

5Rs for Early Learning Leaders: Providing Meaningful Recognition for Staff

Vanessa Maanao-French: Hello, and welcome to our fifth webinar in the 5R series. So glad that you can join us. Today we're going to be focusing on providing meaningful recognition for your staff. I am joined today by Dr. Gail Joseph. Gail, would you like to say hello?

Gail Joseph: Hello to everyone, so glad to see you all here.

Vanessa: Thanks, Gail. My name is Vanessa Maanao-French, and we're both with the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. Our objectives today are we're going to dive deeper into recognition, the fifth and final R in our series, what it is and why it matters. Then, as always, we packaged up some really practical strategies that you can use today, tomorrow, and forever to build in your recognition practice as part of being a leader, not only with your staff, but also in how you engage with families.

Before I move us on to a quick little activity, I do want to remind us all about what we mean when we say early learning leaders. Typically we think of people with manager or director in their title, but we see early learning leaders much more broadly. If you are supporting teachers to implement their curriculum, if you are a coach, a mentor teacher, home visiting supervisor, a child development specialist working with family child care, you are our audience. We are talking to you, as well as the managers and directors, but we see you as leaders just as importantly. You're in the right place, so I want you to know that.

Next up, a quick reflection. Because we're talking about recognition, we really felt it would be important to start by recognizing you. I wanted to borrow a phrase from Dr. Adolf Brown, who is a noted public speaker on leadership, and he's a Head Start alum. And he uses this phrase, "I am, because of you." I was privileged to be in an audience with him, and when he did this I just cried. I know I am not Dr. Adolf Brown, but I hope to arouse some of that same feeling as you reflect on some of these questions.

We want you to take a moment just to sit back in your chair, relax, and think about your interactions with family child care providers, teachers, home visitors, and how have you in your leadership role built responsive relationships, provided those resources that help them strengthen their practice? How have you engaged in reflective dialogue that really got them curious and wanting to explore their data in new and different ways? Again to deepen that planning part of their work, and then also to reflect back and go, "I did really well in that, I want to celebrate that," which is what we're here to talk about, right? Recognition.

Then finally how have you have connected your team, your families, to the why of Head Start? What the purpose, our core reason, our core values that keep us inspired and committed to do the work in the face of just ... Our landscape, honestly, has been very difficult over the past year and a half. We all know that. We're living that now. How have you connected recently to keep people grounded and inspired to do the work despite that?

As you're thinking about that, I want to tell you, all of you out there listening, because of you, your teams provide high-quality service to children every single day. Because of you, your

teachers, home visitors, family child care providers, they are continuing to strive to do more, to learn more, to be better at what they do. Because of you, the kids, the children, our babies, our toddlers, our preschoolers across communities across the country have opportunity to figure out what it means to be a learner, a thinker, a communicator, and they're preparing for lifelong success. Because of you, Head Start and Early Head Start work. On behalf of Gail and myself, thank you for what you do each and every day. With that, I'm going to pass it over to Gail to give us an overview of our 5Rs.

Gail: You know, and before I start there, let me just thank you, Vanessa. Those three words, "because of you," are really the heart of what we're talking about, right? That is the recognition piece, and I just think if we take away nothing else from this webinar, if we can take away those three words and think about how we use those intentionally with others, we will have been successful. Because of you it's just – it's really critical. We want thank Dr. Brown for those words, and I want to thank you for sharing those today because that really is the heart of this.

Now before we dig deeper into recognition, let's just do a really quick overview of the 5Rs. You may have heard this origin story before. I'm going to try and do it really quick. Every time I like to keep expanding and expanding on it, but I'm not going to because likely people that are here today have heard it in some way, either through one of our previous webinars or regional training, or maybe you were at the Manager Institute, and you heard it as well. But we think it's always a good idea to be grounded in how these 5Rs were developed.

I want to give you a quick overview of how we got here. We started out by really seeking to understand what effective learning leadership looks like within Early Head Start and Head Start, not in K-12 or higher ed or nonprofits or businesses. Really, what does it look like in Early Head Start and Head Start? Our purpose was to explain, what is unique about that? What's unique about effective early learning leaders, and then to identify what are the practical strategies, what are the everyday behaviors that they use? What are the values that guide them? What are the beliefs that they hold firm to that really distinguishes them from other leaders?

