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WHAT EMPLOYEES WANT MOST

I (GARY) WAS HAVING DINNER with a friend who is on staff at a large nonprofit organization. I was giving him a brief overview of the research Dr. White and I were doing with the *Appreciation at Work* resources we had developed. When I finished I said, “Could I ask you a personal question about your own work?” “Certainly,” he said.

I continued, “On a scale of 0–10, how appreciated do you feel by your immediate supervisor?” “About 5,” he said. I could detect a tinge of disappointment in his voice.

My second question followed. “On a scale of 0–10, how appreciated do you feel by your coworkers?” “About an 8,” he said. “How many people work closely with you?” I inquired. “Two,” he responded. “Do you feel equally appreciated by the two of them?” I asked. “No,” he said. “One would be a 6 and the other a 9. That’s why I said about an 8.”

Whether you are a business owner, CEO, supervisor, or a co-worker, this book is designed to help you learn how to communicate appreciation in ways that are meaningful to the individuals with whom you work. One exciting lesson we have learned: *Anyone can make a difference in their workplace, regardless of their position*—whether supervisors, coworkers, receptionists, managers, frontline employees, or team members from other departments.

Why is feeling appreciated so important in a work setting?

**Anyone can
make a difference
in their workplace,
regardless of
their position.**

Because each of us wants to know that what we are doing matters. Without a sense of being valued by supervisors and colleagues, workers start to feel like a machine or a commodity. If no one notices a person's commitment to doing the job well, that person's motivation tends to wane over time. Steven

Covey, author of the bestselling *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, felt so strongly about people's need for appreciation that he stated: "Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is psychological survival, to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated."¹

When individuals do not feel truly valued and appreciated, the results are predictable:

- Workers become discouraged, feeling: "There's always more to do and no one notices or cares about the contribution I make."
- Employees become more negative about their work with increasing grumbling, complaining, and gossiping.
- Tardiness (at the beginning of the day, from breaks, after lunch) increases, as does the rate of employees calling in "sick."

- Team members will experience a lack of connectedness with others and with the mission of the organization (and, as a result, employee engagement ratings decline).
- Eventually, team members start to consider leaving the organization, they begin to search for other employment, and staff turnover increases.

WHY “JUST SAY THANKS” DOESN’T WORK

Communicating appreciation to employees and colleagues sounds pretty easy and straightforward. In many ways, it is. However, we also know that for the communication of appreciation to effectively encourage the other person, several factors must be considered.

First, researchers have found that attempts to communicate appreciation globally across an organization are not very effective. One employee said of his organization, “We’re pretty good at showing recognition company-wide. But I don’t think we do a good job of it individually.” Trying a general “just say thanks” campaign across the company will not have much impact and can actually backfire, sparking cynicism in the ranks. While we all want to know that we are valued, we want it to be authentic, not contrived.

Here are some other differences between recognition and appreciation:

Recognition is largely about behavior. “Catch them doing what you want and recognize it,” the books say. Appreciation, conversely, focuses not only on performance but also affirms the employee’s value as a person.

Recognition is about improving performance and focuses on what is good for the company. Appreciation emphasizes what

Appreciation emphasizes what is good for the company and good for the person.

is good for the company and good for the person (which may sometimes mean helping them find a position that is better for them than their current role).

Recognition requires only that you implement certain behaviors: defining desired behaviors, monitoring them, and rewarding them when they occur. Authentic appreciation involves both behavior and heart attitude. Have you ever received “appreciation” from someone and you seriously questioned its genuineness? Trying to “fake” appreciating someone doesn’t work well.

Finally, the relational direction of recognition is top-down, coming from supervisors, managers, or the HR department. Appreciation, on the other hand, can be communicated in any direction—from colleague to colleague, from supervisor to team member, or even from a frontline worker to the president of the company.

