



# 5 Culture Trends for 2026



**Workplaces are constantly shifting, but organizations that stay ahead of the trends and adjust can create cultures where employees are inspired and thrive. See what's coming for 2026 (based on new research by the O.C. Tanner Institute), and how you can prepare.**

# Culture Trend #1: Teams, not just leaders, inspire

Discussions about creating great workplace cultures typically [focus on leadership](#). But the latest research shows that while leaders play a pivotal role in helping employees thrive, they [can't do it alone](#).

Research from the O.C. Tanner Global Culture Report reveals strong teams have a greater impact on inspiring employees, building belonging, and fostering wellbeing. In fact, conversations with coworkers are the [top source of inspiration](#) for employees, and 68% of employees have at least one coworker who inspires them at work.

## Top Sources of Employee Inspiration

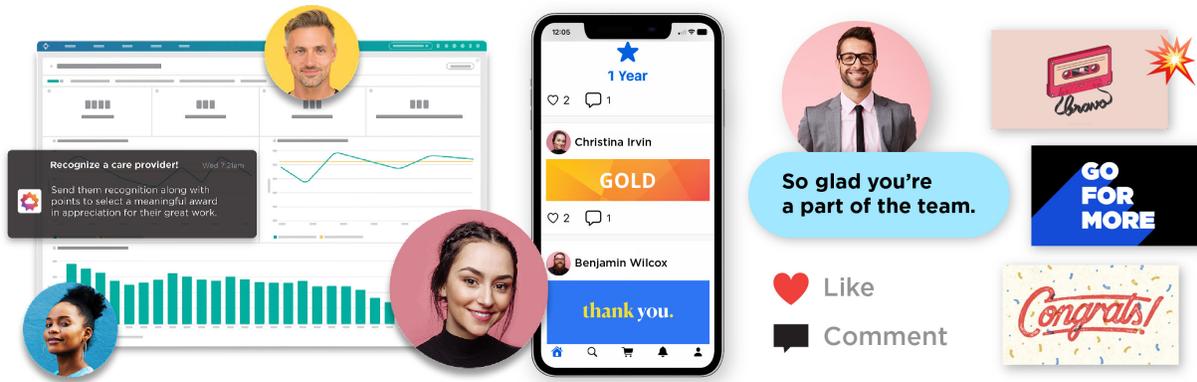
SOURCE	PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYEES WHO REGULARLY LOOK TO SOURCE FOR INSPIRATION
Conversations with one or more coworkers	54%
Conversations with leader	47%
Team or group discussions at work	39%
A conversation or communication from one or more senior leaders	34%
A book	32%

2026 GLOBAL CULTURE REPORT

Workplaces with strong, supportive teams [report the highest satisfaction and mental health outcomes](#), as well as high levels of [belonging and inclusion](#). Inspiring teams lead to [higher engagement](#), retention, and eNPS scores.

### What organizations can do: Prioritize building strong teams

- Give employees time, opportunity, and resources to [connect with one another](#)
- Encourage employees to share ideas, set goals, and [take risks together](#)
- Have tools for [peer-to-peer recognition](#) to build appreciation and belonging



## Culture Trend #2: In the age of AI, human connection matters more than ever

AI has proliferated in the workplace, including in culture initiatives. But 63% of employees [fear AI will make their experiences less personal](#).

### What Employees Want During Recognition Moments:

**75%**

**TIME TO THANK OTHERS FOR THEIR HELP OR SUPPORT**

**74%**

**A PERSONALIZED MESSAGE OF APPRECIATION**

**69%**

**A CELEBRATION WITH OTHERS BEING RECOGNIZED**

**66%**

**A CUSTOM OR PERSONALIZED AWARD**

**65%**

**TIME TO SOCIALIZE AFTER THE RECOGNITION MOMENT**

SOURCE: [STATE OF EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION](#), O.C. TANNER INSTITUTE

The more systems and processes become automated, the more employees want to feel seen by other humans in the workplace. We found 70% of employees believe it's important to use AI responsibly in a recognition program, and 45%

