

How to Give More Powerful Praise

9-minute read

The battle for retaining talent and the battle for top-notch employee performance both have a rather down-home ally: authentic, human-to-human praise.



We're not talking about tossing around compliments or being a nice person (though it's nice to be nice). Telling an employee "Good job!" or "Great idea!" usually manages to compliment them and will probably make them feel good. But it's not powerful praise, because it doesn't really move the needle on behavior.

Praise becomes powerful when it influences people positively, strengthening their good habits and causing them to engage in the desired behavior more often. Done right, powerful praise reinforces good behavior, making it stronger.

The Value of Praise

We hear a lot of excuses for lousy, infrequent, or absent praise:

"They're paid to do it right."

"They're grownups."

"I don't need a pat on the back when I do my job."

Some bosses resist praising because they're afraid it makes them look weak, as if they don't have high standards. Others worry that an employee they publicly praise might screw up later—making them look like they propped up some kind of clown.

Let's dispense with the excuses right up-front: Powerful praise not only improves productivity and retention in the employee being praised, but it also has positive effects on everyone who hears it—giving your team examples of what success looks like.



Many managers find it difficult to give praise, or don't understand the benefits, or can't be bothered to take the time. [Gallup research](#) found that only one in three workers said they had received job-related praise in the past seven days—and those who hadn't received any praise were twice as likely to be planning to leave in the next year.

In our consulting work, we've seen that properly delivered praise has such a dramatic effect on performance that some bosses get unnerved. They had built up a narrative that they were managing bad people—"problem employees" who would never get anything right. After we explained how to praise and had the bosses keep track of the positive and negative feedback they were giving, their employees shaped up so quickly that some supervisors had a hard time dealing with it.

They had to face the fact that it had been in their power to create good employees all along.

Praise 101

Praise costs you nothing but your time, and we think you'll find it's a good use of it. Here are some basics of giving powerful praise:

The value of noticing. You can't praise well unless you're attuned to the good work your employees are doing, so begin by training yourself to notice it.

Bill once counseled a couple who had been married for many years but had fallen out of love. He gave them an assignment: Each was to keep track, on index cards, of how often they expressed their appreciation to the other. After a week, the husband came back with a single blank card—and a big clue as to what had happened to his wife's affection. Bill then gave him a new assignment: He should keep track of how often he noticed—in his head—his wife doing nice things, things he would appreciate if he took a second to think about it. This husband wasn't being mean-spirited; he just needed to rebuild the mental habit of noticing. Once he had learned to notice, his appreciative comments picked right up. Et voilà! The marriage improved dramatically.

If you think you've been taking your employees' work for granted, then build the habit of noticing what's praiseworthy in others. How do you do that? Practice it—at work, at home, and on innocent bystanders. The more often you notice what's deserving of praise, the more opportunities you'll give yourself to influence others with powerful praise.



Praise ratios. You might think you're doing well if you're giving employees "balanced" feedback, praising about as often as you criticize. But whether it's parents talking to children, teachers talking to students, or bosses talking to subordinates, [considerable research](#) suggests that a better ratio is closer to five instances of praise for every one instance of criticism.

Of course, that all depends on the quality of your praise and criticism—and how well your recipients receive them. So leaning toward a yet greater proportion of praise wouldn't be a bad idea. We've also found that higher ratios—as high as 10 to 1—can produce faster results with problem performers.

(Do try to be roughly evenhanded about delivering praise among the members of your team so you don't unconsciously create comparisons and resentment.)

Specificity. Here's a pet peeve among behavioral psychologists: when people praise others so broadly that the praise-ee leaves the conversation having to guess what they actually did well. In other words, the praise was not reinforcement that strengthens the likelihood of the praiseworthy behavior happening again.

Instead of merely thanking a colleague for their work, ask yourself what you liked about it, or about how they approached the task. Rather than saying just, "Nice job on that white paper," you might add: "It was so well-designed, and the bullet points really made it easy to absorb the larger message."

The better you can connect praise with specific actions, the more impact it will have. Powerful praise works because it is also empowering praise, giving your recipient information about what you liked and why.

Immediacy. Adult humans can mentally bridge the time gap between an action and its result—we know that exercising now will make us strong later—but we aren't terribly good at it. The sooner you can praise after the praiseworthy event, the more impact it will have.