Then once we understood that, we also wanted to find out from teachers, everyday leaders, through noted experts, and then also we took a look at some of the instructional leadership frameworks that are out there to really try and see if we couldn't get this down, to distill it down into something that we could all hold onto and hold in our minds. I always think about five things are really easy to remember because we have five fingers and five things to remember. We really got it down to these, what we call the 5Rs. What these 5Rs are, if you haven't heard them before, is that we know that early learning leaders build strong relationships with educational staff, with everyone really in their programs, and use these relationships to build what we would call a unified culture. We're all in this together, a workplace with trust, collaboration, and belonging.

We know that early learning leaders inspire educational staff and families and children to meet program goals and objectives by providing the reason why. What's the reason for the policies and practices, or we think about that really as that powerful why? We know that when we lose our why, we lose our way, so that returning to the why is so important. We know early learning leaders are resourceful. They use their knowledge, their educational staff, and family's expertise, and they really think about how can they provide the resources that educational staff

need to do their jobs well and remembering that that includes the professional development and growth opportunities that we provide. We know early learning leaders engage in reflective dialogue to learn how staff, how children, how families are doing. Who's doing well? Who needs extra support? Who needs extra challenge, et cetera?

Finally early learning leaders create formal and informal opportunities to recognize the very big milestones, the big wins, but also the small everyday wins and really work to encourage the hearts of educational staff. For today's webinar, as we've revealed already, we will be focusing on that fifth R, recognition. And I'm going to send it back to you, Vanessa.

Vanessa: Awesome. Thanks, Gail. Let's get personal. Remember I mentioned that purple Q&A widget? This is the time we would love for you to use it. Let us know about a time when you received, as Gail mentioned, that heartfelt recognition, when you felt seen, heard, valued, acknowledged for your contributions. We would love to know from you, how did it make you feel? You know, how did it make you feel? What was the impact on how you engaged in your work? Tell us how you feel when you get recognized. We'll pause here for a moment to let your responses come in.

Appreciated, yes. Proud. Valued. Oh, I love that. Therefore I work harder. Yeah, it inspires you to move forward, yeah. Acknowledged and appreciated, valued, respected, accomplished, appreciated. Thank you, Cassandra, Jillian, Carla, Lizzie. Thank you, Shannon. They're all coming in very quick. Appreciate what you're sharing with us right now, and keep sharing, please. This is amazing. Oh, Casey, thank you, "Like all of my hard work paid off and was worth the effort. It made me want to continue to do more." Keep them coming. I love it, and it really does reflect what we have heard from the field in terms of how they felt when that recognition comes in.

It is deeply meaningful to them, and you see words that are coming in very similar like the ones on my slide. Important, essential, seen, heard, and understood. Capable. This came through. I think it was just Casey said it, like I was a part of a team. Valued, energized, and part of a bigger mission. If this is how you feel, we want you to hold on to that feeling of how you felt personally and consider, as I'm sure you have already made the connection, that feeling is something that you extend when you provide that recognition to others.

Again, we're not limiting this to staff. I think families also feel that recognition when we acknowledge their contribution to their child's learning, when we see them in parent meetings and say, "I'm so glad you're here. You always say something that makes me think in ways I never thought I would." The recognition matters to everyone. Hold on to those feelings. We're going to dive a little bit deeper.

Leaders who practice recognition acknowledge individual needs, growth, successes, and challenges. I want to really emphasize, and I should have underscored and bolded it, individual, right? We can talk about the team efforts, and that's also very, very important. But what's important here too is being able to see, as we all have mentioned in our comments, to feel valued personally for our work. That means you have to know that person. You see how all of these 5Rs are starting to come together, and now those responsive relationships really come into play when we're talking about recognition.

The recognition matches that person where they're at and feeds their hearts. It's also based on where they're at in their growth. As Gail mentioned too, where they need challenge and push, that's recognition also. You're not going to let me slide because you know I can do more, so you're going to push me a little bit more because you see my potential. Seeing my potential makes me do more, do better, serve my families and my kids in a different way that maybe I didn't think was possible until someone said, "Take one more step and you've gone a little bit further. Now look back and see where you've been, and let's look at that growth together and celebrate." Which is this second one, celebrating the small wins.

The big ones are easy, and we usually do that as a big team, right? Let's all get together. We open the center. Yes, that's great. You reopened the center. And let's celebrate that you did your first home visit, and you were super nervous about it, and you did it. Let's celebrate that small win. It seems small to maybe others, but to you it is a monumental success, so let's celebrate that. Your first time having all of your kids in your classroom, after a year of small classrooms you've gone to nine to 18. Let's celebrate that. To me that's a big win.