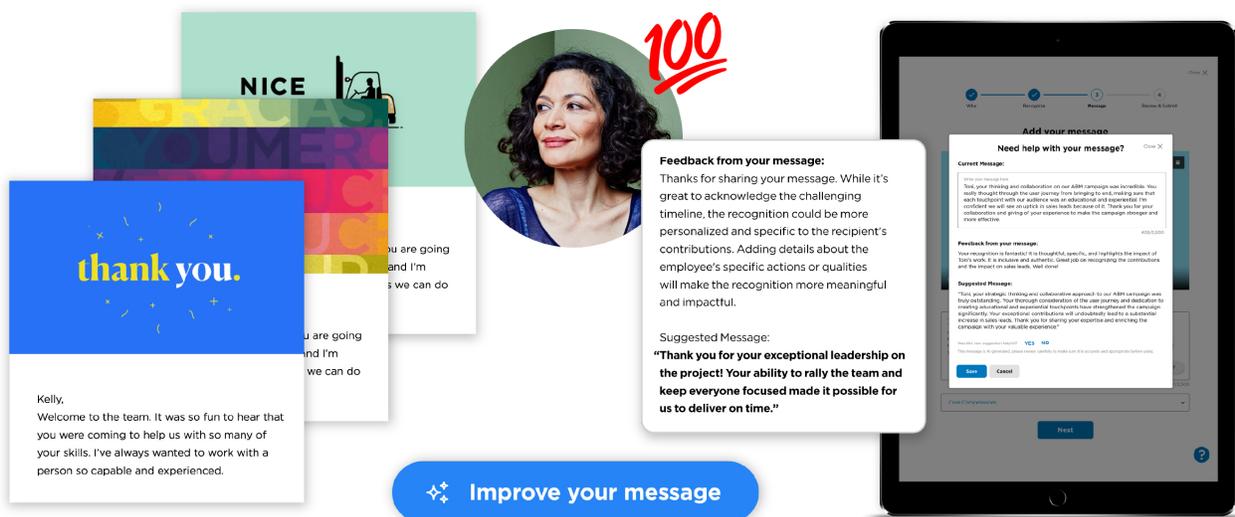
have used AI tools to help write recognition messages. While employees don't want to completely eliminate AI from their experiences at work, there must be a balance between AI and human connection. Companies should create meaningful, personal recognition moments for their people.

**“I’ve got to admit, if I sniffed out AI on a congratulatory note, that would probably be a big turn off. If, all of a sudden, the message said ‘Mr. Jones, we greatly recognize your dedication’, then I know it’s not my boss doing that.”**

**—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT**

### What organizations can do: Use AI responsibly in culture initiatives

- Use [AI-supported tools](#) that support, not replace, personal messages
- Train leaders and peers to create meaningful, in-person recognition moments
- Include peers, leaders, and family in recognition



## Culture Trend #3: When improving culture, process over programs

To be successful, culture initiatives must be more than just an HR program or shiny new piece of technology—they must be fully integrated into your organization’s culture, including your expectations, processes, and practices.

[Harvard Business Review](#) found that 72% of culture initiatives led to no improvements as employees felt they were superficial, and 57% of employees felt worse after a culture-building perk was launched, viewing the perks as a band-aid for deeper challenges. By contrast, when senior leaders changed their behaviors and ways of working, despite not having a formal program for it, trust scores rose 26%.

[Truly integrated solutions](#) are built into the daily employee experience—the interactions, processes, and practices employees encounter each day. They include the support of senior leaders, role-modeling, and measurement, and naturally become part of the company’s DNA. When this happens, employees are 18x more likely to say the workplace has [a healthy performance culture](#) with high expectations and high support and 10X more likely to say their team [is inclusive](#).



## What organizations can do: Treat culture initiatives like any major company initiative, starting at the top

- Senior leaders should communicate and model changes
- Build practices into your daily processes, company expectations, leadership development, formal decision-making procedures, and teambuilding activities
- Empower employees to use new tools and hold leaders accountable—and [recognize them](#)—for changing their practices

## Culture Trend #4: Prove the ROI of culture efforts

Organizations are looking to measure the impact of culture-building initiatives on business outcomes like engagement, innovation, efficiency, customer service, revenue, etc.

For example, one [multinational energy company](#) was able to show a direct relationship between employee recognition and attrition, down to the difference between recognizing once a quarter versus once a month. [Amazon Web Services](#) found improvements in the likelihood of employee retention (59%), innovation (3%), and career growth (64% increase in advancement) from their recognition efforts. And healthcare organization [Wellstar](#) improved their new collection ratio by 1% and reduced aged insurance accounts receivable balances by \$13 million in just one month.



In times of uncertainty, when resources are at stake and companies are pulling back on employee experience programs, you'll want a strong business case to [prove the ROI](#) of your workplace culture efforts.

### **What organizations can do: Connect culture initiatives to business outcomes that matter**

- Define [success metrics](#) for your culture-building initiatives and gather baselines
- Hold leaders accountable for improving metrics
- Solicit employee feedback and create leader action plans to address it

