



Meaningful  
Employee  
Rewards  
Framework

# MAKING **MERF** WORK FOR YOU

A manager's guide to identifying  
meaningful employee rewards.

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## WHAT IS MERF?

The Meaningful Employee Rewards Framework (MERF) is a tool designed to help you identify employee rewards that are both valuable and meaningful.

This workbook is intended for managers and supervisors to use with individual employees. After completing this workbook, you should feel prepared to administer feasible rewards and clearly identify and communicate the intended value to recipients.

Make copies of the pages whose numbers are marked with an asterisk(\*) to use for multiple employees, multiple times, and multiple cycles.

# PREPARING FOR MERF

Before you dive in, keep in mind that this tool will only be helpful if the following conditions are in place:

## **1. Your employees are making a living wage**

Research tells us that before you can start to evaluate non-monetary rewards at work, employees need to be paid a living wage.

## **2. You're attentive to the fulfillment of basic work-related needs within your unit**

Research tells us that, after making a living wage, fulfillment of basic work-related needs such as adequate equipment, physical and psychological safety, and belonging need to be met (or actively addressed) before recognition is meaningful.

Are your bases covered? Excellent!

This workbook is designed to be used. Look for the pages with asterisks at the bottom (next to the page number) – those are pages you'll need to photocopy so you have one for each employee.



# TELLING YOUR TEAM ABOUT MERF

MERF is all about co-creating meaning with your employees. They should be aware of the process, so transparency is key! If you're looking for a way to talk to them about MERF, a sample script is as follows. Edit as appropriate for your work relationships and context.

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*As your manager, I want to make sure that you actually value the rewards you receive at work. I'll be using a tool called the Meaningful Employee Rewards Framework, or MERF, to get to know more about what makes you feel valued at work.*

*There are no wrong answers to any of these questions! My goal is to make sure we're on the same page about the different ways to recognize and acknowledge your contributions to the team.*

*This won't be a long process! Expect a short survey where you can rank your favorite rewards and a brief conversation about other ways we can celebrate your successes. I can't promise we can always provide you with your dream rewards, but hopefully we can continue to do better about demonstrating the value you add here at work.*



# CONTENTS

**1**  
IDENTIFICATION

**2**  
CONTEXTUALIZATION

**3**  
COMMUNICATION

**4**  
EVALUATION

**5**  
REFLECTION



# 1 P H A S E

## IDENTIFICATION



# IDENTIFICATION

In this stage, the goal is to identify what non-monetary rewards mean to employees and how they are valued. Your role as a manager is to learn more from your employees, and there are a variety of ways to do so. We recommend choosing one quantitative method (e.g., a survey) and one qualitative method (e.g., a conversation).

**Before you begin, think through the following prompts:**

- What non-monetary rewards do you currently offer?
- What methods will you use to gather employee input?
- When will you schedule these interactions?
- Are there any basic needs (e.g., safety or belonging) that need to be met before recognition is meaningful?

Category	Examples
Public Recognition	Shout-outs, awards, newsletters
Professional Development	Training, mentorship, conference attendance
Autonomy/Flexibility	Remote work options, flexible scheduling
Work Environment	Office upgrades, snacks, beverages, new equipment
Status/Privileges	Team lunches, offsite activities, preferred office/parking

# IDENTIFICATION

In the left column, write in a current non-monetary reward provided to your employee(s). Then, write in a few realistic rewards you think might also be valuable to employees. This form is filled out already to demonstrate, but a blank version is available for you to use on the next page.

***At this moment of your life and career, how would you value each of the following rewards?***

	Less valuable					More valuable
Coffee in the Break Room	1	2	3	4	5	6
Team Lunch Mondays	1	2	3	4	5	6
Friday Afternoons Off	1	2	3	4	5	6
Recognition in Team Meetings	1	2	3	4	5	6
Mentorship	1	2	3	4	5	6
Remote Work Flexibility	1	2	3	4	5	6



# IDENTIFICATION

*At this moment of your life and career, how would you value each of the following rewards?*

	Less valuable					More valuable
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	1	2	3	4	5	6

# IDENTIFICATION

Now that you have your basic survey results, take some time to create dialogue with employees. This can be in a casual one-on-one conversation or in a focus group.

