

# It's Your Yale

## "Coffee and Kudos" webinar transcript

*February 25, 2026*

Brenda Naegel:

Welcome to our Coffee and Kudos fireside chat. We are so glad to have you join us on this very chilly and very snowy afternoon. And we hope that you will enjoy our cozy caffeinated theme today. I think that's just about perfect for today's forecast, so please feel free to enjoy your favorite afternoon beverage. I've got my cup of Java right here ready to go, staying hot on its little warmer.

And I want to thank you all especially for helping us to get things warmed up with our coffee trivia questions that were appearing on your screen while we were gathering. So, before we jump into today's introductions and our discussion, I think we should find out the answers to the coffee trivia. All right. So I hope that you can see these all on your screen. So it looks like, okay, you did really well with, "What is the most common coffee species consumed worldwide?" and, the answer to that, 86% of you got that right and said Arabica. Excellent. I think that's what I have in my cup right now.

Let's see. Brazil. Brazil is the largest producer of coffee in the world. Is that true or false? That happens to be very true. 62% of you got that one right. And our final question was, "What type of coffee is prepared by forcing a small amount of nearly boiling water through finely ground coffee beans?" One of my favorites in the afternoon, a nice little cup of espresso, 69% of you got that right. So it's clear that everyone that is attending today is staying well-caffeinated, so I hope you enjoyed that little activity and our coffee-themed music.

All right. So, while we don't have a specific prize for the trivia contest today, at the end of today's webinar, we are randomly going to select an attendee from this audience, so we hope that you'll stick around. You need to be present to win. We're going to announce a grand-prize winner of this amazing... Oh, you're not going to be able to see it because my screen is blurred. I'm going to fix that for just one hot second here and show you. We have an amazing basket that is filled with a sampler of coffees from our favorite local roaster, that is, Willoughby's in New Haven. And, oh, there's all kinds of goodies in there. There's a little French press. There are some chocolate-covered coffee beans. So, whoever the lucky winner of that is, you need to invite us all over. So, stick around for that announcement at the end.

So my name is Brenda Naegel. And I am joined by my colleagues Ashley Blackwell and Emily DeFrances. Together, we are Yale's staff recognition and engagement team. And we oversee things like the staff service recognition programs that includes our Long-Service Service Recognition Dinner, our gift programs for our staff members, the Linda K. Lorimer Awards, Staff Appreciation Day, Staff Spirit Week and many related resources to recognition and engagement. So this workshop today is part two of a three-part series that we call Celebrating Moments that Matter. This is an exclusive series for Yale managers.

In our first workshop that many of you attended back in January, we grounded ourselves in understanding why recognition is so vital to both Yale and to our staff members. So, at that session, we also explored several resources that are available at Yale today to make it easier for you to recognize your teams and one another. So, today, we're going to take the next step. So we are going to learn from

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three Yale managers who raised their hands to say that they would be willing to share what they're doing in their part of the university, and so we're excited to have you hear from them. They are working in significantly different work environments, and so we're going to hear a little bit about those environments, their successes, their challenges and the lessons that they learned along the way. They're sharing those with you so that, hopefully, you'll feel inspired to try something new, maybe something that you hear from them today or something that you build off of. So, I am excited to and pleased to introduce you to Agatha Williams, who is the director of Organizational and Workplace Excellence and Hospitality.

Hi, Agatha. Thanks for joining us.

Agatha Williams:

Hi, everyone. My pleasure.

Brenda Naegel:

And-

Agatha Williams:

Yes? Go ahead.

Brenda Naegel:

And Lucas Swineford, who is the executive director of Digital Education at the Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning.

Lucas Swineford:

Hello, everyone. Good to see you all.

Brenda Naegel:

It's good to see you, Lucas. And Cheri Ross is joining us. She's the manager of Information Technology Services Finance and Business Operations.

Cheri Ross:

Good afternoon, everyone.

Brenda Naegel:

Hi, Cheri. So the way this is going to work is we want this to feel cozy. It would be nice if we all were sitting around a fireplace right now. The idea is that it's going to feel like a fireside chat. I'm going to be asking our panelists, our participants a group of questions. We're going to do this round-robin style, so I'm going to ask a question and each one is going to take a turn answering. And, by the way, for our panelists, you can go in any order that you like. I'll invite you to do that each time.

