & Engagement	Recognition/appreciation/shoutouts sent or given	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
	Coverage (was everyone recognized?)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
2) Performance & Reflection	Commitments on track (what % of projects/tasks completed)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
	Quality score of the commitments/projects/tasks completed	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
3) Connection & Culture	Values moments (were values referenced or demonstrated?)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
	Connection pulse (did meaningful check-ins happen?)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
4) Career growth & Development	Growth touchpoints (career or skill development convos)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
	Progress moves (people took a next-step action)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
5) Budget & Impact	Team capacity/workload (1=not sustainable, 5=sustainable)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
	Budget (1=not sustainable, 5=sustainable)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5

<b>Total score:</b> _____ /50	<b>Last month score:</b> _____ /50
<b>Biggest win:</b>	<b>Biggest risk:</b>
<b>Team status:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> High-performing <input type="checkbox"/> Improving <input type="checkbox"/> Stable <input type="checkbox"/> At-Risk	
<b>What I need:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Decision/Direction <input type="checkbox"/> Priority tradeoff <input type="checkbox"/> Support <input type="checkbox"/> Budget <input type="checkbox"/> Other	

**Notes/plan to improve:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Closing: What to do next

High-performing teams aren't built overnight. It's the everyday interactions, guidance and support that build momentum over time. You chose to open this guide, which means you're already on the right track to building a fantastic team.

This can be an overwhelming journey, so start with these 3 small steps toward a high-performing team:

- 1. Start a weekly "5-minute connect check-in" habit:** Outside of your regular 1:1s, take the time to have more casual conversations with your team to build trust.
- 2. Recognize one thing you want repeated (every week):** Pick one value or priority behavior (quality, ownership, collaboration) and call it out specifically so "what good looks like" becomes obvious.
- 3. Track what you're doing (so you can see the progress):** Whether it's through the scorecard, a platform (like Kudos!) or your own spreadsheet, record your progress so you can spot problems early, and provide proof to your Executives when needed.



# About Kudos

Kudos is a leading employee recognition and rewards platform that helps organizations build stronger cultures by celebrating achievements, fostering connection, and driving employee engagement.

Kudos has reimagined how organizations approach recognition, internal communications, and employee milestones. By empowering teams with flexible tools like automated celebrations, real-time insights, and powerful rewards budget management, organizations can introduce and scale meaningful recognition programs while reducing administrative effort.

Organizations in over 140 countries trust Kudos to create workplace cultures where employees feel seen, valued, and inspired to do their best work.

[Get in touch →](#)





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