I think I'm going to pass ... We're going to move on to this next one, and you'll stop hearing from me and hear from two voices out in the field, Pam and Jessica, who are going to share their stories of recognition, how either they received or provided feedback based on what they knew about their team. As you listen to their stories – because this is not a video; it's just them talking. Don't worry; your screens aren't messing up. It really is just audio. I would love for you to reflect on how this might connect to your own personal practice as a leader, but then also what made the recognition, either given or received, effective? Sound good? All right. This is only 2 minutes, so this is it friends. Let's buckle up and listen close.

[Music begins]

Pam Keenan: I try to be really positive with my staff and I – every day, like, as they're doing things. Like, as soon as I notice something like a little – one of them was throwing a temper tantrum, and this teacher worked the whole time and sat with them. As they're walking away from it, and you can see that they're coming down off of the "Oh, my gosh," I will, you know, go up and say, "You know, I don't know that I could have done that today, so thank you for taking care of him." Or, you know, so thanking them, and, I said as they walk out the door at the end of the day, as they're leaving, I thank them for being in my classroom for that day, and I thank them for what they've done with the children. And I try to acknowledge them in meetings publicly with other staff.

When we're doing shoutouts, I make sure that I shout out about my team regularly. You know, bringing in special little somethings just to say thank you. Just because some people, you know, when you have their little [Inaudible] hollow legs, like they say, or the teachers. Everyone has their own way of accepting praise. Some might like it if you say thank you, while others might like it to get a cheesecake or something. So I always try to figure out how my staff likes to get their praise, and that's how I thank them and help them.

Jessica Doril: Then the director that I have right now actually, she is really big on supporting the staff, so she pays for the coffee that we have here every day. She will randomly go out and buy coffee shop rounds of drinks. She might buy dinner if we have a staff meeting. It's just all these

nice things that she does, which in turn, you know, we have staff who are like, “Oh, I brought a Friday treat for everyone.” It just spreads that happiness to come to work and appreciation of others, just those little things and having that appreciation happen.

[Music ends]

Gail: Got to love it, cheesecake and coffee.

Vanessa: Oh, my gosh, that was the takeaway.

[Cross-talk and laughter]

Vanessa: That was the takeaway. I’ll take a cheesecake any day. In all seriousness, friends, as we were listening to the stories, what do you feel made the recognition, given or received, effective? Again, we’re going to use that purple Q&A widget. Pop your responses in there, and we’re really curious, what were your takeaways? I mean, I’m sure we’ll see lots of coffee and cheesecake in the responses. And if so, you’re in very, very, very good company. “It was amazing to hear that a small token goes a long way.” Yeah, I think this is going to be building into some of the comments that Gail is going to make in a bit, but you’re right on, Lisa. Thank you for sharing that.

Gail: Small, frequent, meaningful, I love that.

Vanessa: It was personal, yes. The leaders paid attention to what the staff enjoyed. Food is always good. Carla, you and I might be best friends, yes. I completely agree. Shannon, yes, you really got that, about finding out what individual staff like, thank you for pulling us back to that slide previous about really individualizing how staff receive their recognition. Yeah, you guys get this. Oh, my gosh. OK, I’m going to – I hope I’m saying this right, Shanel, “Genuine and intentional listening to the staff,” yes, absolutely.

At the heart of everything we do, we are relationship-based, right? Everything we do is in that context, so that starts with listening and learning from a place of humility. I need to learn from you. I don’t know, and I want to do well by you, and that includes how I provide recognition and acknowledge you. Thank you. I think you got all of them. Spreading happiness and appreciation is so vital to our work, especially in this time. When we’re dealing with lots of stresses, these are the things that lift us up. I’m going to pass it over to you, Gail, I think for the next section.

Gail: Yes, absolutely. Of course our wise audience, our participants, have really hit on all of these things that we’re going to say, which is around, you know, leaders who practice recognition. One of the things that they do is respect individual cultures and cultural roots. They really honor educational staff members, children’s uniqueness, by cultivating ongoing discussions that promote an understanding of origins, of home culture, of cultural beliefs and values, that they are also really cautious not to stereotype or make an assumption, that it’s really based in the individual and what that individual might like to receive as recognition and not to make assumptions about what they might want to receive as recognition but also that there’s just a feeling that me and my culture and my family are respected as a staff member.