I hope that for our audience members that you're thinking about these questions as well and thinking of your answers to them. At the end, we're going to have a time where you can also open up your mics. I'll

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invite you to ask questions of our panelists as well at any time. You can just drop your question into the chat panel, and Ashley and Emily are going to keep an eye on those for us.

All right, so, for our panelists, if you're ready, my first question to you is if you could just briefly describe your work environment and what generally the type of work that your staff members are doing. Who wants to go first?

Agatha Williams:

I can start.

Cheri Ross:

I'll kick it off. Oh, sorry.

Agatha Williams:

Cheri, go ahead.

Cheri Ross:

Hi, everyone. We're in Central ITS, and we're spread across the entire campus with a lot of presence. And we currently have a hybrid staff, but we also have a large portion that's a hundred percent on-campus, as well as some that are a hundred percent remote. So we prioritize hybrid engagement around our recognition, any recognition approach we take, always inclusive, always participative, and we try to have a purposeful connection.

Brenda Naegel:

Excellent. Thank you, Cheri. That's a complicated environment. We're trying to do something for everyone all the time.

Agatha, do you want to go next?

Agatha Williams:

Sure. Sure. So, at Yale Hospitality, our work environment is fast-paced, service-driven and highly collaborative. So we have a strong focus on service excellence and shared accountability. So, as a primarily front-facing operation, we support the daily needs of our students, faculty and staff through a diverse workforce that includes managers and professionals, clerical, and technicians, and service and maintenance employees. That's our Local 35.

So we're given our responsibility to safeguard students' well-being through the preparation of and service of food. So our work spans multiple platforms, residential dining halls. We have retail locations across campus. We have catering services and various campus events that require planning, set up and execution, so the breadth of our requires teamwork, coordination and unwavering commitment to quality, and safety basically is who we are. And I must say that, as an essential operation with a need for an onsite team, so the need is for us to be onsite to take care of our students and faculty. Our presence is critical to the campus experience, so I should say I'm deeply appreciative of our staff, their dedication, professionalism, and their continued commitment.

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I do want to make a shoutout and thanks to Yale University senior leadership for recognizing our service and maintenance employees and appreciating their dedication and coming in during the snowstorm.

Brenda Naegel:

Thank you. It is very much a complex environment. And shoutout as well to your amazing team for keeping everything moving forward the last several days. I know it was really, really complicated. And, also, it was really heartwarming to see our leaders of the university recognize that in such a public way. That was very heartwarming to see that email come through from President McInnis and from Geoffrey Chatas.

Thank you, Agatha.

Agatha Williams:

You're welcome.

Brenda Naegel:

Lucas, how about you?

Lucas Swineford:

Yes, so let me first... I agree with that. When I saw that message from President McInnis yesterday, I thought like what a wonderful university that the leader is recognizing these hundreds or thousands of employees who had to trudge through a snowstorm to deliver these essential services. Even though I did not receive the free lunch, it still made me feel really good and appreciated to work here because you know that leadership feels that way.

So hello, everyone. Lucas Swineford. I'm at the Poorvu Center where we have about 60 full-time employees spread across about 10 different teams. We are a primarily in-person organization. Our staff are here a minimum of four days per week during the academic year. We are, I would say, a highly collaborative environment, a highly collaborative team, as evidenced by the fact that we sit in the Sterling Memorial Library. And that's where I am now. But none of us have offices. We all sit in like shared space so that we can constantly be talking to each other and working together.

I would describe our culture here as one that is a combination of... We have a number of high achievers that I believe, and, of course, I'm biased on this, produce exceptional work, but they're also thoughtful and kind. And I think that's not an accident. Much of the work that we do is in support and in service of the instructors across the university and students. As our name would suggest, we help in any element of teaching or learning at Yale. We also build and deliver what is now hundreds of courses that are available at low cost or no cost to global learners.

So I feel that our organization attracts people who are in support, in service, as does the university when we think about the mission of a university. And because of that, again, I would describe our work environment, our culture as one that is very like thoughtful and kind. And I think that does lead to a culture of appreciation. And that's not to say that we're not working hard. We are. I think we're able to balance those two things.

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Brenda Naegel:

That's wonderful. Thank you. Boy, you are representing all of you, the best of Yale in all these different dimensions, so thank you for those really vivid descriptions.

My next question for each of you is I'd love for you to share a point of pride in something that you've done to build your recognition programs in your areas, something that really landed well that you will absolutely want to try again. And we could do this in any order that you like, so whoever wants to talk about that first.

