Prosocial Behavior in the Workplace

Silvia Castro[*], Hoa Ho[†], Maren Mickeler[§§]

September 19, 2024

Abstract

Prosocial behavior in the workplace comes with a range of benefits. Yet, organizations struggle to stimulate it effectively since it is neither easily contractible, nor verifiable. We present new evidence on the effectiveness of public recognition as a management tool to increase prosocial behavior and offer insights into the mechanisms driving such behavior at the workplace environment. Running an RCT with a large African bank, we show that awards increase the number of people engaging in prosocial activity and that career concerns and professional reputation are the underlying mechanisms. This study underscores the powerful roles of public recognition and visibility in cultivating a supportive organizational culture.

[*]Department of Economics, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Germany

[†]Department of Accounting, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Germany

[‡]Department of Management, ESSEC Business School, Cergy, France

[§]We would like to thank Fabian Kasi, Solomy Luyombo, Charles Kabande, Sebastian Mulindwa, Fred Akena, and Nelson Luvule for hosting this project. We thank Martina Sanin for her excellent research assistance and project management and Florian Englmaier and Karen Bernhardt-Walther for their feedback. We gratefully acknowledge funding from the German Research Foundation through CRC TRR 190 (project number B05) and through TRR 266 (Project-ID 403041268), from ESSEC, from Joachim Herz Foundation, and Hans Riegel Foundation. This experiment was pre-registered as AEARCTR-0012191 and received ethics approval from the Ethics Review Board of ESSEC and Makerere University.

1 Introduction

Firms benefit from employees helping each other. In particular, in knowledge industries, many processes rely on voluntary cooperation, such as knowledge sharing or informal mentorship. For instance, when more experienced workers provide guidance or share task-specific skills with less knowledgeable colleagues, it accelerates the learning process and reduces inefficiencies across the organization (Sandvik et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2003). This type of support improves task execution, as individuals can leverage each other's expertise to overcome challenges that would be difficult to address alone. Tapping into the collective knowledge and capabilities of multiple individuals is one of the core functions of organizations.

Yet, fostering such assistance is difficult in practice. Meaningful support to colleagues cannot be easily written into contracts or tracked by management, making it hard to include in job descriptions or performance reviews. As a result, firms often focus on incentivizing individual performance. However, when both effort dimensions—individual performance and helping behavior—are considered substitutes in an agent's cost function, as in a multi-tasking environment (Holmstrom & Milgrom, 1991), individual incentives may inadvertently discourage employees from helping each other. Moreover, the workplace is a complex environment where employees are often motivated by competing factors, such as career advancement (Auriol et al., 2002), professional reputation (Exley, 2018; Heursen et al., 2023), and formal power structures within the organization. These competing incentives can suppress naturally supportive behaviors or shift focus away from collaborative efforts toward individual achievements.

Empirical research on the drivers of supportive behaviors has faced several methodological challenges. Observational approaches are tricky due to issues like omitted variables and selection bias—employees most likely to help others may be more altruistically motivated or have a lower marginal cost of helping, which complicates establishing causality. Additionally, they often self-select into organizations that promote such behaviors (Deserranno, 2019; Ashraf et al., 2020). Second, experimental studies have a hard time measuring prosocial behavior accurately. Self-reported helpfulness is unreliable since employees may exaggerate their contributions and management may fail to fully observe the supervisees' efforts. Capturing the full range of helping behavior requires not only individual self-assessments but also peer evaluations across the workplace network. So far, no research has fully solved the challenge of systematically measuring supportive behavior in large, real-world organizational settings.

In this paper, we present results from a field experiment that addresses these challenges. Partnering with a large financial corporation in East Africa, we collected detailed peer assessments of helpfulness from over 1,200 employees across 78 branches. Using a novel scoring rule, we measured prosocial behavior in a way that reflects the complex interpersonal dynamics of

the workplace. Additionally, we introduced an exogenous incentive — public recognition — for the top 20% of supportive employees in randomly selected branches. This experimental design allows us to clearly identify the effects of incentives on employee knowledge-sharing behaviors. Finally, we disentangle the underlying mechanisms by varying the organizational layer involved, using a 2x3 design. We measure employees' willingness to engage in tasks that benefit their peers, with variations in who is aware of their participation: top management, peers, or the employee themselves.

Our results show that managerial public incentives alone are not effective in stimulating prosocial behavior. This is surprising given the evidence on the effectiveness of awards and recognition outside the realms of organizations (Gallus & Frey, 2017). However, they become effective when combined with corporate mechanisms. Public recognition incentives change employees' behavior when such behavior is potentially observed by peers or by top management. When employees' supportive behavior is visible to other employees in the same branch, participation increases by 8 percentage points (18%). This is consistent with a professional reputation mechanism. When observed by management, participation increases by 14 percentage points (30%), further confirming the importance of a professional reputation channel.

The study began in November 2023 with the identification of the most supportive employees through peer voting and a baseline survey that measure workplace climate and leadership. Using the metrics from the survey and productivity data, we pairwise matched branches and randomly assigned them to either the treatment or control group, following an RCT design. In February 2024, awards were distributed to the most supportive in the treated branches in a public ceremony. Two months later, employees are asked to engage in real helping tasks, such as providing feedback on productivity strategies or signing up for volunteering opportunities within the organization. We exogenously vary the knowledge of who will be aware of the employee's participation in these tasks: top management, peers in the same work center, or only the employee. In May 2024, we conducted another round of awards to assess mid-term effects, following the same structure as the first round with and final survey in August 2024. This approach allows us to evaluate the mid-term effects of the intervention. Our main outcomes are the sign-up rates and the time volunteered at two points in time within this 2x3 design. Additionally, we collected self-reported prosocial behavior metrics and administrative productivity data provided by the firm [1].