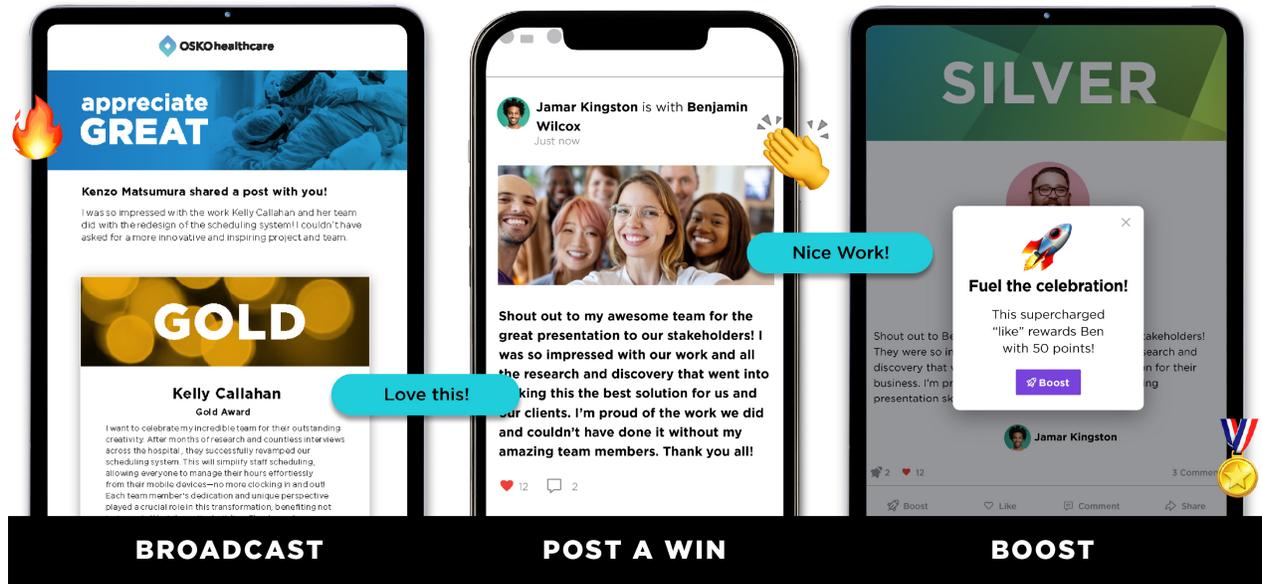
**Need help measuring the ROI of your recognition efforts? [See how](#) the O.C. Tanner Institute can help.**

## **Culture Trend #5: Sharing recognition builds belonging and community**

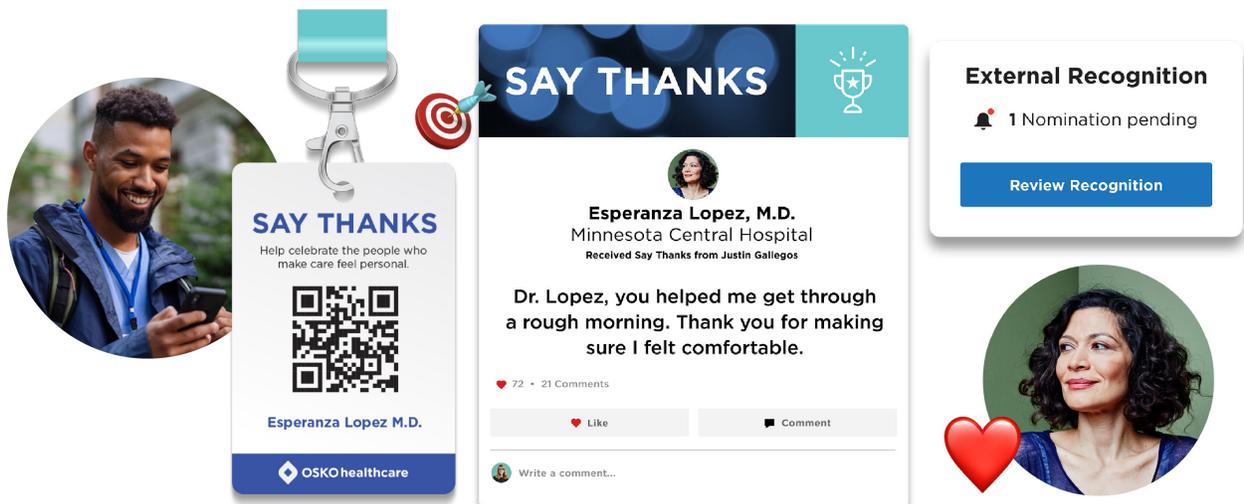
Employee recognition impacts not just the giver and receiver, but everyone who observes that recognition experience.

Research shows 65% of employees [feel inspired](#) when they hear about the accomplishments of others, and employees are 2x as likely to try something new when they observe recognition. Teams are also [11x more likely to be inclusive](#) when employees frequently share in recognition moments.

Tools like [Post a Win](#) (where any employee can share another's recognition), Boost (leaders and peers can add extra points to recognition), and Broadcast (leaders can share recognition outside the platform), in Culture Cloud® all build meaningful connections across every level of the organization.



Including customers in employee recognition expands employees' sense of community and their connection to purpose. In fact, those who regularly hear positive customer feedback are [2.3x more likely](#) to say their work has purpose. Tools like [Say Thanks](#) allow customers, patients, and clients to thank frontline employees, making their great work visible across the organization and building appreciation for those who [often feel neglected](#) in recognition efforts.



## What organizations can do: Share the joy of recognition across the organization

- Provide [recognition tools](#) that make it easy to highlight employee contributions
- Empower leaders and peers to add to recognition through comments, points, or resharing
- Include customer feedback in recognition efforts

**“When you recognize people for the great work they’re doing and the impact they have, they feel good about being part of the organization. And when people feel good and feel connected to the organization, they stay. You can have lofty goals around belonging, but it’s the people you work with day to day that make you feel like you belong.”**

—PEGGY ESSERT, MANAGER OF HUMAN RESOURCES, ST. ELIZABETH HEALTHCARE

Want to create an inspiring, thriving workplace culture in 2026? See how O.C. Tanner [can help](#).



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