

Partnerships for the Future of Nursing

Margaret Bishop, MSN, RN

Meaningful partnerships help strengthen the nursing profession and improve the health of our communities. The Colorado Nurses Association is proud to be working alongside members of the Colorado Coun-

cil of Black Nurses, Inc., the National Association of Hispanic Nurses, Denver Chapter, and other partners to develop programming for middle school students aimed at increasing diversity in nursing. Through

this collaborative effort, we hope to inspire young people from all backgrounds to explore nursing careers and help build a workforce that better reflects and serves Colorado's communities. ■

Take This Crust and Stuff it: Beyond Pizza Parties, What Nurses Identify as Meaningful Recognition in Contemporary Practice

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Raise your hand if you have been personally victimized by day shift eating all the bargain bin “Thank you for all you do” pizza, and you are left with half-crusts as you arrive for your night shift. How about the “you rock” painted rocks in your mailbox for Nurses Week? My personal favorite was when, years ago, administration informed the nursing staff that we “get” to pick which charity the hospital will donate to in our names for Nurses Week: a nice tax write off for them as their nurses scramble around to deal with short-staffed units.

Meaningful recognition is a foundational component of healthy work environments and is strongly associated with nurse satisfaction, engagement, and retention. Emerging research demonstrates a persistent gap between organizational recognition strategies and what nurses themselves perceive as valuable. It is imperative nurse leaders consider evidence on nurse preferences for recognition and identify commonly ineffective approaches.

Recognition in nursing is not merely a morale booster—it is an evidence-based strategy linked to improved retention, reduced burnout, and enhanced organiza-

tional outcomes. Meaningful recognition is defined as acknowledgment that is authentic, individualized, and reflective of a nurse's professional contributions. However, healthcare organizations often rely on standardized or symbolic gestures that fail to resonate with frontline staff, likely with cost as big factor.

What Nurses Report as Most Meaningful

Compensation and Tangible Rewards

Recent research indicates that salary and financial recognition remain the most valued form of acknowledgment among nurses. This reflects a shift from earlier assumptions that intrinsic motivators dominate. Pay, bonuses, and equitable compensation signal organizational respect and validation of workload and expertise.

Authentic, Individualized Feedback

Private, sincere verbal recognition and written acknowledgment rank immediately behind salary in importance. Nurses consistently report valuing: direct feedback from immediate supervisors, specific recognition tied to clinical actions, and timely acknowledgement

following meaningful events. Recognition is most effective when it is personal, specific, and delivered by someone perceived as credible.

Respect and Professional Value

Nurses want to feel respected as professionals—not simply praised. Recognition that affirms clinical judgment, autonomy, and expertise contributes significantly to perceived value.

Flexibility and Work-Life Balance

Scheduling flexibility and workload considerations are increasingly recognized as meaningful forms of appreciation. These operational changes communicate respect for nurses' well-being more effectively than symbolic rewards. People are more likely to stay in an organization that recognizes them as humans, acknowledging the fact they have important matters to attend outside of work and showing respect for that.

Inclusive and Personalized Recognition Systems

Recognition preferences vary widely based on demographics, role, and experience, underscoring the importance of individualized approaches rather than one-size-fits-all programs and trinkets.

What Nurses Find Least Meaningful

Token Gestures (e.g., “Pizza Parties”, lanyards, pens)

Widely cited across surveys, tokenistic gestures such as food-based rewards or generic appreciation events are often perceived as superficial and disconnected from real workplace challenges. Food rewards are how dogs feel special and know they did something correctly, and does anyone really want a hospital branded key chain?

Generic or Public-Only Recognition

Recognition programs that rely solely on public awards (e.g., employee-of-the-month, unit star) may fail to capture the contributions of quieter or less visible staff and can feel inequitable. These can often feel like there was not much thought behind them, and can seem to cycle through the full roster of nurses, giving an ‘everyone gets a trophy’ feel.

Infrequent or Delayed Recognition

Annual recognition events lack immediacy and fail to reinforce desired behaviors in real time. Acknowledging excellence in a delayed fashion almost demeans the act/behavior, relaying to the doer their action was not significant enough to garnish praise on the spot.

The Impact of Meaningful Recognition

Meaningful recognition is strongly associated with increased job satisfaction and engagement, improved retention and reduced turnover, stronger alignment with transformational and authentic leadership styles, and improved morale. Organizations implementing structured recognition systems aligned with healthy work environment standards demonstrate improved staffing stability and reduced workplace distress.

Actionable Strategies for Nurse Leaders

Prioritize Financial Recognition

Nurse leaders can and should advocate for competitive salaries and retention bonuses, and implement spot bonuses tied to exceptional clinical performance. Time and again, it has been proven to increase patient safety and improve outcomes in units where there is less staff turnover.

Train Leaders in Real-Time Recognition

Immediate specific feedback avoids losing impact from a delay. Daily recognition for excellence should be common (e.g., end-of-shift acknowledgment)

Personalize Approaches

Leadership including management and Charge RNs should conduct routine check-ins to identify individual preferences, and avoid assuming uniform motivators across staff

Replace Tokenism with Support

No pizza tastes as good as being fully staffed. By improving staffing ratios and scheduling flexibility, it communicates to the staff that their work load and time is valued. Leaders must recognize workload realities rather than compensating with symbolic gestures, especially of the “sorry we’re short today but I put out a box of Girl Scout Cookies in the break room” variety.

Develop Multi-Level Recognition Systems

Managers can combine informal (peer-to-peer, verbal) and formal (awards, compensation). It is satisfying to be recognized by a supervisor, but equally so to know your peers acknowledge your good work and effort. This can be something as easy as a bulletin board where staff can write thank you notes or shout outs to each other. There should be accessibility and fairness across all staff roles when implementing this sort of recognition.



Colorado's Peer Health Assistance Program for RNs and LPNs

Encourage nurses to SEEK HELP EARLY

Substance use and mental health concerns impact Nurses at the same rate as the general public.

Created in statute, DORA contracts with Peer Assistance Services to implement statewide services.

The program provides:

- Evaluation
- Support
- Practice Monitoring
- Confidential Assistance
- Resource Referrals
- Mutual Help Groups



Scan the QR code to watch our program video

Contact us:

303-369-0039

Info@PeerAssistanceServices.org
www.PeerHealthCo.com/nurses

Embed Recognition into Organizational Culture

Staff appreciation should be normalized across the entire organization. This should be so embedded into the culture that it is seen as the norm. Organizations must align recognition practices with leadership competencies and integrate recognition into performance management and governance structures

The evidence is clear: nurses value recognition that is authentic, individualized, and materially meaningful. While traditional appreciation efforts persist, they often fail to address the core drivers of nurse satisfaction. For nurse leaders, the path forward requires a shift from symbolic gestures to systemic, evidence-based recognition strategies that affirm both the professional and personal value of nursing work. It is essential for this to become a part of health care cul-

ture if we are to maintain consistently high levels of patient safety and satisfaction, as well as retaining highly skilled nurses.

By aligning recognition practices with what nurses actually want—fair compensation, genuine acknowledgment, and meaningful support—healthcare organizations can foster more sustainable, engaged, and resilient nursing workforces. And in the least pizza party way, thank you for all you do. ■

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