Our results show that the average willingness to help is 43%. This figure does not increase with the award if the helping behavior is only known by the employee. Helping behavior increases in the short term only when it serves as a signal to peers to show that the employees is someone that invests in helping others. Notably, a second survey indicates that the increased

[1]The results from the administrative data are not part of this preliminary draft, they will be added after October 2024

collaboration persists after the second round of awards. Six months after the first award, helping behavior in the treated branches remains higher than in the control branches.

We contribute to three literature strands. First, our paper examines whether and how symbolic public recognition promotes employee effort to support their peers, and thus it relates to the literature on prosocial behavior in economics and organizational citizenship behavior in management. Prior work has investigated various types of non-monetary incentives that foster good citizenship behavior. Such incentives can range from identity, mission motivation, and social pressure and norms (see, e.g., reviews by Bursztyn & Jensen, 2017; Ashraf & Bandiera, 2018; Besley & Ghatak, 2018). Our paper examines the effectiveness of symbolic recognition and relatedly speaks to the findings of Goette & Tripodi (2024), which illustrate the complexities of social recognition in incentivizing prosocial behavior. Their research highlights that socially recognized contributions, such as blood donations, may signal not only altruism but also image-seeking motives, thus diluting the intended social recognition impact. Moreover, while monetary incentives are commonly used to align individual goals with collective outcomes, recent studies suggest that these monetary incentives can sometimes undermine their primary objectives (Ashraf et al., 2020; Alfitian et al., 2023). This is particularly evident in the realm of prosocial behaviors at the workplace, where monetary rewards can paradoxically impede the support for others (Gneezy et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2020; Bauer et al., 2021). Building on this, our research focuses on prosocial behavior *within* organizations, further enriching our understanding of how symbolic recognition fosters such behavior and affects the broader organizational culture.

Our work directly links to the existing literature on awards as influential social signals (Gallus & Frey, 2017; Gallus et al., 2023). Recent studies have shown that awards help improve employee productivity by conferring public recognition and enhancing social visibility (Ager et al., 2022; Fracchia et al., 2023). Our research extends the findings of Gallus et al. (2021), who show that managerial recognition plays a significant role in shaping employee behavior, and Deversi et al. (2020), who suggest that sustained levels of prosocial behavior within firms relate to non-monetary rewards. We broaden this scope by analyzing the amplifying impact of awards and public recognition on non-awarded employees' prosocial behavior. We document a positive spillover effect of managerial recognition, thus contributing new insights into the complex dynamics of public recognition in workplace environments.

Lastly, our research contributes to the literature on organizational culture and knowledge sharing within firms. It highlights the pivotal role of leadership in shaping the social culture of the workplace, as documented by Blader et al. (2020); Hoffman & Tadelis (2021). At the core of this cultural framework is the quality of social interactions among colleagues, a factor extensively explored in recent studies (Kahn et al., 2018; Sandvik et al., 2020; Friebel et al., 2023; Alan et al., 2023). Our findings reveal distinct effects of peer recognition versus managerial recognition, underscoring the importance of these mechanisms in crafting effec-

tive managerial programs. This distinction is critical for understanding how different forms of recognition can influence the overall organizational culture and employee interactions of sharing their knowledge within an organization.

2 Experimental Design

2.1 Setting and Sample

Our field experiment was conducted with one of the largest financial institutions in East Africa. We worked with their largest division which operates in Uganda. In 2023, this organization employed over 2,000 individuals across various sectors of commercial banking and serves over 2.5 million customers, with an asset of 6.3 trillion UGX (about 1.6 billion USD at the time of writing).

The organization operates across the country through branches. A branch is structured into four hierarchical levels. At the top is the *branch manager*, who oversees both the credit and banking sections of the branch and reports directly to the head office. There is only one branch manager per branch. Branches with more than 8-10 employees additionally have a *manager of business banking*, who is responsible for the credit section and reports to the branch manager. The next level includes the *business administrators*, who are supervisors of teams of 5-6 bankers. The bankers, who constitute our study sample, are the lowest in this hierarchy and they are referred to as *personal bankers* and *business bankers*. The bank employs approximately 1,000 bankers, 200 supervisors, 60 managers of business banking, and 80 branch managers.

In a branch, the branch manager and the manager of business banking constitute the management team. The branch manager oversees the operations of their branch, while the manager of business banking focuses on the performance of the credit section. Both branch managers and managers of business banking do not handle clients themselves. Instead, their responsibilities include coordinating the work of bankers assigned to the branch, supervising and providing guidance to bankers to meet their performance targets. The managers' incentives are tied to the aggregate performance across all employees under their supervision in a branch.

At the lower level of the hierarchy, the business administrators and bankers are the main field staff responsible for all client-facing work. Business administrators are promoted from the ranks of bankers after at least five years of experience and if they demonstrate high productivity. Both roles involve multiple tasks in their daily work, and they often travel from the branch to clients' locations to provide services through face-to-face interactions. Within the bank's operational framework, a banker's salary is directly tied to individual productivity metrics. This compensation model incentivizes bankers to prioritize increasing their productivity to achieve higher salaries but does not promote prosocial behavior within a branch. Among their duties, the principal tasks are disbursing new loans, and recovering and depositing the installments from their current borrowers. Approximately 60% of a banker's salary depends on this variable, specifically the number of loans disbursed in the current

month. Each officer has a target of 20 loans per month.

The bank operates 80 branches across the country, of which 78 participated in our study.[2] We include all bankers in these 78 branches in our sample. Branches have on average 13 bankers. As of November of 2023, the bankers have been on average for around 5 years at the organization and at the particular branch for 2.38 years, 39% are female. Table 1 presents summary statistics of our sample.

