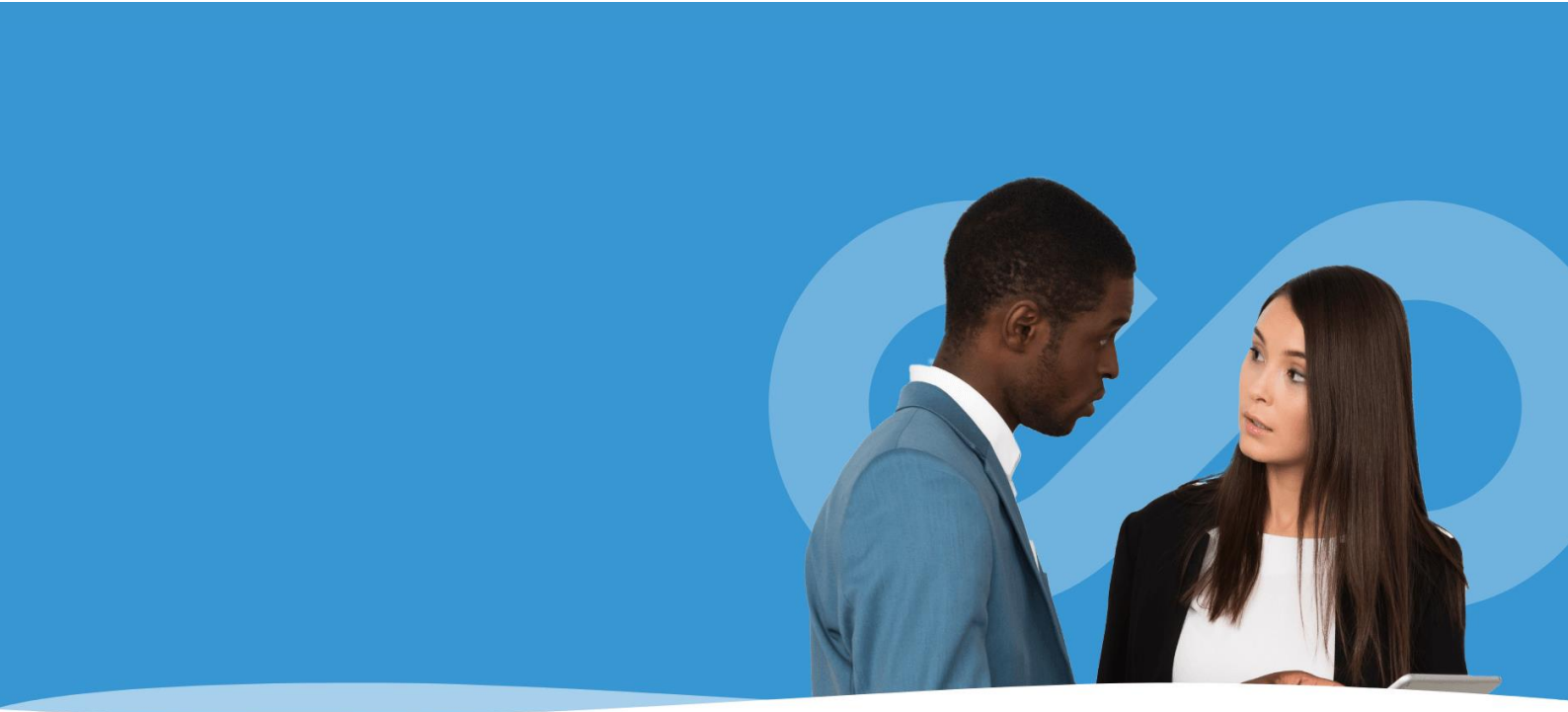




Difficult conversations - text

Chapter 5

Appreciation

Appreciation

How are you at receiving a complement? Do you feel warm and fuzzy, or do you cringe and deflect it?

If you feel uncomfortable with appreciation, you are not alone. But it could be holding you back from recognising and celebrating your colleagues' strengths.

Your appreciation

Before we look at why appreciation is hard and how to improve, take a moment to consider where you are now.

Is appreciation built in to how you work with others, or do you wait for formal opportunities such as appraisals? Or perhaps you are somewhere in between?

Think back over the last month at work and the various interactions you have had with colleagues. On average, how often do you verbally express your appreciation for others?

- Very frequently
- Fairly often
- At specific milestones
- Rarely, but they know

A lot of people find it awkward and difficult to verbally appreciate others; it is easier to stay on the safe, non-emotional ground of tasks and results. But most teams and organisations need more positivity and appreciation. A majority of employees report that they get very little recognition and feedback about their strengths.

This chapter will help you appreciate others more often in a simple, straightforward way.

Appreciation is good for you

Appreciation, acknowledgement, recognition and gratitude are good for you. They all generate neurochemicals - dopamine, serotonin or oxytocin - which increase connection, trust, positivity and wellbeing in individuals, teams and working relationships.

When you appreciate others, you smile more, feel happier, increase effectiveness and innovation, notice what's working well and inspire others. You can read more about the benefits in [this Forbes article](#).

Appreciation is a win-win!