Lucas Swineford:

Should I go first? We'll go in reverse order.

Brenda Naegel:

That sounds good to me.

Lucas Swineford:

All right. Yeah, when I was thinking about this question, what I came to first wasn't a particular program, but it was just this idea that we really have sort of normalized this idea that recognition and appreciation comes from all parts of the organization, that it's not only a top-down directive.

Jenny Frederick, who's the executive director, and I, we've been here since the start of the Poorvu Center in 2014. We've really worked hard to intentionally model that idea of everyday recognition and everyday appreciation for the work that our staff is doing. I think that's important because I do think, and this is evidenced by feedback that we've gotten from staff and workplace surveys and exit surveys, that our staff does feel like we are an organization that appreciates the work that is happening and, yes, we celebrate the big things when we launch a new website, for now, with some of the retirements we have coming up.

When there's a big project done, we celebrate those, but it's also the little celebrations and the little points of acknowledgement that are happening constantly, whether it's on the Zoom chat, even though everyone is here or someone just walking into one of our bullpen areas and saying, "Hey, Jane, you did an excellent job. Thank you for that," that it'd just become like a normal thing to happen here. And although it's been a long time since I've worked anywhere else, that was not the case in the former organizations that I worked at. So I think this idea of modeling a culture of appreciation and seeing our staff respond to that is something that I'm really proud about.

Brenda Naegel:

Thank you, Lucas. That is just really wonderful to hear. And it absolutely sounds like it's incredibly effective as well. Thank you. All right, Cheri or Agatha?

Agatha Williams:

Well, I can go ahead. So thank you for that, Lucas. And I did what Lucas said about different acts of recognition. A couple of things I'll mention in terms of pride with recognition, I'll say, out of the Yale employee engagement survey, we reached out to our employees to get feedback, to solicit their input

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based on feedback. And this was led by our AVP Jodi Smith Westwater. And, a couple of us, we met with the employees and basically to get their feedback and to get insights on different ways they would like to be recognized. And out of that came... Out of these different forums in all our employee units came the True Blue Program.

And our True Blue Program basically serves as a formal and public platform for celebrating excellence. What it is is we highlight these awards at our all-hands meetings which we get to get most of the employees to attend three times a year. And those are usually with our group because we're kind of all year round. So when the students are away is when we can get everybody together and meet with them. So we publicly acknowledge our employees that way. We have different things.

Our department has values and behaviors that we pride ourselves upon. And we have an acronym called COKIWI. It has to do with food, so, hence, the kiwi, and so it's called kiwi. It's being compassionate, being open, being knowledgeable, being inclusive, being welcoming and then having integrity. So those are our values with behaviors attached to those values. So, with that, we have values awards, we have distinction awards, and we have culinary awards. So the distinction awards talk to innovative ideas. Culinary awards is outstanding, best menu item recipe. Then we also have Employee Spotlight, which the faculty and students get to tell us, "This employee is doing really well based on an example." And we've had some of those.

I'll give a quick story about a football player at one of our units. And he actually came back and recognized the entire team, took pictures with them and just talked about how much the Outstanding Work made an impact on him. We have scenarios like that. And then we have a Black Linen Award, which basically is like our highest honor award. It recognizes exceptional service excellence, teamwork, collaboration, integrity, initiative, continuous improvement, and then the Values Awards we have. So, by celebrating those achievements in that public forum, we're able to recognize more employees in a more public forum where everybody and their peers are with them.

The great thing about this is that we actually have a QR code and links in which we encourage people to nominate their peers. So it's not top down, like Lucas was saying. It's not a top-down driven recognition, but everybody is involved. If you see your employee doing an outstanding job, going above and beyond, you nominate them, and then we recognize them. We have seen increased nominations, people wanting to be on the groups. There are different teams, so we have a diverse team, so we have service and maintenance, managers, and professionals, and CNTs on those teams of nomination or different action teams.

I will add, because we always try to make sure that we capture a captive audience, so the public recognition is that, but the private recognition in which we've seen significant progress is our Birthday Card Program. And our Birthday Card Program basically is our senior leadership sign off on cards, personalized signatures. We put an inspirational quote in there, and then we send the birthday cards every month to our employees. And we've had stories about people in tears, people saying that was the only card they got on their birthdays, people sending us thank-you notes back. Just hearing that feedback was heartwarming for us knowing that it makes a difference with those small acts that you wouldn't even think of. So those are two programs.

