



Thank You – I Think!

by Grace L. Judson

Have you ever gotten a compliment that you didn't understand and weren't sure how to take?

I don't mean what's typically called a "backhanded compliment," which is an insult in disguise. I mean something that's truly meant as a compliment, but you can't quite figure out what it means, or perhaps it makes you feel uncomfortable instead of appreciated.

Most compliments you receive are probably like this to some extent — and in fact, most of the compliments you *give* are likely to fall into this category as well. Simply put, we're just not taught how to show appreciation to others in a way that makes them feel good *and* provides useful feedback.

As a leader, giving effective compliments, a.k.a. positive feedback and appreciation, can make a tremendous difference in your ability to motivate your team and to win the respect and cooperation of your peers. "Effective" is the key word here, because *ineffective* compliments can backfire by making people feel uncomfortable and manipulated.

Here are the three primary elements to giving effective positive feedback.

1. **Actions, not people**

"Rachel is so funny!"

"Wow, Joe is a really organized project manager!"

It may seem as if those are compliments, but in reality you're simply applying labels to the person. Even when apparently positive, this type of label can be viewed as a judgement. Rachel may know half a dozen people she considers much funnier than she is, while Joe may secretly believe that he's totally disorganized and putting up a false front in meetings.

Focus instead on the specific actions or behavior that you noticed and want to recognize. And address your comments directly to the person instead of speaking about them as if they weren't even there.

2. **Details, details, details**

"That was a really funny joke, Rachel!"

"Joe, you have this project organized to the hilt."

Now that you're not labeling people, these sound a little closer to reality — real comments about real events. And you'll find that people respond more positively to appreciation phrased this way. But it's when you provide the *details* of what you liked that you'll really see their faces light up. You'll notice, too, that their response will go much further than just a smile. They'll be more likely to repeat the behavior you acknowledged, to look for ways to gain additional positive feedback, and to offer help when you need it.

Identifying the details takes a little more work on your part, but it's well worth your time — and it's fun, too. After all, it's much more pleasant to think about what someone has done well than to pick apart their performance to find out what they've done wrong.

3. **So what?**

"Rachel, I loved the way you used different accents to point out the different people talking in the joke you told."

"Joe, I like how you've laid out the project schedule with each task's dependencies and resource requirements."

These are well-thought-out, focused examples of positive feedback. You're speaking directly to the individuals, and you've clearly identified in each case exactly what the person did. Rachel used different accents; Joe has identified dependencies and resource requirements so you can see them at a glance.

What's still missing is the "so what" factor. Why is this behavior of theirs important? How did it make you feel? This is what provides the real impact of your acknowledgement. People want to know that their actions have made a positive difference to others — so why not give them feedback that clearly spells out what the difference was for you?

Here's the final revision of the two examples:

"Rachel, I loved the way you used different accents to point out the different people talking in the joke you told. It made the story very clear for me, so when you got to the punch line, I knew exactly why it was funny. Lots of times I don't get jokes, so I really appreciate how you told this one — I laughed my head off!"

"Joe, I like how you've laid out the project schedule with each task's dependencies and resource requirements. I can look down the list and see exactly where we may run into conflicts, and I can plan ahead to be sure that we get the right resources lined up to be ready when we need them. This makes me feel very confident that we're going to be able to meet the project schedule."

Try giving at least one person, whether at work or at home, a compliment phrased this way every day, and see how it changes their reactions to you. Let me know your results — and by all means, drop me an email or give me a call if you need some help with giving positive feedback.

*"Get not your friends by bare compliments, but by giving them sensible tokens of your love."
Socrates, Greek philosopher, 469 BC - 399 BC.*

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