Table 1: Sample Descriptive Statistics and Balance

	(1) Treatment	(2) Control	(3) Difference
Demographics			
Female	0.38	0.40	-0.02
	(0.49)	(0.49)	(0.03)
Tenure in firm	2.32	2.46	-0.14
	(2.16)	(2.69)	(0.15)
Tenure in organization	4.95	5.35	-0.40*
	(3.69)	(3.54)	(0.23)
Survey metrics at baseline (0-100)			
Career clarity	72.94	70.98	1.96
	(22.69)	(23.91)	(1.35)
Trust in management	69.28	66.77	2.51
	(26.18)	(24.87)	(1.61)
Recognition by management	57.90	55.59	2.31
	(28.19)	(28.56)	(1.79)
Recognition by head office	51.52	49.94	1.58
	(29.56)	(29.93)	(1.87)
Own support to organization	71.80	70.81	0.99
	(24.80)	(24.24)	(1.54)
Own support to colleagues	86.00	83.99	2.01*
	(17.11)	(17.12)	(1.08)
Colleague support to organization	59.79	58.73	1.06
	(27.88)	(28.08)	(1.76)
Colleague support to others	74.43	73.52	0.91
	(23.65)	(23.12)	(1.47)
Observations	471	544	

Notes. Summary statistics at baseline. For columns (1) and (2) the standard deviation is reported in parentheses. Column (3) reports the differences between the treatment and control group showing the coefficient of a simple regression of the variable on a treatment group dummy with robust standard errors. The variable *gender* is a ratio of female to male. The variables *tenure in branch, tenure in organization* are in years. The survey metrics are the answers to the baseline levels of the survey, answers range from 0 to 100, with being 100 the highest level of agreement. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

[2]Two branches were excluded: one is located within a university campus, presenting unique operational characteristics, and the other was established after the study commenced.

2.2 Experimental Timeline

We collect data from all employees in our sample branches in three surveys, which are referred to as baseline, midline, and endline surveys.Figure 1 presents a timeline and an overview of our surveys and treatments.

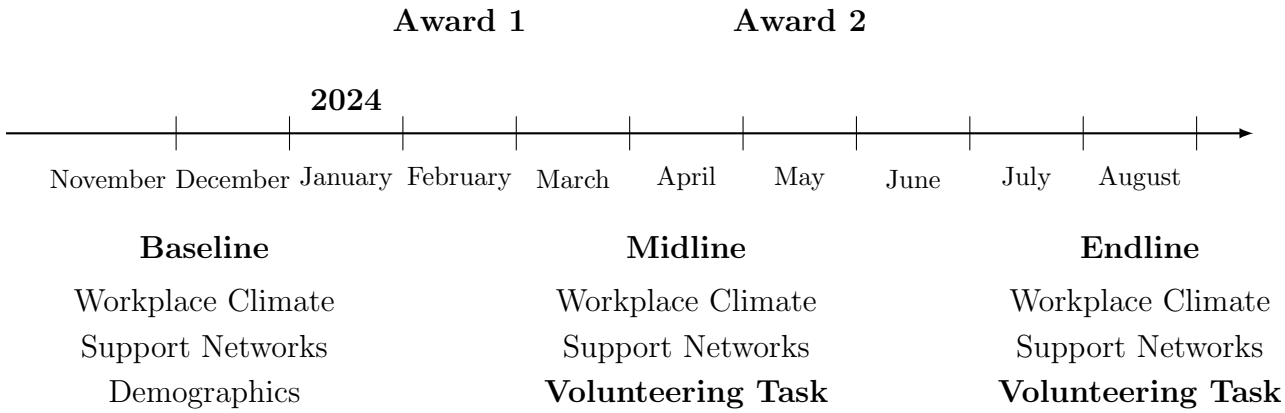


Figure 1: Timeline

The baseline survey was conducted between in the month of November 2023. In this survey, we ask all employees about their perceptions of workplace climate at their branch, including work engagement, turnover intentions, work-life balance, promotion, and work advancement clarity. In addition, we ask about the prevalence of pro-social behavior among bankers (e.g., assisting others when they face challenges, attending events that are not mandatory but promote organization's image, and considering how their actions might affect others). Furthermore, we ask business administrators to evaluate their direct subordinates' engagement in pro-social behavior from a scale of 0 (very rarely) to 100 (very frequently). These questions provide us a baseline level of pro-social behavior at the branches.

In the second part of the baseline survey, we solicit each banker's support network. First, we ask if the bankers receive professional or personal support from the other bankers at their branch. If the answer is yes, we ask the bankers to indicate the names of all their colleagues that frequently support them. Second, if more of one colleague has been selected as supportive, we ask each banker to indicate the one most supportive among the rest. We will use this question together with the supervisor evaluation to create a scoring to rank the supportiveness of each employee. Lastly, we ask the bankers to evaluate their management team and supervisors and to assess the extent to which the management team fosters cooperation, cultivates trust, and recognizes workplace behavior. At the end of the survey, we collect demographics information of all employees: age, risk attitude, languages, and tenure.

In April 2024 and August 2024, we conducted the midline and endline surveys, respectively. These surveys included metrics on workplace climate as in the baseline, as well as

additional measures to assess employees' helping behavior through real-effort volunteer tasks. Detailed descriptions of these tasks can be found in Section 2.4 and will be our main outcome variables.

The survey data were collected via Qualtrics. The selected branches and all their employees received an email from the General Manager of Human Resources informing them about the surveys and encouraging their participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants could complete the survey on their work computers or on their phones. To ensure employee privacy, it was explicitly stated that individual-level responses would not be disclosed to managers, with only aggregated results being communicated to the headquarter. The bank regularly conducts surveys among its staff, hence this survey was not perceived as something new. Participants received 10,000 UGX (approximately 2.5 USD) in phone credit for participating in the surveys, which lasted on average 15-25 minutes.