I remember I had a doctoral student who did this really smart study who was looking at, in Head Start programs, about how staff were feeling about them being recognized and their culture recognized. Staff felt like the program did a great job doing that for families whose

children were enrolled but that staff didn't feel that same way. So how do we shift and make sure that staff see themselves and feel that respect and that honor?

But the other thing that leaders do is they just make sure that each and every person feels seen, feels heard, feels valued, feels a critical part of the big whole, right? That doesn't feel like a cog in the wheel but feels like an essential part of the work that we do so making sure that that happens and making sure that everyone is feeling that their whole selves are being seen, not just the person that comes 9 to 5, not just the person that does job X, but my whole being is here. One of the ways I think that this happens, such a simple way, but one of the ways that we heard in our interviews and that we've seen that leaders do is they start any conversation with, "Hey, how are you?"

I think that it feels so – We feel so rushed a lot. Our work is so important. We've got things to do. But that starting with just, "Hey, how is it going? How are you?" Remembering something personal about that person or their family is so critical to just start with, "Hey, I see you. I know you're here. I want to know what's on your heart and in your head right now, and then let's talk about this other thing that I wanted to talk to you about. But first, how are you?" That is such an easy way to make sure everyone feels seen, heard, valued. We heard in that video about the thank you, about how important that thank you is. Like, just, I know a leader that every day, when the staff are leaving, that no staff member leaves that workplace without hearing, "Thank you. You're awesome."

You know, it just is such a great way to make sure everyone feels seen, heard, and valued, and we saw this, too, in some of the comments, Vanessa, but that idea of just leading with heart, just communicating to educational staff the trust that we have in them, that we understand that this work is challenging. You know, our colleague, Vanessa, Lisa Wilson, she says, "This is hard work, and it's heart work, and that both of those things apply," and that leading with a heart. I think a lot about this question, how does one know they matter, right? When we say, "You matter," how does one know that? Then thinking about, as a leader, how do we make sure that staff feel that they matter, that they know that they matter? That's what leaders do, is they think about, how can I do this in a conversation I have with you? How can I do this in an email I have with you? How can I do this in the way I recognize you? How can I make sure that you know that you matter?

Now, we're going to listen in to a couple of leaders again. I love these video clips that we've captured. We're going to hear from two leaders. Karina and Mike shared their recognition stories. Just like we did with the last time, as you listen, just consider why the recognition that they received is effective. Why do you think it is feeling effective? This is a 3-minute video, so sit back, relax. Let wherever you are hold you while you listen in.

[Video begins]

[Music begins]

Karina Rojas Rodriguez: Pretty much everything we do is really embedded and rooted, and the children know that we have a diverse staff. One of my teachers that has been here for 9 years, she's Somali. All the children whether, you know, you have a hijab or you don't know about the hijab, what it means to have a hijab. That's something that we're always talking about within

our program. Some of the goals that we have is for the children, when they leave our program, we want them to be really rooted within their identity, their culture, and their language. We want them to be proud of who they are.

We want to make sure that, at the beginning of this school year, we all understand our process of where we came from. Are we proud of our culture? Are we proud of our language? Are we proud of our identity? Are we proud of how we identify ourselves? Then that's going to help us lead the way with the children and our teaching and practices. We do a lot of work around that. When we start orientation, and a teacher is more hesitant or reserved to talk about their history of where they come from because, of course, you know, maybe if they're new, they're not going to be as open as I am. I'm an open book. I get in an elevator, and I'll share my whole life story. Not everyone is that way. From that we want to make sure, you know, that everyone has the ability.

One thing that I stand for is that if there is an injustice or something that's not right, I'm very outspoken about it. I do it in a very calm approach, but I'm known for that in this city just because we don't want to stay silent. We don't want to stay silent for any of that stuff. We don't want to stay silent for the children that we have. There is a saying in Mexico that we say that we're not here to damage children, you know. The word doesn't translate the right way. But we're not here to, you know, shoot the breeze and not do what our job is. We're here to really educate the children and set them for the future.

Mike Brown: The three things that really stood out to me in what they did in order to support me is that they made me feel visible, they validated me, and they made me feel valued. Really working in this industry that is predominantly white and then even beforehand working in corporate from my experience, very few times I've been in a position where I felt all those three things. During the course of the time I worked with this people, they worked to really understand my pain. Even when I refused to engage in what I believed was white supremacy at its finest, right, they listened, and they made me feel heard and validated. When others dismissed my thoughts and my feelings, they made me feel seen. They all helped to improve my practice and my work by first and foremost giving me the grace, space, and permission to show up and be unapologetically me.

