Recently I’ve been undergoing treatment for cancer, and have had access to a leading oncologist at a world-renowned medical center. At one point during a visit, we discussed how long she’s been practicing her specialty. She said she’s been at the same hospital for more than 40 years. Then I asked what her employers had given her to note that amazing milestone — four decades of saving lives! With a shrug of acceptance rather than indignation, she laughed and showed me a plastic key chain
that had been mailed to her. Clearly, that gift was a classic employer mistake — a trivial attempt at recognition that not only missed the mark but also disappointed rather than inspired.

If even doctors who save hundreds of lives each year are getting plastic key chains, it’s no wonder most workplaces suffer from what I call a “recognition deficit.” This deficit is especially bad for those whose jobs are viewed as more mundane than a highly trained cancer specialist — for people who never gain direct appreciation from customers, clients, or others who can recognize a job well done even if an employer doesn’t.

We need to recognize the tremendous value people bring to their work, regardless of their role in the organization. Recognition isn’t just about implementing employee programs to check them off a list; it’s about bringing out the best in people and improving your company’s bottom line.

According to a survey recently commissioned for my new company OGO (O Great One!), 82% of employed Americans don’t feel that their supervisors recognize them enough for their contributions. That lack of recognition takes a terrible toll on morale, productivity, and, ultimately, profitability. Another key finding: 40% of employed Americans say they’d put more energy into their work if they were recognized more often.

The good news: It’s both simple and inexpensive for leaders to solve the recognition deficit in their organizations. Here are some of the key strategies that worked well when I had the privilege of leading Yum! Brands as we built a recognition culture across more than 125 countries. Despite cultural differences around the world, these practices had universal appeal.

• Keep in mind that the overwhelming majority of people aren’t simply motivated by a paycheck. They want to work hard and contribute and be noticed and respected for their efforts. If you truly appreciate them in your mind and heart, your attitude will come through naturally in what you say and do.

• Show respect by sharing as much information as possible. Sam Walton summarized this better than I can: “The more they know, the more they’ll understand. The more they understand, the more they’ll care. Once they care, there’s no stopping them. If you don’t trust your associates to know what’s going on, they’ll know you really don’t consider them partners.”

• Ask lots of questions — not simply to your direct reports, but to as many frontline people as possible. One question I loved to ask is, “What would you do if you had my job?” Maybe the response will be a useful suggestion, in which case you should acknowledge it and implement it if possible, to prove that these conversations aren’t just for show. Even if you don’t get any great ideas, such discussions can still have a huge impact, as long as your staff sees that you really thought about their suggestions.

• Celebrate first downs, not just touchdowns. Publicly recognizing and rewarding small wins keeps everyone motivated over the long haul. Don’t be the Negative Nelly who says, “Well, it’s great that you just closed that new sale, but we’re still $5 million behind budget this year!”

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• Make recognition as fun as possible. Take your business seriously, but don’t take yourself too seriously. Over the years I’ve given out rubber chickens and plastic chattering teeth to recognize exceptional contributions. Which do you think people are more likely to display and tell their friends about — a rubber chicken or a fancy pen?

• Make it personal. Another interesting point from the OGO research: 76% of people save handwritten thank you notes. A customized, thoughtful gift will have a bigger impact than something mass-produced, regardless of the price tag.

• Make it timely. Don’t wait for monthly meetings or annual performance reviews. The OGO survey respondents reported an average of 50 days since they last felt recognized in any way at work. That’s way too long. Good things are happening all around you; notice them and seize any opportunity to acknowledge them.

• Finally, remember recognition is a privilege, not just another item on your to-do list. As a leader you have the privilege of feeding people’s souls and helping them feel great about themselves. And by feeding their souls, you’ll feed yours in return.

My vision is a world where every leader understands that recognition is too important to leave to the HR department — and where no oncologist will ever have to settle for a plastic key chain.

David Novak is the co-founder and retired Chairman and CEO of Yum! Brands and the founder of OGO (O Great One!), a brand dedicated to helping people through the power of recognition. His latest book is O GREAT ONE! A Little Story About the Awesome Power of Recognition.