

10 Ways to Give and Receive Praise

By Dianna Booher

Just because praising others comes easily, don't be lulled into thinking all commendations and congratulations are equally effective and welcomed. Praise, just like constructive criticism, takes skillful delivery. For some people, accepting praise can be as difficult as accepting a gift. If you wouldn't consider insulting someone who has given you a gift, you wouldn't want to insult them by not accepting their praise. These tips will provide perspective on both the giving and receiving end.

Notice Opportunities to Praise

There are many reasons people don't give praise: Others never come up to their standard of performance. Some managers hold the philosophy that punishment works better than praise. Some people are naturally impersonal and distant around others. Still others think they're too busy to notice or comment on "little things." And finally, some people's lack of praise can be attributed to the fact that they're too hard on themselves. They see even stellar performance as routine. They work, they get a paycheck; they also expect themselves to do good work without verbal pats on the back. Therefore, they take it for granted that others operate under that same principle.

For better relationships, make a point to notice praiseworthy effort, performance, or results. Something's bound to surface that deserves a compliment. If not, remind yourself to look harder.

Distinguish Between Praise and Flattery

Flattering comments focus on what someone has no control over and did nothing to earn. Praise, on the other hand, focuses on commendable character, performance, or behavior. Flattery: "You're so tall. You strike an imposing figure as a leader." Praise: "You have analyzed our situation well and come up with a unique strategy to build market share. Your plan is highly creative." Flattery, on the other hand, can leave people feeling as though they've been patted on the head like children.

Consider Emotional "Behavior" as Worthy of Praise

For a customer service rep to keep her cool under pressure with an irate customer can take as much presence of mind as designing an ad campaign. And it can be as important, as well. When it comes to praise, don't limit your thinking to action or performance. Examples: "I appreciate your admitting the error. Many people would have pretended they didn't know what had happened to the machine." "I admire the way you stood firm in your position yesterday, but did not become aggressive with the customer. That takes finesse and patience that many people don't have."

Praise People When You Don't Want Anything

Offering praise should not be a prelude to more work. "I really like the way this report is laid out. Do you have a minute to show me how to put those graphics in my report?" is likely to bring a frown rather than a smile. Make praise an "end" in and of itself, not a transitional thought.

Personalize Your Comments With "You"

Just as big corporations use the "you" approach in referring to individual customers by name ("Thank you, Ms. Harris, for shopping with us."), individuals should offer their praise that way. "You do a good job in maintaining this equipment" sounds more personal than "Good job on the maintenance." "Great idea" isn't as meaningful as "You came up with a great idea--thanks." "You put in a lot of extra time over the weekend" sounds more personal than "This took a lot of weekend time, I'm sure." Praise with the "you" approach.

Follow Awkwardly Accepted Praise With a Question

To lessen the awkward moment when your compliments might make other people stammer and stutter, simply follow your compliment with a question. The other person can focus on answering your question without having to handle a response to the praise. Examples: "Nice job in handling that customer. Has he been in here before?" "I like your menu selections for all the convention meals--most people just take whatever they offer and don't put in the time you invested in making sure we had such a variety. Do you plan all of the sales meetings?"

Consider Third-Person Praise

In a staff meeting, the manager stands in the doorway and comments, "Where's Sylvia? That woman has the stamina of five people. She made thirty-two appointments last week. Will somebody find out what her secret is and let the rest of us in on it." Somebody will be sure to pass on to Sylvia what the manager said about her performance. Third-party pass-ons build morale because they are even more believable delivered as "fact" to someone else.

Deliver "Eavesdropped" Praise

Deliver your praise to a second person within earshot of the one being praised. You'll eliminate their need to respond and increase the value of the compliment because it was shared. Example: One colleague talks "around" a friend seated at the table with others. "Somebody should tell Carlos that the campaign is over. He's still beating the bushes for new customers. Would you believe he reeled in three new accounts last week?" Carlos doesn't have to respond; he can smile modestly and bask in the glow.

Keep in mind the other side of this equation: It often takes as much social savvy to receive praise as it does to deliver it.

When Receiving a Compliment, Don't Match It

You will sound insincere if you return the exact compliment someone paid you: "I like your new hairstyle." Response: "Well, yours looks nice also." The attempt to acknowledge the remark gracefully is appreciated, but the matching compliment will diminish the other person's gift of words to you. If you sincerely feel that a matching compliment is in order, say something like, "You beat me to the punch; I was going to tell you how much I liked..."

When Receiving Praise, Accept It Graciously

Never simply shrug and let a compliment "roll off" as if unnoticed, expected, or unappreciated. If praise embarrasses you and you feel at a loss for words, a simple acknowledgement is enough: "Thank you." "I appreciate your noticing." "I like to hear that." "That makes me feel really good." "It's nice of you to say that." "Thanks for mentioning that. It makes me feel good that you noticed." "Thank you. I'm glad you're pleased with the results."

Gifts of praise arrive too infrequently. Enjoy them.

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For more tips on conflict resolution, see Communicate with Confidence: How to Say It Right the First Time and Every Time (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.