[Music ends]

[Video ends]

Gail: Unapologetically me, letting me feel unapologetically me, that clearly speaks to a culture established in that program, a leader that really understood what does it mean to matter, and how do I ensure that you feel like you matter here? That idea I think – I love Mike's the three Vs, the visible, validated, and valued. Now we'd love for people to enter into our widgets down there or our Q&A chat, Q&A buttons, what is it that you think made that recognition effective?

We heard two people talk about how leaders made them feel recognized. What made that feel effective? I'm going to just screen through here a little bit. Some people have been commenting on loving that video. I also love that video. I love that so much. Yes, they truly listened to everyone, that they feel they belong and are important. They clearly sent those messages. It was personal. Absolutely. That seems to be a thread running through, right, the personal part of

this. Yes, love that, standing up for injustice, making sure that people felt safe and that meant making sure that people were standing up against injustice happening.

They definitely made it personal, respected individualism, that idea of listening with your heart, that it felt really genuine. I think that's so important. People know when it's not genuine, right, when it's just empty words just like children might know that when we provide empty praise, right? That feeling that genuine, feeling seen, and opening themselves up, listening and said – I just love all these things that are coming in that really all seem to be so key to that making someone feel visible, validated, valued, and I think we can just continue. Just keep thinking about that, that “because of you,” those three words that Vanessa started us with, the three Vs that Mike Brown is providing us with: visible, validated, and valued.

The two words, “You matter.” Thinking about how can you do that in the ways in which you live your life as a leader. How do you do that in everyday conversations? What does that look like in your – What are the pictures on the walls, even? How is your environment, physical environment, sending those messages to you? Now I hate to pivot off of this conversation. We're continuing to get some really great comments in, but let's talk a little bit about why recognition is important, and I think we get it, right?

Recognition is important because it makes you feel valued and visible and validated. But thinking about it from a leader side, why recognition is important, and it really is that idea of how do you create positive workplace attitudes where people feel committed. They feel like – You know, if you asked your staff, “Do you see yourself here in 5 years, in 10 years?” and they say, “Yes.” If you said, “If we needed to stay a little extra time to get this work done, would you?” and they say, “Yes.” Not that you need them to, but it's just that attitude of, “Yes, I am willing to give everything to this mission and this vision that you have that I'm willing to give to this organization.”

We've been hearing so many stories during this really trying time around COVID. We've been hearing so many stories about how staff have gone above and beyond. And clearly that's happening in programs where there is this culture of seeing people, of making sure people feel like they matter, of making sure people feel valued and visible and validated. That's how people are giving this, you know, we sometimes call it the discretionary effort, right?

At the end of the day everyone has a little something left in the tank. Are they willing to give it to the mission and vision of your organization? Not that they need to. We don't want to burn people out, but we just want people to feel like, “Yeah, I would do it.” That comes from a culture of recognition. That's why recognition is important because it really contributes to positive workplace attitudes, which means people are staying longer. You're not having as much staff turnover. There's just this culture of people being in love with the work that they do.

I think people probably feel that intuitively. But just so you know, this is stuff has been validated by research as well, that we know that in organizations that have low turnover, that have that sense of, “I'm going to be here,” you know, “I would recommend this place to others to work,” things like that, that's all been found in the literature as well. Let's talk a little bit about what are some daily practices of meaningful recognition, and we're also hoping that people will be writing in some of the ways in which they do that as well. Here's just a few ideas.

One is to set the expectations high, expect the best, and really pay attention. Sometimes we talk about catching kids being good. This is – It's catching staff members being good and doing this work and living. That sounded not quite right, but it's that idea of, "I expect a lot from you. This is hard work. It's heart work." As our friend Lisa Wilson says, "And I'm going to pay attention, and when you are doing that well, I want to make sure that I recognize you for that." Whether that is a small little win, like if that's a small thing that you did that day, like, "You read that story with such enthusiasm. Children were so engaged," to maybe a bigger thing as well so showing that appreciation. Expect the best. Make sure that what you're asking of your team is really known and apparent, right, so making sure that the expectations are very visible, but then also when people are meeting and exceeding those expectations, there is positive recognition provided.