As we have a limited number of branches, we apply the matched-pair cluster randomization (MPCR) to improve covariate balance and increase the efficiency and power of our causal effect estimation. Branches were assigned to a pair match following MPCR, with the defining clusters being the branches where our units of interest (i.e. the employees) work. In particular, we implement an "optimal greedy algorithm" first described in King et al. (2007) and implemented by Bruhn & McKenzie (2009).[3] To match pairs, we used information obtained from both the administrative data, as well as the baseline survey data on workplace climate. More specifically, we match branch-pairs based on the following branch covariates: branch productivity (variance in repayment percentage, dispersion volume), branch size, the share of business bankers, gender composition, employee perception on how much their workplace behavior is recognized by management, and employee perception on how much colleagues help each other. We test whether employees' characteristics and perceptions are balanced across treatment arms. Table 1 shows that there are no significant differences in employee characteristics and workplace perceptions between those who are assigned to the treatment and those who are in the control (Column 3).

2.3 Treatment Intervention: Most Supportive Employee Award

We examine the effects of unannounced, public recognition of employee supportive behavior on their willingness to spend time sharing their own experience and knowledge as a proxy for prosocial behavior at the workplace.[4] In our setting, prosocial behavior at workplace falls outside of the incentive scheme of firms as these discretionary behaviors are often formally

[3]The algorithm forms pairs in such a way as to minimize the Mahalanobis distance between the values of all pre-selected covariates within pairs. Subsequently, one unit in each pair is randomly assigned to treatment and the other to control.

[4]Following the terminology of Bénabou & Tirole (2003, p. 504), unannounced, public recognition corresponds to "discretionary" or "ex post" rewards, as opposed to "promised" or "ex ante" contingent incentives (e.g., innovation prizes).

non-contractible. Due to their specific nature and the compensation system in place, such supportive behaviors commonly go unseen and remain in the realm of *non-promotable tasks*.

Our intervention introduces a symbolic managerial recognition on employee supportive behavior - a certificate of recognition awarded by management. We randomize branches and select them into two groups: *Award* (Treated), and *No Award* (Control). In the treated branch "Award" we roll out an award program "Most Supportive Employee" that aims to symbolically recognize the most supportive employees in the branch. In the control branch "No award," the employees will continue working as usual and do not get informed about the award program.

Our pre-registered intervention takes place in the first two weeks of February 2024 in the treatment branches. The certificates publicly recognize the most supportive employees in a branch. The certificates are signed by the Managing Director of the bank and the General Manager of Human Resources. To ensure the public nature of recognition, these certificates are handed to employees by their respective branch managers in an award ceremony, in which all employees of the branch are present and the branch managers highlight the values of supportive behavior in their branch and how the winners of these awards have personally contribute to the supportive culture. All together, the certificates send a signal from the management of the organization, underscoring the values and importance of employee prosocial behaviors.

We award the top 20% of the employees in the credit team in our treatment branches. By keeping a constant proportion of winners across branches, we seek to ensure heterogeneous intensity of the intervention across branches of different size. To select the winners of the awards, we combine both peers' and supervisors' ratings on each employee's prosocial behaviors at the workplace.

We ask supervisors to rate on a scale from 0 (very rarely) to 100 (very frequently) how often each employee under their direct supervision engage in prosocial activities at work. For the peer rating we rely on two survey questions. First, we access information on employees' support network by asking the following question: "From which credit officers (in your team) do you receive frequent personal or professional help?". Employees can select from a list of colleagues in their credit team (multiple selection is allowed). Second, we use information on employees' most supportive colleague. From the list of names selected in the support network, we ask employees to select a single colleague who they think is most supportive and always ready to help in the branch.

After obtaining both supervisor and peer ratings, we calculate an overall supportive score for each employee. We first normalize supervisor ratings between 0 and 1 by dividing them by 100. We then normalize both peer ratings for each employee by dividing the absolute number of times an employee has been mentioned helpful (support network question) and the absolute number of times and employee has been mentioned most supportive (most

supportive question), respectively, to the total number of colleagues in the credit team in each branch. The peer ratings represent the percentage of colleagues in a branch who rate that an employee is supportive. We equally weigh supervisors' and peers' ratings for the overall supportive score.

2.4 Outcome Variables

This paper seeks to understand drivers of helping behavior in the workplace. We proxy this by incorporating into the survey volunteering tasks that are common and necessary for the organization at the time of this research project. These outcome variables are elicited in the midline and endline surveys, allowing us to assess the effectiveness of the award program in influencing employees' willingness to help their peers.

Willingness to Invest Time Sharing Knowldege with Peers

To capture willingness to help in the midline survey, we offer the option to employees' willingness to invest their valuable time in sharing knowledge with their colleagues. Specifically, we present employees with a choice: after answering all questions in the main part of our midline survey they can opt either to conclude their participation or to continue to contribute additional information that could benefit others. Opting to continue and provide further insights can be interpreted as a positive inclination towards contributing to the collective knowledge. The prosociality of their time investment is made salient by highlighting that the shared knowledge will help other bankers in overcoming their challenges. Employees are invited to participate in a collaborative booklet and are told that "*your suggestions will be included in a collaborative booklet titled Personal Strategies for Shared Success, made up of valuable contributions of officers across the bank and shared at the end of the year with every [officer].*" Employees are also informed that their participation will be anonymous that their names will not be shared in the booklet. We designate the decision to contribute, either "yes" or "no," as our initial primary outcome– willingness to share. The exact phrasing in the survey reads as follows:

