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**Wade Into Water**

*Winning streaks often start and continue because some proactive leader takes initiative or sacrifices for the greater good, thus causing a tipping point or a virtuous cycle. In the waters of leadership, intent—why you choose to lead—matters. Reflect on your motives and means.*

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# Praise Principles

*Release peak performance.*



by Dianna Booher

**M**ANY MANAGERS share Pascal's philosophy: "Kind words do not cost much—yet they accomplish much." Indeed, as William James wrote: "The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated."

Just because praising others comes easily, don't think all commendations and congratulations are equally effective. Praise, just like constructive criticism, takes skillful delivery. For some people, accepting praise can be as difficult as accepting a gift.

Perhaps these 10 tips will help:

## 1. Notice opportunities to praise.

People fail to give praise for many reasons: perhaps others never measure 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 the "little things." 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. For better relationships, make a point to notice praiseworthy effort, performance, or results. Look for things that deserve a compliment.

## 2. Distinguish between praise and flattery.

Flattery focuses on what someone has no control over and did nothing to earn. Praise 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."

## 3. 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. 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 equipment." Or: "I admire the way you stood firm in your position yesterday, but didn't become aggressive with the customer. That takes finesse and patience that many people don't have."

## 4. 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. Could you show me how to put those graphics in my report?" will likely bring a frown. Make praise an "end" in and of itself, not a transitional thought.

## 5. 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."), offer your praise in that same way: "You do a good job in maintaining this equipment" sounds more personal than "Good job." "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 time, I'm sure." Praise with the "you" approach.

## 6. Follow praise with a question when delivered to the timid.

To lessen the awkward moment when your praise might make another person stammer and stutter, simply follow your compliment with a question. The other person can focus on answering your question without having to respond to the praise. Examples: "Nice job in handling that customer. Has he been in here before?" "I like your menu

selections for the convention meals. Do you plan all of the sales meetings?"

## 7. 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 32 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.

## 8. 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. Mark Twain once quipped: "I can live for two months on a good compliment." But keep in mind: It often takes as much social savvy to receive praise as it does to deliver it.

## 9. 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 office decor." Response: "Well, yours looks nice also." We appreciate the attempt to acknowledge the remark, but the matching compliment will diminish the other person's gift of words to you. If you feel that a matching compliment is in order, say, "You beat me to the punch; I was going to tell you how much I liked..."

## 10. 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, simply say, "Thank you." "I appreciate your noticing." "I like to hear that." "That makes me feel great." "It's nice of you to say that." "Thanks for mentioning that." "I'm glad you're pleased with the results."

Gifts of praise arrive too infrequently. Enjoy them. **LE**

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**ACTION:** Apply these principles of praise.