

THE ART OF APPRECIATION

One of the most important responsibilities of a leader is the ability to effectively express appreciation. Please note my use of *responsibility*, as I quite intentionally mean that expression of appreciation is *not* a merely optional “desired qualification” on the job description.

Having excellent people skills is one of the distinguishing characteristics of an exceptional leader. And one of these skills is the ability to articulate and express thoughts and feelings appropriately. A work group is a community of people and a good leader takes good care of his or her community’s spirit. Positive communication is a key aspect of this responsibility. For some people this is a natural personal style, but for many it requires conscious attention and effort.

I am here going to address only the subject of positive communication. However, other types of communication such as constructive criticism and conflict management must also be part of a leader’s tool kit. My own rule of thumb is that the ratio of positive communication to negative communication should be about 5:1. This ratio in itself illustrates the importance of a leader being willing and able to express positive thoughts and feelings.

In order to better understand the nuances, it is helpful to make a distinction between the five basic types of positive communication.

FEEDBACK Although this word is now used as a catch-all for many types of communication, let’s revisit its original meaning. The word comes from the scientific realm, from the term “feedback loop,” which closes an electrical circuit or completes a system. It implies that the activities that created the outcomes can be modified, and therefore improved, as a result of the feedback. It is informational and objective. The focus is primarily on the system, the process, and the results. In the organizational context, it can be as simple as acknowledging the receipt of a message or as complex as analyzing

the results of a new system. Surprisingly, basic feedback is often overlooked or ignored, when simple feedback systems could minimize misunderstandings and miscommunications.

ENCOURAGEMENT This type of communication involves support, heartening someone with encouraging words. It is intended to give hope or confidence to a person who may feel unsure or discouraged. It can be as simple as a quiet statement such as “I have confidence in you,” or vociferous cheerleading for a rousing team effort. Encouragement may be one to one, or it may be directed to an entire organization. Leaders must be able to see when encouragement is needed. From their unique vantage point, leaders are in a position to understand how each person, each activity, and each decision contributes to the whole. An encouraging leader can make the difference in how an organization weathers difficult times.

APPRECIATION Appreciative comments are the lubricant of human interaction. Working with others, particularly under challenging circumstances, can easily lead to interpersonal tensions. Observing the simple customs of good manners is especially important in the workplace. Contrary to some beliefs, being polite does not “take more time, ” but it certainly does take discipline. Expressing sincere appreciation for effort, kindness, consideration, and cooperation serves as a balm that can mitigate the stressful demands at work. The words “please” and “thank you” belong in the work community just as they do elsewhere.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT This type of communication is more subtle. It involves slowing down enough to look beneath the surface of a situation and see the underlying motivations. This requires awareness and insight. A thoughtful acknowledgement is a meaningful way to honor a person’s contribution, and especially their values. This type of communication is indeed personal, and requires a fair degree of skill. For example, a leader might acknowledge, either publicly or privately, an employee’s commitment to excellence

or customer service as evidenced by a particular behavior. An important distinction here is that an acknowledgement is not necessarily connected to the results, but to the underlying intentions and values. A group acknowledgement can also be appropriate for a team that works together and shares like-minded values and commitments.

RECOGNITION Most often, recognition is a public demonstration of approval and gratitude for a particular achievement or effort. Recognition serves to honor the recipient and also serves to demonstrate to the other members of the work community what the leader(s) consider to be desirable conduct and/or results. It is a method for modeling and teaching by providing a positive example. However, I would caution leaders that a "recognition program" is not a substitute for authentic and personal communication. If you don't practice the other forms of positive communication - giving feedback, encouragement, appreciation, and acknowledgement, a recognition program will appear hollow or even hypocritical.

Remembering and practicing these tenets of positive communication in the workplace is a continuous discipline. People need to know how they are doing, how they are or aren't meeting expectations, and their leader's perceptions about the quality of their work. We all need to be acknowledged for our efforts and contributions. In effect, what a leader says with positive communication is "I see you and I understand and appreciate what you contribute to this organization. You make a difference. Thank you."

•••

Mary Luttrell is a Certified Management Consultant and business coach who helps leaders be more effective and their organizations be more successful. She has helped hundreds of organizations in her 26 years in business, and industry analyst James Kennedy has named her firm as one of the "100 Leading Management Consulting Firms in North America". Services include: strategic planning, marketing, organizational performance development, and leadership coaching. Contact her at thecoach@sonic.net or 707-887-2256.