> *Congratulations, you've successfully completed the main part of the survey!*
>
> *You now have two options:*
>
> 1. *You can* ***finish*** *the survey*
> 2. *You* ***continue*** *to an additional,* ***entirely voluntary*** *section.*
>
> *In this additional section, we will ask you to share your personal experiences, tactics, or tips* ***which might help other bankers*** *in (firm name) in overcoming challenges that they are facing every day.*

> ***Your suggestions will be included in a collaborative booklet*** *titled Personal Strategies for Shared Success, made up of* ***valuable contributions*** *of officers across the bank and shared at the end of the year with every banker.*
>
> *Please note: Your contributions will be anonymous and no names will be included in the booklet. This means you can freely share personal strategies.*
>
> *Overall, this additional part will take about* ***5-10 minutes*** *to finish.*
>
> *Would you like to contribute?*

If an employee agrees to share, they are shown two questions which aim at eliciting employees' actual contributions and their time investment in the public good. The first question shows a specific vignette, which represents a case study. The vignette describes a general scenario which is commonly faced by bankers in their early careers across the bank. They read about a junior female banker who recently joined a newly created branch and is facing personal challengues and struggling to manage her time and meet the performance targets at work. Her clients recently stopped repaying their installments despite the fact that their business appears successful. Given the vignette, employees are asked in an open-text format to provide personal practical tips and strategies on how to overcome the challenges described in the case study. The second question is a open question, which asks employees to share their approaches to cope with challenging days or specific, actionable tips and personal tactics that could benefit other bankers throughout the bank, at any stage of their careers.

To analyze employees' contributions, we measure the quantity of contributions. In particular, we calculate the number of tips given, the length of the tips (number of characters) and the time spent working on them (as per the Qualtrics time stamp). If an employee did not submit any suggestions, we code the quantity as zero for all above dimensions.

Willingness to Sign-up for Volunteer Program

The bank seeks to pair new staff in their first months with more experienced bankers. Additionally, they require feedback from employees to build and improve their processes. We used both this tasks that are important for the organization and prosocial in nature to study the impact of the award on willingness to help. We integrated a call for volunteers for both tasks into the endline survey. Similarly to the midline survey, employees could opt into two volunteer programs: the first was a call for mentors for junior staff, and the second was a call to sit with an external consultant to improve customer relationship processes and management. Both tasks help their peers and the organization.

2.4.1 Mechanisms

Our intervention features multiple layers and dimensions of recognition. In the horizontal dimension, colleagues significantly influence the award process by not only voting for awardees but also participating in the award ceremonies. At the branch level, the vertical dimension involves supervisors in the voting process, with branch management overseeing and executing the award ceremonies. In the top management layer, the firm's highest leaders officially endorse and sign the awards, taking responsibility for their organization.

To determine which of these recognition layers and dimensions stimulates an increased willingness among employees to help, we introduced variations in the intended audience of employees' shared contributions in the midline survey. We specifically focus on horizontal recognition by peers and vertical recognition by top management, comparing these to a no-recognition condition where all forms of external, public recognition of employees' contributions are absent. All employees read the text as outlined in the previous subsection. We refer to this condition as *No Recognition*; if employees contribute under this condition, it will help others but remains completely anonymous. In the no-recognition subgroup, employees are informed that their contributions will remain fully anonymous, ensuring that contributions cannot be traced back to individuals and that neither management nor peers can recognize individual contributors.

One third of randomly selected employees read one additional sentence that introduces a horizontal, peer-recognition dimension. In this subgroup, we inform employees that a list of contributors (names only, not the tips) will be shared among the other officers in their branch.

> Your contributions will be anonymous and no names will be included in the booklet. This means you can freely share personal strategies. *However, we'll circulate a list of contributor names to the bankers in the branch* ***so that the efforts of those who shared can be recognized by their direct peers****, while the content remains anonymous*

In the head office-recognition subgroup (vertical dimension), we notify employees that a list of contributors' names will be shared with head office management as follows:

> Your contributions will be anonymous and no names will be included in the booklet. This means you can freely share personal strategies. *However, we'll share a list of contributor names with Head Office (HR and Microfinance teams)* ***so that the efforts of those who shared can be recognized by head office management****, while the content remains anonymous*

This exogenous variation in the survey enables us to explore potential differences in employees' willingness to share, based on the visibility of their behavior to different audiences, and assists us in understanding the various mechanisms at play.

3 Results: The Effect of Recognizing Prosocial Behavior at the Workplace

3.1 Impact of Award on Willingness to Help Peers

Our primary outcome evaluates the impact of a symbolic award on employees' willingness to contribute to the public good. This willingness is measured by their readiness to invest additional time sharing personal experiences and information that could benefit their colleagues, or signing up to the call for volunteers.

Results presented in Column (1) of Table 2 indicate that 42% of employees in the control group were willing to spend additional time helping others in the baseline. This willingness increased by 7.4 percentage points (a 17% increase) among employees in branches where the award was implemented. Interestingly, the effect observed in the treatment group is not driven exclusively by those who received awards. Columns (3) and (5) show similar impacts and endline, employees in treated branches are 5.8 and 10.6 percentage points more likely to volunteer for being a junior mentor, and to meet with an external consultant to give feedback on how to improve customer service.

In the even-numbered columns, we added an interaction term with employees who were selected as the top 20% in both the first and second rounds of the award. The goal is to determine whether the increase in sign-ups is driven by the awardees. "Most Supportive" employees in the award branches are those who actually received the award, while the "Most Supportive" in the control group are those who would have received it otherwise. We observe that those selected as "Most Supportive" are indeed more likely to help, which increases our confidence that both our helpfulness and volunteering metrics are effectively capturing the intended behaviors. However, receiving the award does not further increase this helping behavior. Instead, it appears to motivate the rest of the employees who voted and observed the award, as they are now sharing at higher rates than those in the control group.