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Brenda Naegel:

Fantastic. So small things matter.

Agatha Williams:

Yes.

Brenda Naegel:

So that's one theme we're hearing, top down, bottom up, that everybody's recognizing everyone for excellence, for values and for, again, the small things and the little things. Cheri, can you add to this conversation?

Cheri Ross:

I sure can. Wow, that's amazing really. I love following what I've just heard. What I would like to share today is, in ITS, as I said, we also have Local 34 staff. We have remote, hybrid, a hundred percent on campus. And we have a very robust internship program. And, every summer, we bring in anywhere from 20 to 25 interns. And we were really looking for a way to socialize our early-career interns and staff into the Central ITS culture in a very short 10-week timeframe.

A lot of these interns are coming to us with very little career time under their belt. They're really looking to get engaged, immediately join some of the projects. And, also, we don't hold back and we bring them right into our team meetings and make them part of the atmosphere. We didn't really have a good way to socialize them into all of our programs. Everybody just kind of took them into their units. And so we kicked off in 2023 a summer program, and it fostered. We wanted a program that would foster belonging, boost morale, connecting colleagues, aligning with unit culture and a stronger commitment to the organization's goals. And we launched the program in 2023. It was the first year. It was called Summer to Savor. And it was a 10-week program that pulled in activities. They were weekly activities based around themes. And it started slow because it was our first year, but that year allowed us to hear the results of these themes we were doing.

The Summer to Savor, if you can think about it, it brought in ideas around how do you savor your summer, what does that mean to you. And we brought those themes into weekly activities, communications, visuals. We would put flyers around. And the activities could be anything from bringing staff into the building, having hybrid staff come in, if there was remote staff, pulling them into activities remotely. And the result really turned us into a well-engaged summer program. And the feedback was enormous.

When I tell you it was a very low budget the first year, very little, and it kicked off in 2024 with the renewal of the program called Summer of Possibilities, the budget did not increase, but the energy and the excitement around it did. And it sounds silly to say how a 10-week program could pull the team together throughout the entire year, but it did. People would leave on Friday afternoons, and they couldn't wait to find out what the theme would be for Monday morning. We shared the general theme on Fridays, but it wasn't until Monday they knew what was going to happen. We would hear the excitement on Fridays, and they'd come in on Monday, and we would have everything up and running.

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The interns actually helped us run the program. They started to hear about the program and got more engaged. And it pulled in all levels of the unit. Senior leaders all the way down to our interns were engaged, and the feedback was tremendous. So one of the things I'll say is don't be afraid to try something. It may not work, but the smallest efforts really do have a large impact.

Brenda Naegel:

That's fantastic, Cheri. I love how it just gained all this momentum and everybody wanted to jump into the act and to be part of it. That's really just a wonderful example. I love that you have just such three different examples of what you're trying in your departments. We are actually getting close to time already. For this event, we were intentionally keeping them short so people could just dock in on their lunch hour. We only have three minutes left. I want to actually leave a moment for our audience members to ask a question, and so is there anyone that wants to come off mute and ask our panelists a question or ask a question of the team? Is anybody willing or if you want to drop something into the chat panel?

I have one more really quick question. We could take about 30 seconds for each of our panelists if we don't have any questions from our audience members. I would like to hear maybe... And you don't have to answer this question necessarily, all three of you, but if there was a particular challenge that you had to overcome, if you want to highlight one or two of those really quickly and then we'll announce our winner in just a moment?

Oh, we do have a question that just dropped in. Let me just take a moment for that. Kendall is asking were there some initiatives you felt were more impactful than others? That's a great question. Does somebody want to take that one?

Agatha Williams:

I-

Brenda Naegel:

Go ahead, Agatha.

Agatha Williams:

It's an interesting question. I will say, because there are people who like public appreciation and some people who like private, but I will say that we have realized that just even a shoutout of thank you with a meaning behind it goes a long way. So that's one thing that our teams have told us has been impactful. It's like they go through daily working service, breakfast, lunch, dinner. So for just somebody to say a shoutout, like, "Thank you very much. I saw you did this, and it was really meaningful," that really has gone a long way in what they do. I think the more that it becomes operational more than it becomes something that you do occasionally, it creates more of an impact.