Now the next one is share recognition with the team and community. I think we might all know that when someone hears something that they've done well in front of others, it means something even more. That's personal too. Some people don't really like that recognition in front of others. But for those who do like to get that recognition in front of everyone, make sure you share that recognition with the team and community. Appreciating staff in front of others can be a real booster. Again, if some people don't like that, it might be a small little Post-it Note that they get instead. But if people do appreciate that kind of recognition, do that a lot. Appreciate people in front of others, and make sure that you are recognizing what it is that they did. It's not just the person, like, "Yay, Vanessa!" but it's, like, "Yay, Vanessa. Oh, my gosh, you put together an incredible webinar that people really enjoyed," right? It's giving that descriptive praise. We're going to talk a little bit more about that too.

The other thing that is really important when you're thinking about sharing recognition is to think about, is everyone getting recognized, right? This is something that we want to be aware of where we might not be providing recognition. Sometimes it's those middle – our middle leaders or those that have been here for a while. They're not quite like the long-term veterans. They're not the new teachers on the block anymore, but they've been here a while. Sometimes it's that group that we kind of forget to recognize, but that's the group that really seems to need a boost, like, that well-timed thank you and that recognition. Maybe it's your colleagues that feel like, "You know what? I feel like you recognize that person and that person, but I don't feel like I ever get recognized."

Just being mindful of who is getting recognition to make sure that you're spreading that around so that everyone is getting recognized. I feel like that's something that – I always feel like, you know, like, social-emotional recognition, I've got that. I literally have written some books on that, but I also realize that sometimes I forget to give that recognition to people that I dearly respect. I think part of that is because I think, "Well, they must know they're awesome because I think they're awesome." So pay attention to who's getting recognition, and just be mindful of that.

The next piece is to personalize recognition. So many of our participants have been writing that in, that it's so important that it is personalized to make sure that you feel that sense of feeling valued and validated and visible is really about how personalized that recognition is, that it's not just a typed-out thank you that just appears on your desk one day or a thank-you email. But

it's a personal piece that really shows that you know that person and that you are also really thinking about what it is that they did that you are recognizing them for.

Some people do little menus, right? How are ways that you would like to be recognized? To find out from their staff, how do you like to be recognized? You know, what if I called your name in front of others? Would that feel good? Would that not feel good? Getting that information and that feedback also can help you to really understand how people might want to be recognized.

Now the last one that we have on there is be creative with recognition, and this is one of my favorite things is to really think about how you can be creative with recognition. Thinking about it just not as a one-time thank you, but are there fun ways that you can give some special awards that can recognize others? You can think about right now. I think everyone think for a moment. Is there a special event coming up? Is there something that's going to happen?

A lot of people are probably thinking about their professional development days right now, or maybe those have already happened, but something is coming up. Is there a time right now that you could think about giving out some special awards to staff? Can you create a Head Start Hall of Fame and induct some people into that Hall of Fame once a year? Ask your team, your leadership team, to brainstorm some ways of recognizing others. I'm sure you will hear really fantastic ways to do that. How can you think about every – you know, a regularly scheduled meeting that you have with others, as a time that you're going to build in some of that recognition?

I worked with an organization once, and we had this plastic red apple that opened up, and you could fill it, and we started passing the apple at every staff meeting. Someone would start – You know, I started passing the apple to someone, and I filled that apple with a certain kind of candy or treat that I knew that that person liked, and then I said, "Next week you recognize someone else." Then that next meeting they passed that on to someone else, so thinking about how can you build that into a regularly scheduled meeting.

Think about, is there a special milestone coming up? Is there, you know – Are you serving the thousandth family in your program this year? I'm thinking of all kinds of ways. Are there special celebration days that you can come up with, right? Some programs – Sometimes holidays are difficult and not always best practice to recognize holidays because those are so culturally bound. But can you create kind of your own programmatic culture and a special day that you recognize? I know, Vanessa, at our center we started doing kind of a New Year's Day celebration, like, as we're celebrating a new year and celebrating what we've done in that past year but also kind of looking ahead to that new year. Can we think of a special day that we're going to recognize others?

Now the next piece is to share meaningful stories. I learned this when I was a teacher, that someone said this to me, and it has never left my brain, and that is, "Never give a naked sticker." The idea is that it is the story that you tell that is so meaningful with recognition. If I just gave you a smiley face sticker, it might perk you up a little bit, but if I gave you a smiley face sticker and said, "You know what? I want to give this to you because every day that you have come in, and this has been such a difficult time, you have always had a smile on your face, and that has just lifted my spirits, and I want to give you a smile."