Table 2: Willingness to Help- Extensive Margin

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Midline		*Endline*			
	Share Knowledge		*Junior Mentor*		*Share Knowledge*	
Award Branch	0.074***	0.079***	0.058**	0.056*	0.106***	0.108***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Most Supportive R1		0.103*				
		(0.05)				
Award Branch × Most Supportive R1		-0.033				
		(0.07)				
Most Supportive R2				0.082		0.049
				(0.07)		(0.06)
Award Branch × Most Supportive R2				0.007		-0.010
				(0.09)		(0.09)
Mean Dep. Var	0.420		0.535		0.475	
Observations	925	925	930	930	930	930

gm

Linear probability model (OLS) estimates the effect of the treatment on various volunteer activities: willingness to provide productivity tips (Columns (1) and (2)), willingness to mentor junior staff (Columns (3) and (4)), and willingness to meet with a consultant to improve customer management processes (Column (5)). Regressions control for demographics, including tenure at the branch and firm, as well as gender. All models include pair-matched fixed effects. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

3.2 Understanding the Drivers: Recognition's Impact on Contributions

Our results show that recognizing prosocial behavior has the potential to increase helping behaviors. What remains to be assessed is the driving factor behind this increased willingness. Several changes could explain the improved supportive behaviors. One possible mechanism is the enhanced institutional signal that helping and supporting others is desired behavior and part of the culture in this organization. This cultural shift might lead employees to alter their behavior even if they are not personally recognized. In Figure 2, we observe in the first two columns that there is no difference in the share of contributors between the control and treatment groups when employees are asked to provide with anonymous contributions without any recognition. Therefore, the awards do not seem to change the behavior of employees per se. In columns (1) and (2) of Table 3, we present regression results that include controls and pair-matched fixed effects. We observe that, if anything, the helping coefficient is negative for the awarded branches. Interesting is also to note that those who have received the award are not more likely to contribute.

A second potential channel is that employees now recognize that helping others is visible to their peers, who observe and value supportive behaviors and ultimately decide the award winners. Consequently, employees in awarded branches might be more inclined to help to signal to their peers that they are supportive colleagues. In the middle columns of Figure 2, we observe an increase in the share of contributors from 44% in the control group to 51% in the treatment group when peers will see the names of those who helped in the collaborative booklet. Additionally, columns (3) and (4) of Table 3 show that the share of people who contribute rises by 10 percentage points (a 22% increase) in the treated branches once added controls and pair match fixed effects. Notably, this effect is primarily driven by the most helpful employees who have been awarded in the treated branches. Therefore, willingness to contribute increases significantly among those who have been already recognized. When these supportive employees know that their peers will be aware of their contributions, they are more willing to contribute, likely aiming to reaffirm their supportive reputation. We can conclude that peer recognition significantly influences those who have been awarded and can have a lasting effect. The coefficient remains positive even for those not awarded.

A third mechanism is the effect of top management recognition. At baseline and in the control branches, supportive behaviors are largely considered non-promotable tasks. Employees typically receive rewards and promotions primarily for high productivity. However, with the introduction of the award, this previously non-promotable task gains visibility with the organization's top management. We observe in the last two columns of Figure 2 that recognition by top management (Head Office) is the largest driver of willingness to contribute. Compared to the non-recognition arms in the control and treatment groups (around

