The Power of Appreciation

Understanding the Relationship between Positivity and Productivity

If we take a moment to think of the kind of situations that cause people to go "above and beyond"—whether it's a parent staying up all night with an upset child or an activist willing to risk anything for a cause—we soon notice a common element: Feeling needed and valued often predicates greatness. When we know that our efforts can make a measurable difference and are appreciated by others, we become willing to put our heart and soul into whatever task is laid out before us.

With the ever-greater emphasis that is being placed on productivity in the workplace, it is therefore unfortunate that so few managers take the time to truly appreciate those they work with: According to a worldwide study conducted by Towers Watson, 40 percent of employees report feeling as though their managers are not genuinely interested in their well-being. As the study also found that a sense of being valued and cared about is the single highest driver of engagement, the toll this lack of managerial interest and appreciation is taking on productivity and morale is almost certainly immense. In fact, the correlation between positive feedback and performance has been verified by researcher Marcial Losada, who found that high-performing teams report a positive feedback vs. negative feedback ratio of 5.6 to 1, whereas low-performing teams have a ratio of just .36 to 1.

Adding to this burden, many employees also cite a strong fear of being criticized by their managers, one which results in chronic performance anxiety. Many people become so preoccupied with avoiding criticism that their focus is diverted to that aim and, in a sadly ironic turn of events, their performance actually suffers as a result. Innovation is likewise stifled; in order to be creative, people need to feel safe enough to take risks, and in an environment where criticism is louder than appreciation, a feeling of safety cannot be achieved. As author Daniel Goleman expressed, "Threats to our standing in the eyes of others are almost as powerful as those to our very survival."

Learning to give praise

Most managers mean well and do in fact value those they work with—they simply fail to communicate their appreciation effectively. The praise they do give is often too superficial and general to make a deep impact (e.g. using phrases like "Good job"), whereas the criticisms they deliver are specific and insightful. Though positive feedback is not entirely absent from most workplaces, it's usually treated as *less important* than negative feedback, when the reverse is actually true much of the time.

If you're in a managerial position and are looking for ways to rectify this habit, try implementing the "best practices" outlined below:

- Practice active harm reduction. Understand that your words have a deep, lasting impact on your team members (physically as well as emotionally—according to one well-known study, workers dealing with overly critical superiors have a 30 percent higher rate of coronary disease than workers who feel appreciated) and make a daily effort to modulate the language you use to emphasize value as much as possible. Deliver criticisms only where truly needed, and phrase them in such a way that they end with an affirmation, a message which states "I believe you can do it."

- Seek the good. Managers are often trained to spend their working lives identifying "problem areas" where employee performance could be improved, and over time, they become so focused on doing this effectively that they forget to look for the good in their employees. Change this pattern by spending a bit of time each day noticing what each employee is doing *right*—and how his or her unique qualities are adding to the greater good. Remember, it is through our sense of contributing to a higher group purpose that our work takes on meaning, so it's essential to point out how each person adds value not only through what he or she does, but who he or she *is*.

- Practice by learning to appreciate yourself more, too. Managers typically have a lot of responsibility riding on their shoulders, and as such, they become hard on themselves—a critical attitude which then spreads out into how they treat others. As such, one of the best ways to curtail a negative attitude is to begin to show yourself a bit more kindness and appreciation: Try ending each day with a review of what you did well, what you learned, and what you can be proud of.

- Give specific feedback. As mentioned above, it's important to not rely on vague, cliched phrases when expressing positive feedback. Each item of positive feedback should communicate what, exactly, the person has done right, how the correct action has added value to the whole, and why you personally appreciate the individual taking that action. This kind of detailed positive feedback not only creates happiness in the moment—because it details *how* to succeed, it provides a map for tomorrow.

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