

Why Appreciation Matters So Much

Tony Schwartz, *Harvard Business Review*, 2012

I've just returned from an offsite with our team at **The Energy Project**. As we concluded, I asked each person to take a few moments to say what he or she felt most proud of accomplishing over the past year.

After each of their brief recountings, I added some observations about what I appreciated in that person. Before long, others were chiming in. The positive energy was contagious, but it's not something we can ever take for granted.

Whatever else each of us derives from our work, there may be nothing more precious than the feeling that we truly matter — that we contribute unique value to the whole, and that we're recognized for it.

The single highest driver of engagement, according to a worldwide study conducted by **Towers Watson**, is whether or not workers feel their managers are genuinely interested in their wellbeing. Less than 40 percent of workers felt so engaged.

Feeling genuinely appreciated lifts people up. At the most basic level, it makes us feel safe, which is what frees us to do our best work. It's also energizing. When our value feels at risk, as it so often does, that worry becomes preoccupying, which drains and diverts our energy from creating value.

So why is it that openly praising or expressing appreciation to other people at work can so easily seem awkward, contrived, mawkish and even disingenuous?

The obvious answer is that we're not fluent in the language of positive emotions in the workplace. We're so unaccustomed to sharing them that we don't feel comfortable doing so. Heartfelt appreciation is a muscle we've not spent much time building, or felt encouraged to build.

Oddly, we're often more experienced at expressing negative emotions — reactively and defensively, and often without recognizing their corrosive impact on others until much later, if we do at all.

That's unfortunate. The impact of negative emotions — and more specifically the feeling of being devalued — is incredibly toxic. As **Daniel Goleman** has written, "Threats to our standing in the eyes of others are almost as powerful as those to our very survival."

In one well-known study, workers who felt unfairly criticized by a boss or felt they had a boss who didn't listen to their concerns had a 30 percent higher rate of coronary disease than those who felt treated fairly and with care.

In the workplace itself, researcher **Marcial Losada** has found that among high-performing teams, the expression of positive feedback outweighs that of negative feedback by a ratio of 5.6 to 1. By contrast, low-performing teams have a ratio of .36 to 1.

So what are the practical steps you can take, especially as a manager, to use appreciation in the service of building a higher-performing (and more sustainable) team?

1. As the Hippocratic oath prescribes to physicians, "Above all else, do no harm."

Or perhaps more accurately, do less harm, since it's unrealistic to do none. The costs of devaluing others are so great that we need to spend far more time thinking than we do now about how to hold people's value, even in situations where they've fallen short and our goal is get them to change their behavior for the better.

2. Practice appreciation by starting with yourself. If you have difficulty openly appreciating others, it's likely you also find it difficult to appreciate yourself. Take a few moments at the end of the day to ask yourself this simple question: "What can I rightly feel proud of today?" If you are committed to constant self-improvement, you can also ask yourself, "What could I do better tomorrow?" Both questions hold your value.

3. Make it a priority to notice what others are doing right. The more you work at it, the better you'll get at it, and the more natural it will become for you. For example, start by thinking about what positive qualities, behaviors and contributions you currently take for granted among the members of your team. Then ask yourself, what is it that each of them uniquely brings to the table?

4. Be appreciative. The more specific you can be about what you value — and the more you notice what's most meaningful to that person — the more positive your impact on that person is likely to be. A handwritten note makes a bigger impression than an email or a passing comment, but better any one of them than nothing at all.

We're all more vulnerable and needy than we like to imagine. Authentically appreciating others will make you feel better about yourself, and it will also increase the likelihood they'll invest more in their work, and in you. The human instinct for reciprocity runs deep.