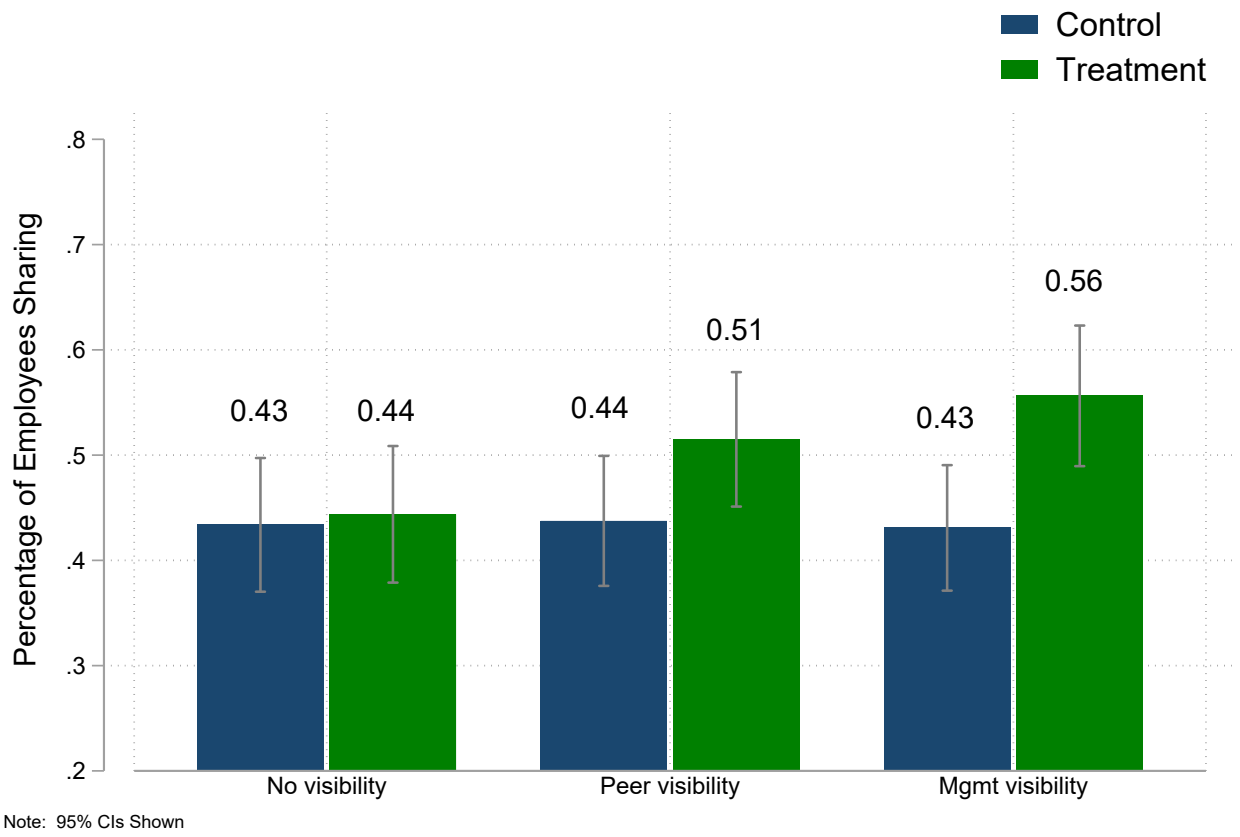


Figure 2: Mechanisms

Table 3: Willigness to Share - Mechanisms

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	No Recognition		Peers		Head Office	
Award Branch	-.07	-.08	.10**	.05	.14***	.16***
	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)	(.06)	(.05)	(.06)
Most Supportive		.04		-.13		.14
		(.09)		(.10)		(.13)
Award Branch × Most Supportive		.03		.23*		-.15
		(.14)		(.13)		(.16)
Mean dep. var	.437		.437		.431	
Observations	326	326	343	343	339	339

Notes. Linear probability model (OLS) of the effect of treatment on willingness to spend time helping others (yes/no). The regressions incorporate demographic controls, including tenure at the branch and the firm, as well as gender. Baseline survey controls include measures of trust in management and clarity of organizational roles. All regressions include pair-matched fixed effects. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

44% share) or to Head Office recognition in the control (43% share), the potential for Head Office recognition increases the share of people deciding to contribute to 56%, representing an increase of about 30% when compared to the share in the same mechanism arm for the non-awarded branches. For the control branches, being recognized by the Head Office does not have a different effect from an anonymous contribution. With the leadership's introduction of a symbolic award emphasizing the value of collaboration, employees are motivated to contribute if they know that their contribution will be seen.

In Table 3, within columns (5) and (6), we see that this effect is statistically significant at the 1% level and, interestingly, is not driven by those already awarded. Employees who have not been awarded, (and that were not selected as more supportive employees in the baseline by their peers) are the ones more likely to contribute. This mechanism highlights the importance of bringing visibility to non-promotable tasks

3.3 General Reception of the "Most Supportive Award"

To derive a general understanding of how employees perceive the introduction of the "Most Supportive Award", Table 4 provides descriptive evidence on how different groups of employees (Awarded vs. Non-Awarded) in the treatment branches feel about the award. Employees feel more recognized and valued, particularly those awarded, with a level of agreement of 82.6 out of 100. They also agree that winning the award has positive implications for their careers, with an agreement score of 81.7 out of 100 points. Concerns about the award fostering toxic jealousy are relatively low overall (25.60 out of 100), with no significant difference between awarded and non-awarded employees, indicating a well-received implementation of the award

system. The desire to be recognized with the award again is high, particularly among past recipients (90.51%), suggesting that the award is coveted and valued within the workforce. Lastly, the perception that the award recipients were deserving stands at 76.13% across all respondents, and significantly higher among those who received the award (91.37%), which underscores the credibility of the selection process.

Table 4: Perceptions about the Award

	(1) All	(2) Awarded	(3) Non Awarded	(4) Difference
Feel morevalued with the introduction of the award	71.12	82.66	68.34	14.31***
	(25.45)	(20.77)	(25.71)	(2.51)
Winning the award has positive career implications	81.70	88.28	80.12	8.16***
	(20.52)	(17.15)	(20.97)	(2.07)
Award might create toxic jealousy among colleagues	25.60	23.05	26.21	-3.16
	(27.39)	(29.02)	(26.99)	(3.30)
Desire to be recognized with the award again	83.43	90.51	81.73	8.78***
	(20.34)	(14.07)	(21.24)	(1.81)
Believe the award recipient was deserving	76.13	91.37	72.47	18.90***
	(26.29)	(14.05)	(27.23)	(2.01)

Notes. OLS regression on perception of award. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

These findings collectively suggest that the introduction of the award has effectively enhanced feelings of recognition and value among employees, contributed positively to their career outlook, and been executed in a manner that is perceived as fair and meritorious. The minimal concern regarding jealousy and the perception that the winners were deserving point to the intervention being well-liked and well-implemented.

4 Conclusion

The findings from our study demonstrate the significant role of public managerial recognition in promoting prosocial behavior within organizations. By highlighting the impact of non-monetary rewards, particularly in the form of a "Certificate of Recognition for Outstanding Support," our research contributes to a deeper understanding of how these mechanisms can be strategically employed to enhance organizational culture. This approach not only rewards individuals who exhibit supportive behaviors but also encourages a broader cultural shift towards increased prosociality. The increase in both willingness and actual time spent helping peers following the introduction of symbolic awards underscores the potential of recognition systems to foster more collaborative and supportive workplace environments.

Moreover, our results indicate that the visibility of recognition plays a crucial role in motivating employees. The variation in response between anonymous contributions and those acknowledged by peers or management suggests that public recognition can serve as a powerful incentive for employee engagement in prosocial activities. This effect is particularly pronounced when top management acknowledges these efforts, highlighting the importance of support from the highest levels of organizational leadership. Such findings underscore the need for firms to consider more holistic approaches to employee recognition that encompass both peer and top-level endorsement.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights for organizations looking to foster a supportive and collaborative culture. By moving beyond traditional monetary incentives and exploring the dynamics of public recognition, firms can better harness the intrinsic motivation of their employees. Future research should continue to explore the nuances of how different forms of recognition affect employee behavior across various contexts. Additionally, organizations should consider tailoring their recognition strategies to align with their specific cultural and operational goals, ensuring that they not only promote prosocial behavior but also enhance overall organizational effectiveness and employee satisfaction.