If you tell an employee that you appreciate the way they handled a tight deadline last week, your praise had really better make up in specificity what it lacks in immediacy. Immediate praise helps people connect what they did with what you liked. So don't wait for spectacular performance; "better" performance is quite deserving enough of your praise on the spot. And definitely don't wait for the next annual performance review.



Praising in public. Depending on the circumstances, praising in front of others is a wonderful way to convey to a work team what success looks like in your organization. Say something positive about the person in front of the group, perhaps with a head nod to the praiseworthy. (“Sasha and her team put together a report that I think really explores the risks we need to be looking at. Very thorough.”)

Some people find it embarrassing to be praised in front of others. If you notice this happening, save your more elaborate praise for when you’re talking to the person alone, and deliver public praise about them with a very light touch. You might say, without making eye contact, “Cynthia was able to get this through our approval process early, which really helps.” That lets the rest of the team know what kind of behavior you value without putting Cynthia on the spot.

Another quick, public way to praise employees is to do it nonverbally. We once met an extremely effective supervisor who conveyed his approval on a noisy shop floor by giving subordinates a two-finger salute on the rim of his hard hat. He was letting them know he was paying attention to their good work, and they adored him for it.

Advanced Praise

Here are some more challenging topics in the field of praise:

Labeling. Praise should always be specific, but highly specific praise can be a bit austere. “I appreciate that you put pens and paper out for each of the attendees” might be precise, but it’s also pretty dry. The trick here is to add a positive label that references the characteristic you’re trying to support. You might add, “That was thoughtful.” Or, “That was good planning.” Or, “That was great attention to detail.”

When you give people positive labels, they will begin to live up to them. You’re not only reinforcing good behavior patterns, but you’re also boosting self-esteem and morale. You’re helping someone link their behavior to a virtue. You can even give employees a motto of sorts to live up to—“Every time we hit an obstacle, you come up with a creative solution.”

By the way, this principle works in reverse if you must deliver criticism. Talk about the single instance you’re criticizing—and what you’d like to see instead—but never attach a label to less-than-desirable performance, unless you want your employee to live down to it.



Connecting to a higher purpose. You can go a step beyond positive labels: Praise can be a vehicle to help you reinforce your brand, purpose, or strategy. If an employee's performance advances your organization's mission, then frame your praise in a way that makes that clear.

If an employee handles a customer complaint well, you can say, "You were so empathetic. Without agreeing with everything she said, you really conveyed that you understood her perspective. She left happy and I think you've won us a customer for life, and that's part of our core mission here. Nicely done!"

For more on connecting to purpose, see "[Success on Purpose.](#)"

Praising the hard-to-praise. Some people have a difficult time accepting praise for reasons that go beyond just being shy. Whether it's about their distrust of you (surely you're BS'ing them) or their distrust of themselves (surely they don't deserve it), praise makes them genuinely uneasy.

Think of such people as still thirsty for praise—but holding only a thimble, not a bucket. You will have to try to give them their bucket of appreciation in thimble-sized portions, by keeping your words brief, making your comments in passing, and limiting eye contact. (That description may call to mind the challenge of praising rebellious teenagers, which is in fact where we learned the technique.)

Executive leaders can be hard to praise, too. They might be guarding against brownnosing, or they may view your praise as a judgment (though a positive one) that you don't have the right to make. Be cautious about praising up the chain until you have built a trusting relationship with the person.

Dealing with deflected praise. When someone contradicts your praise ("Actually, it was pretty subpar") or declines it ("I was just doing my job"), follow up with another statement of appreciation. Say, "Nevertheless, I admired it and wanted you to know that," which is a sentiment they can't reasonably argue with.

And the next time you praise that person, consider whether they might respond better to just a thimbleful.

Setting a good example. When it comes to receiving praise, don't discourage someone who gives you a compliment. When you accept others' praise gracefully, you are in essence giving gentle praise for praising.



Praise-deflecting isn't humble. It can actually be insulting, since you're telling the other person that their judgment is faulty. Also, many people are shy about giving compliments, and you don't want them to feel foolish or intrusive. It's so much better to reinforce the lovely behavior called "praise." Smile and say, "Thanks. I appreciate that."

Praise can be a powerful act of leadership. Done expertly, it reinforces good performance in an individual and creates practical models for the whole team to follow. Incidentally, it also has a positive impact on the person delivering the praise, including [production of positive emotions](#) such as gratitude, admiration, and elevation. You'll find you get more enjoyment from the people whose strengths you're noticing and complimenting—and the entire workplace will become more pleasant. Not a bad deal for anyone!

