

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

The power of praise: offering praise at home and in the workplace

Everyone experiences failures in life. If these are repeatedly emphasized without being balanced by praise, we may gradually develop a way of thinking (conscious or otherwise) that says, "This isn't worth the effort," or, on a deeper level, "I'm not worthy."

The word praise comes from the Latin verb "pretiare," meaning to value highly. Maybe you have noticed that people who know how to give praise hold themselves and others in high esteem. They find it easier to acknowledge mistakes and accept new challenges because they don't perceive mistakes and uncertainty as evidence of unworthiness. Somehow, they are able to inspire with their confidence: If you can do this, I bet you can do that.

Perhaps you've withheld praise because you were not sure how it would be taken. What's important is the honesty and intention behind our words. As long as people sense we are being sincere – that we're not humouring them, giving them mixed messages or trying to serve our own purposes – our praise will likely be well received.

Tips and Tools You can Use

When considering the power of praise, here are some factors to keep in mind:

Praise recognizes effort as well as achievement. Whenever possible, link praise to personal skill and effort as opposed to factors over which an individual has little or no control. Telling a colleague, "The way you followed up on that request made the client very happy," is more meaningful than saying, "Congratulations on your fifth year with the company!"

Offer praise relevant to the issue. If someone is feeling discouraged about losing weight, for example, be there for him or her. Let the person know you believe he or she is still a good person, but find a way to offer support so that he or she does not give up. Remind them of the progress they have made so far. That tells them you share their concern and encourages them to continue.

Don't make yourself the issue. With children, it's especially important not to confuse your pride or love for them with what they have or have not done right. Otherwise, they may have trouble separating parental approval from the personal satisfaction to be gained from their own efforts. When offering praise to others, put their deeds in the spotlight. Instilling a sense of pride in children is easier when we say, "That's something you can be proud of."

Try not to delay praise. Giving credit where and when it's due can go a long way in avoiding misunderstandings and injured feelings. In meetings, for example, try acknowledging others' contributions as a normal part of the conversation by saying, "Your idea sounds interesting," or, "Thanks for pointing that out."

Find different ways to recognize people. This will prevent praise from becoming mundane. At work, recognize good performance with an upbeat note, praise in a company bulletin or in a meeting. With friends or family members, honour someone's achievement with a special dinner or outing, or perhaps with an amusing story or poem.

Break the "yes-but" habit. “Yes, but…it's good, but…but not good enough.” That's what we are really telling people when we let the word "but" slip into our expressions of praise. It's a word that cancels out all satisfaction, all pleasure, and all sense of accomplishment for what has gone before. The word "but" may even turn the whole conversation into a fault-finding exercise that prevents people from focusing on solutions.

Try replacing "but" with "and." Note that, "Yes-but…”only gives excuses," whereas, "Yes-and…” is an agenda for action.

Learning to Praise Yourself

Recognizing the good in others is easier when we can see it in ourselves. Here's how to begin making that "little critic" in your mind move over a bit to accommodate your "cheering section":

Start looking at the big picture. All human traits have both positive and negative qualities. Stubbornness, for example, can prevent us from hearing others and from learning. It can be the glue that keeps us sticking to a challenging task. Being meticulous will reduce the likelihood of errors. On the other hand, it can keep us from moving on to other tasks.

Praise yourself for the steps that you make in exercising good judgment – or for any action you have taken toward meeting a goal. Many successful people are in the habit of doing a nightly "inventory" where they take time to review the events of the day, note how they reacted towards them, where improvement may be needed and where they can give themselves a pat on the back.

Praise yourself for small improvements. Big improvements are the accumulation of many little ones. As your self-confidence grows so will the size of your improvements.

Did you ever stop to think of the impact that you make on someone, simply from the way you interact with that person? You may not ever realize the influence that you have over some, and the influence others have over you. All of this accomplished by language and communication. You may not be able to change the attitude of people you answer to, but you can encourage the people you deal with – those who answer to you – children, employees, family and friends. And remember that no one wants to hear that they're disappointing you by not doing what is expected.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact LifeWorks to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.
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