References

Ager, P., L. Bursztyn, L. Leucht, & H.-J. Voth (2022): "Killer incentives: Rivalry, performance and risk-taking among German fighter pilots, 1939–45," *The Review of economic studies*, 89, 2257–2292.

Alan, S., G. Corekcioglu, & M. Sutter (2023): "Improving Workplace Climate in Large Corporations: A Clustered Randomized Intervention," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 138.

Alfitian, J., D. Sliwka, & T. Vogelsang (2023): "When bonuses backfire: Evidence from the workplace," *Management Science*.

Ashraf, N. & O. Bandiera (2018): "Social incentives in organizations," *Annual Review of Economics*, 10, 439–463.

Ashraf, N., O. Bandiera, E. Davenport, & S. S. Lee (2020): "Losing prosociality in the quest for talent? Sorting, selection, and productivity in the delivery of public services," *American Economic Review*, 110, 1355–1394.

Auriol, E., G. Friebel, & L. Pechlivanos (2002): "Career Concerns in Teams," *Journal of Labor Economics*, 20, 289–307.

Bauer, K., M. Kosfeld, & F. Von Siemens (2021): "Incentives, self-selection, and coordination of motivated agents for the production of social goods," .

Bénabou, R. & J. Tirole (2003): "Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation," *The Review of Economic Studies*, 70, 489–520.

Besley, T. & M. Ghatak (2018): "Prosocial motivation and incentives," *Annual Review of Economics*, 10, 411–438.

Blader, S., C. Gartenberg, & A. Prat (2020): "The contingent effect of management practices," *The Review of Economic Studies*, 87, 721–749.

Bruhn, M. & D. McKenzie (2009): "In pursuit of balance: Randomization in practice in development field experiments," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 1, 200–232.

Bursztyn, L. & R. Jensen (2017): "Social image and economic behavior in the field: Identifying, understanding, and shaping social pressure," *Annual Review of Economics*, 9, 131–153.

Deserranno, E. (2019): "Financial Incentives as Signals: Experimental Evidence from the Recruitment of Village Promoters in Uganda," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 11, 277–317.

Deversi, M., M. G. Kocher, & C. Schwieren (2020): "Cooperation in a company: A large-scale experiment," .

Exley, C. (2018): "Incentives for Prosocial Behavior: The Role of Reputations," *Management Science*, 64, 2460–2471.

Fracchia, M., T. Molina-Millán, & P. C. Vicente (2023): "Motivating volunteer health workers in an African capital city," *Journal of Development Economics*, 163, 103096.

Friebel, G., M. Heinz, M. Hoffman, & N. Zubanov (2023): "What Do Employee Referral Programs Do? Measuring the Direct and Overall Effects of a Management Practice," *Journal of Political Economy*, 131, 633–686.

Gallus, J., S. Campbell, & U. Gneezy (2023): "Awards: Tangibility, self-signaling and signaling to others," *Self-Signaling and Signaling to Others*.

Gallus, J. & B. S. Frey (2017): "Awards as Strategic Signals," *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 26, 76–85.

Gallus, J., O. Jung, & K. Lakhani (2021): "Recognition incentives for internal crowdsourcing: A field experiment at NASA," Working Paper.

Gneezy, U., S. Meier, & P. Rey-Biel (2011): "When and why incentives (don't) work to modify behavior," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 25, 191–210.

Goette, L. & E. Tripodi (2024): "The limits of social recognition: Experimental evidence from blood donors," *Journal of Public Economics*, 231, 105069.

Hamilton, B. H., J. A. Nickerson, & H. Owan (2003): "Team Incentives and Worker Heterogeneity: An Empirical Analysis of the Impact of Teams on Productivity and Participation," *Journal of Political Economy*, 111, 465–497.

Heursen, L., S. Friess, & M. Chugunova (2023): "Reputational Concerns and Advice-Seeking at Work," Discussion Paper 447, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Collaborative Research Center Transregio 190 - Rationality and Competition, München and Berlin.

Hoffman, M. & S. Tadelis (2021): "People Management Skills, Employee Attrition, and Manager Rewards: An Empirical Analysis," *Journal of Political Economy*, 129, 243–285.

Holmstrom, B. & P. Milgrom (1991): "Multitask Principal-Agent Analyses: Incentive Contracts, Asset Ownership, and Job Design," *Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization*, 7, 24–52, special Issue: Papers from the Conference on the New Science of Organization, January 1991.

Kahn, W. A., M. A. Barton, C. M. Fisher, E. D. Heaphy, E. M. Reid, & E. D. Rouse (2018): "The Geography of Strain: Organizational Resilience as a Function of Intergroup Relations," *Academy of Management Review*, 43, 509–529.

King, G., E. Gakidou, N. Ravishankar, R. T. Moore, J. Lakin, M. Vargas, M. M. Téllez-Rojo, J. E. Hernández Ávila, M. H. Ávila, & H. H. Llamas (2007): "A "politically robust" experimental design for public policy evaluation, with application to the Mexican universal health insurance program," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 26, 479–506.

Sandvik, J. J., R. E. Saouma, N. T. Seegert, & C. T. Stanton (2020): "Workplace knowledge flows," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 135, 1635–1680.

Wagner, Z., J. B. Asiimwe, & D. I. Levine (2020): "When financial incentives backfire: evidence from a community health worker experiment in Uganda," *Journal of Development Economics*, 144, 102437.