It's that story, that personal recognition story, that makes it effective. Remember that you always – Never give a naked sticker. Always kind of wrap it with the personal story, and this is where our 5Rs come together, Vanessa, because it's really effective when that story is connected to the why, right, connected to the reason for what we're doing. Connecting that recognition to the reason is very, very important.

The next thing is encouraging that peer recognition. I already talked a little bit about that with the idea of the pass the apple. And here is another idea, which is around inviting others to fill each other's appreciation cups. I love this idea. This is literally – The idea here is literally a cup of gratitude that would appear on someone's desk and that people would then stop by and put little notes in that person's desk about why they're so special and why they're being appreciated.

Then of course the notes can be dumped out and put on display, and then that cup can get given to someone else, and then they would also fill that person's cup as well. Again, I've seen things like pass the apple. In one staff room that I used to work in we had a big piggy bank poster, and just like we've talked about filling children's piggy banks with little deposits of personal recognition every day, in that staff room there was a big piggy bank poster, and people would write on Post-it Notes to fill each other's piggy bank, write notes about just special recognition of each other.

I worked in another early learning center that did this really great thing. It was pass the flag. They actually had a flag made with their center's logo on it. Outside each classroom door there was a flag holder, and they would pass the flag to a different teacher. The flag would be floating outside their classroom that week, and parents and family and children knew. They would get excited when the flag was outside of their teacher's classroom.

I know another leader, this was so great, who started a thing called "Your Name Up In Lights." She took an old Lite Brite. Remember Lite Brites? She would put the teacher's name in lights, and then that was kind of passed around too, so then the next person being recognized the next week, their names would be. The ideas are endless and I'm sure – and I invite people to start writing in some ideas as well.

All of those ideas, of course, are about physically being together. And even when we can't physically be together, we can do these things on Padlet boards, on Jamboards, on Teams Wiki, on Microsoft Office Whiteboard, things like that, so that we can provide that recognition in a virtual space as well. Oh, my goodness. I am talking too long. I'm so excited about this. Then just the last thing is saying thank you and giving a reason.

Again, I just can't emphasize this enough. It is that personal story that you tell that makes it really so effective. It is giving out that very – the personal thank-you note and I think just never underestimating how important a well-timed and genuine thank you can be. Even if it's not a thank-you note, just saying thank you, which I think leads right into what you were going to say, Vanessa, as well so I'm going to turn it over to you.

Vanessa: Thanks, Gail. Yeah, I love that we kind of ended on some images of cups and pass the apple. But let's go back to that cup. I mean, you've heard this before. You have to fill your own cup to be able to share with others. So we wanted to pause for a moment and go back to where

we started, which was thinking about you and recognizing you. And this is hard work. This is heart work. Lisa Wilson, thank you for that quote forever. And so you have to refill your own cup, and one way to do that is by practicing gratitude.

You may already incorporate some of these strategies or others. So if you do, please put them in the Q&A and share them with us because we would love to continue this conversation on MyPeers, right, so we can keep going and sharing these amazing things that you've been giving to us. We want to give back to the broader community.

To be able to practice gratitude you have to make time for it. I know that's tough. I know our lives are busy, and it doesn't have to take a long time, 5 minutes, 10 minutes, your time, your thoughts. If you journal, journal. If you meditate, meditate. If you take a walk around the block, and that does it for you, if it's reading a story to your child, and that makes you feel grounded and have a deep sense of gratitude and maybe even inspired to do the work you do because you're connected with your heart to it, do that. But practice that gratitude of recognizing the need to create space to take care of you.

If you have a gratitude journal, let us know. If you do something totally different, let us know. But it's important to identify what you're grateful for. It creates a different connection to your work, to others, to the community, just by being able to shift in your space. We talk a lot about the context of our work right now and the impact of the pandemic and moving back to fully in-person services for some programs. Others, it's bringing more kids and families into the program. For others, it's been business as usual the whole time, but there are other things outside in the community that are creating stressors. It's really important to create this time for yourself.

Again, when we talk about gratitude you can keep it in, and that's great. That's one step. Step two is putting it out in the universe, right? Practicing that gratitude out loud, that recognition. Make space and time and amplify it because this encourages others to do the same. If you model gratitude, others will follow. If your space embraces gratitude or depicts gratitude – I think, Gail, you mentioned that earlier. Does your environment say, “Hey, we're in that space of recognition, of gratitude, of celebrating our successes, of being aware and validating, valuing others in our community?”