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Be prepared to enter these conversations with curiosity and without assumptions. Be ready to listen more than you speak! Make it clear that all input is valued and that there are no right or wrong answers. **Some possible prompts include:**

- If you could design your own reward for a job well done, what would it look like?
- How do you prefer to be recognized – publicly in front of the team, privately, or in another way?
- Are there any current rewards here that don't resonate with you? Why might that be?
- Can you tell me about a time when you felt truly appreciated at work? What made that experience meaningful to you?
- Are there any non-monetary rewards or gestures that you find especially motivating or meaningful?
- What, if anything, gets in the way of you feeling recognized or valued here?
- Think about how often you like to be recognized. Would you rather get smaller recognition on a regular basis, or bigger appreciation a little less often?

# IDENTIFICATION

As you ask questions and engage in conversations about rewards with your team, use this space to **take notes**.

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# 2

PHASE

## CONTEXTUALIZATION



# CONTEXTUALIZATION

After learning about what your employees value, what are three rewards they would find meaningful?

1.

2.

3.

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Excellent! Now, it's time to consider how those rewards fit into the context of your organization. After each question about **feasibility**, write down which of the rewards above meet the requirements.

- Which rewards fit into your team's rewards budget?
- Logistically, is this something you can provide to your employees, even if multiple people asked for it?
- Is this a reward your organization would support?

Next, consider your organization's **stated culture and values**.

What are three values for your organization that stand out to you?

1.

2.

3.

Which of your identified rewards enforce and align with your organization's stated values?



# 3 P H A S E

COMMUNICATION



# COMMUNICATION

Before administering your reward, create a brief communication plan to ensure the intent of your reward is understood fully by the recipient(s). Be as specific as possible in this section.

*What reward are you providing?*

*On your team, what are the criteria for receiving this reward?*

*Who is receiving this reward?*

*Why, specifically, are they receiving the reward at this time?*

*How will you communicate this to the recipient?  
(e.g., team meeting, email, virtual/phone call, letter, etc.)*



# 4 PHASE

## EVALUATION





# EVALUATION

Remember that over time, a lot can change about the value and meaning of employee rewards. Periodically, conduct a brief check-in to ask yourself the following questions. The answers will help determine how urgently you should revisit MERF at the identification stage.

Change Type	Examples
Meaning	<p>Do the rewards still have the same meaning to the organization?</p> <p>When did you last identify meaningful rewards with your team?</p>
Team	<p>How has the makeup of your team changes since the last identification of meaningful rewards?</p>
Organization	<p>Have the available resources or values of your organization changed recently?</p>

Change is not a bad thing! If you recognize changes in the makeup of your team, the resources of your organization, or how current rewards are valued, then it is time to repeat the MERF phases. **Even if there are no observed changes, we recommend cycling through MERF every 18-24 months.**



# 5 PHASE

REFLECTION



# REFLECTION

Congratulations! You've completed one round of MERF. Take a few moments to reflect on this process.

Did you learn anything new about what your employees value?

Do you think the rewards you provided made a positive impact on your team? If so, how?

What will you do differently the next time you complete the MERF cycle?

If you were to revisit this in a year, what do you want to make sure you remember?

**Don't throw this workbook away!** You might find it helpful to scan and save for future reference and as a handy guide to remember what your employees find meaningful.



# QUESTIONS?

We hope this guide gives you everything you need to learn more about what your employees value.

If you still have questions, reach out to Amanda Jeppesen ([MERF.amanda@hillshift.com](mailto:MERF.amanda@hillshift.com)) or Vanessa Hills ([vanessa@hillshift.com](mailto:vanessa@hillshift.com)).