HITTING THE BULL’S-EYE VS. MISSING THE MARK ALTOGETHER

But the challenge, from a supervisor’s (or coworker’s) perspective, is to know what actions hit the mark and effectively communicate appreciation to a team member. This is why we developed the *Motivating By Appreciation Inventory*,² which includes specific “action items” for each language of appreciation. We wanted to develop a tool that provided accurate, individualized actions business owners and organizational leaders can use to show their appreciation for their team members without having to guess about what will be most significant to the employee. We agree with Buckingham and Clifton who state in their bestselling book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*: “To excel as a manager, to turn your people’s talents into

productive powerful strengths, requires an additional, all-important ingredient. Lacking this ingredient . . . you will never reach excellence. The all-important ingredient is *Individualization*.”³

We have found many organizations are looking for ways to encourage their team members and reward them for work well done, but using financial rewards to accomplish this purpose is not realistic. This is especially true in the areas of government, schools, social service agencies, ministries, and nonprofit organizations. Directors and administrators must find ways to encourage team members that do not require large amounts of financial resources. (In reality, as is discussed in the following chapter, using financial rewards to motivate and show appreciation is not very effective.)

Finally, there is a bit of good news for organizational leaders. When leaders actively pursue teaching their team members how to communicate authentic appreciation in the ways desired by the recipients, the whole work culture improves. Interestingly, even managers and supervisors report they enjoy their work more! *All* of us thrive in an atmosphere of appreciation.

WHEN APPRECIATION MISSES THE MARK

We have found that each person has a primary and secondary language of appreciation. Our primary language communicates more deeply to us than the others. Although we will accept appreciation in all five languages, we will not *feel* truly valued unless the message is communicated through our primary language. When messages are repeatedly sent in ways outside of that language, the intent of the message “misses the mark” and loses the impact the sender had hoped for.

We all tend to communicate to others in ways that are most meaningful to us—we “speak our own language.” However, if

the message is not expressed in the appreciation language of the intended recipient, the action will not be especially meaningful to them. That is why many employees are not encouraged when they receive a reward as part of the company's recognition plan—it doesn't speak in their preferred language of appreciation. (Or, even if their language is Tangible Gifts, the specific reward may not have much value to them.)

"I've gotten various gifts over the years for anniversaries or recognition for 'above and beyond' effort," said one woman who works in a midsized company. "But since gifts are my least-favored language, these don't do a lot for me. You know what makes me feel good? Having a really interesting conversation with my boss or other senior leaders about what's going on in the organization." This woman's primary language of appreciation is Quality Time. For her, trinkets miss the mark.

Then there's Lindsay, who consistently leads her department in sales and has the highest marks in customer service. At their department's quarterly meetings, she is regularly called forward to receive a reward. For Lindsay, this is like torture. She hates to be in front of groups, and she doesn't want public attention. What she would value is time with her supervisor regularly where she could share her ideas on how to improve customer service. Lindsay's primary language of appreciation is also Quality Time, not Words of Affirmation. Giving her public recognition is embarrassing to Lindsay and a negative experience for her—clearly not affirming.

This process of miscommunication can be frustrating to both the sender and the recipient. Consider the following scenario:

"What's the matter with Elliot?" Anna asked a colleague. "I tell him he's doing a good job. I even bought him tickets to the Lakers game this weekend to show him how much I appreciated the extra

hours he put in to get the project done. And yet, he mopes around here and tells Alex that he doesn't feel the management team really values what he does. What does he want?"

What Elliot wants is help from his teammates when a project needs to be done. He doesn't like to work by himself, although he will if necessary. He values Acts of Service and would be really encouraged if either his colleagues or his supervisor would stay late with him some evening and pitch in to help him get the project done. Telling him "Thanks" or giving him some tangible gift after the fact is okay, but it doesn't really meet his emotional need for feeling appreciated.

This leads to the overall thesis of this book. *We believe that people in the workplace need to feel appreciated in order for them to enjoy their job, do their best work, and continue working over the long haul.* When team members feel truly valued, good results follow.

Tony Schwartz, president and CEO of The Energy Project, puts it well:

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.⁴

Understanding what makes you and your coworkers feel encouraged can significantly improve your relationships in the workplace, increase team members' sense of engagement, and create a more positive work environment. Our goal is to provide the tools, resources, and information to help you gather this knowledge

and apply it in a practical, meaningful way in your work setting.

Making It Personal:

- 1. When you want to communicate appreciation to your colleagues, how do you typically do so? How effective do you believe your actions are (in making your colleague feel appreciated)?*
- 2. How well do you believe your coworkers know how to express appreciation to you? What have they tried? What has been the impact on you?*
- 3. When you feel discouraged at work, what actions by others can encourage you?*
- 4. On a scale of 1-10, how appreciated do you currently feel by your immediate supervisor?*
- 5. On a scale of 1-10, how appreciated do you feel by your coworkers?*