You will see it in this space. You will see, maybe, you can buy a poster that says, “I appreciate you,” in different ways, right, or, “How to practice gratitude.” But maybe it's photos of your team in action. Maybe it's photos of your team celebrating. Maybe it's a family event, and we want to capture that and remember that because that was a special moment, and we're grateful that we had it. Think about how you can amplify by saying it out loud and creating spaces that depict what you feel, so gratitude. I think we're going to – I think you kind of tied this up for us, Gail, but did you want to say more about bringing this all together in terms of the 5Rs?

Gail: You know, I think people probably get it, but we need responsive relationships to know how best to provide that effective recognition. We've heard that over and over again about how personal it is, I mean, how important it is to be personal. That reasons really inspire our educational staff around the mission of supporting children's development and positive

outcomes and that connecting recognition to the reason is really important. That reflective dialogue helps us understand, kind of, are we on the right track here? Who is benefiting, and who might need more support or more challenge?

Then making sure that we have the right resources to build staff's skill and knowledge so that we can – You said something earlier, Vanessa, about, "I'm going to encourage you to take the next step and then look at what you did." I think that's about that kind of reflective dialogue and resources being tied together that then leads into that recognition. Now we want to give people a chance to think about one recognition strategy that you plan to use this week. While we give people an opportunity to write that into the Q&A, I want to just – because I'm so excited about this, about recognition, and I want to drive home the idea that it is not expensive, right? We did hear about coffee and cheesecakes as being something that might [Inaudible]

[Laughter]

Gail: But you can really – I like to think about, you can gild things with your words, right? Never give a naked sticker. You can turn anything into a silly but meaningful recognition, and I just wanted to share – while people are putting their ideas in there – share an idea, right? Have you ever heard of the Magic Tape Award, which is about the way that you keep things together for us, right? It's, like, the Magic Tape Award. You can think about the Magic Bag Award. During a difficult time you held it together for us, and we want to recognize that for you.

What about the Flip-Flop Award? You can find these for not very much money at all. You might wonder why someone would want a Flip-Flop Award, but what if you were recognizing someone for stepping up, right? Now I didn't bring them with me, but what about the Golden Insole Award, right, because you provide comfort and support to others, right? That little shoe – Oh, you can find a light bulb anywhere, but it becomes really meaningful when you talk about the Bright Idea Award and make sure to recognize people for their bright ideas.

Oh, yeah, this one. This is one of my favorites. This is a huge thing of gum. I love gum, but this becomes the MacGyver Award. You know, giving that to someone that always finds a way to fix things with that little bit of gum. It's so important. I think we heard from Mike and Karina the importance of making sure it feels like a safe space, that someone is standing up for injustices, and so I love this idea of the Giraffe Award for people that are upstanders and will stick their neck out for justice so thinking about who is going to get that Giraffe Award. We could go on and on. It just takes a little bit of imagination to turn anything like a rubber band into that Flexibility Award that can be given out at a staff meeting or some type of award recognition. While we were doing that, people probably wrote in some strategies that they are going to use this week. Do you see any that you want to call out, Vanessa?

Vanessa: Oh, individualized greetings and acknowledge what I see. A candy bar with personal appreciation, I am coming to you.

Gail: Yeah, send them our way. I think we should just put our address in there.

Vanessa: Yes, I think people are really taking away the individualizing piece, individual appreciation notes. Even if it's just a small Post-it or, you know, a quick note when you see

someone in Zoom, and you'll private message, "I saw what you did. That was amazing." Or "Thank you for doing that." Those things mean so, so much.

Gail: I love it.

Vanessa: Oh, this one is so good. Thank you, Carla. I'm going to try and stop what I'm doing, as hard as it is to do, and actually look in the eye and take time and listen. Yeah, in the rush of all we do, sometimes the best way to show appreciation is by pausing and just being present. I actually had a teacher that was her goal for an entire year, "I just want to be present with the children." Imagine if we did that as leaders to be present with our teams.

Gail: That's so hard. Easy to say, so hard to do, right? To just stop and be like, "You've got a million things," but how important that is. So great, so great.

Vanessa: I realize we probably have run out of time. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. Gail, I'll give you the final word.

Gail: I'm just going to say thank you to everyone who joined. Thank you to Effie. Thank you to Jen and Heather who have also been helping out with our Q&A. And thank you, Vanessa. Because of you we got to spend an hour talking about recognition, and I really appreciate it and appreciate you.