But there are many reasons why we avoid giving appreciation

There are many very good reasons that keep us from appreciating others. Consider all of these:

- Our attention is focused on tasks and other things
- We make assumptions, for example that they already know we appreciate them
- It's uncomfortable – “this isn't something we do around here”
- Some people feel that if you say something positive to them, it's only because you want something in return, so you avoid creating those feelings in others
- It doesn't feel “authentic” – because it's not familiar
- Don't know how

Assumptions about appreciation

As you know from previous chapters, your brain makes assumptions frequently to fill in gaps in information. This happens frequently when it comes to appreciation. Our underlying assumptions - such as 'others already know they are valued and they do not need to be told' - need to be challenged as they can lead to unhelpful outcomes.

Consider these common assumptions regarding appreciation to see the likely impact in the other person's brain.

No news is good news

You know that if there was a problem with someone's performance they would know about it, and therefore no news is good news. You assume that *they* know this too.

The reality is, they might not. And, unfortunately, the negative orientation of the brain makes 'no news is good news' very difficult to work with anyway. People will default to their own beliefs that they are not good enough. Their brain needs to be reminded and their attention needs to be pointed to what they are doing well.

I told them earlier this year

You told someone earlier this year that they were doing well, and you assume that they know this is still the case.

However, the brain has more circuitry dedicated to interpreting something as a threat rather than a potential reward. This bias means that we are much more likely to interpret everyday comments and interactions as negative. We need to consciously bring in positive comments to balance this; people need regular reminders.

I gave them a bonus

You might assume that people interpret a bonus as a gesture of appreciation.

But bonuses do not create a feeling of appreciation in the social brain. A bonus is impersonal. If you follow a bonus with a personal message about why they deserve it, then they are likely to hear it as appreciation.

They do not need the soft stuff

You might assume that appreciation is not needed in your business, as you need to spend your time focusing on our business outcomes and results.

But we are not robots. We are emotional creatures driven by a social and emotional brain. Emotions motivate us and get us to focus on business results. A lack of positivity creates a transactional workplace where people do only the minimum. Create a positive workplace and they will give you their best and go above and beyond.

Reflect

Consider which of the above points might keep you from appreciating others. Take note of these and see how you might be able to address them as we move forward.

Gratitude

So how do you get beyond discomfort and start to feel authentic when you appreciate others?

You just do it!

Anything new is uncomfortable; any change will be resisted by the brain. So you need to push your way out of your comfort zone and practise until you find a new comfort zone - as you did when you learned to ride a bicycle, drive a car or use a new mobile phone. It wasn't *authentic, automatic or even comfortable* at first. It was awkward, clumsy and it took some focus and repetition to master it. It is the same for giving appreciation.

Practising gratitude is a place to start.

This video on the [Science of gratitude](#) provides some excellent reasons why it is important to engage in this important practice.

Steps for practising gratitude

Step 1: Set a 2 minute timer

Step 2: Take those 2 minutes to focus on and write down to focus on what you are you grateful for in your life. Your health, wealth, privileges, access to healthy food and healthcare, your home, friends, colleagues, your education, job and career, the opportunities you have had and so on. These are easy to take for granted, but you would really miss them if you didn't have them.

Step 3: Set another 1 minute timer and focus on the changes you have made in this programme and how those have positively affected others. Appreciate yourself for that.

Appreciating individuals

Now you are more aware of the positive people and things around you, you can focus on appreciating them.

"But I'm too busy to even think about appreciating people individually!" is a common thought. After all, you are focused on getting your job done and getting good results, right?

The truth is that appreciation takes very little time; it is just a matter of knowing how and then choosing to do it or making it a habit.

Focus your attention on appreciation

Consider these three steps to help you direct your attention and a few minutes of your time each day towards the essential skill of gratitude.

Notice your error detectors

Become aware of how often your attention is drawn to what is wrong with a situation rather than what is working well. How quickly do you point out a small error on a page? How much do you focus on the mistakes that others make or the habits they have that irritate you?

Once you start noticing, you will likely find that your error detectors have a strong hold on what your attention is drawn to.

Consciously redirect your attention

If you want to direct your attention more consciously - on appreciation vs tasks, for example - it will take some PFC energy. Until you have developed a habit of looking to the positive, you will need to use your PFC to actively point your attention.

As you have heard before, brain care and wellbeing support a strong PFC and a strong PFC gives you the capacity to direct your attention where you want it. Ensuring that you and others take care of your brains will also ensure that you can focus on appreciation.

Add appreciation to your routine

As with any habit you want to build, repetition will help you develop strong neural pathways which makes a behaviour feel like second-nature. Practise appreciation regularly. As you do, it will become more comfortable and habitual.

Consider bringing appreciation to your team or working groups. How could you and your team members build appreciation into your meetings or working sessions?

How to appreciate authentically

The key to meaningful, authentic appreciation is being personal. Look beyond the task to the quality or characteristic the person portrayed in their great work.

You do not have to write an essay or give a speech, it can be as quick as letting somebody know specifically what you are thanking them for when you say thank you. For example: *"Thanks for delivering that report and thanks for being so efficient!"*

Ask yourself these questions to help you find the words to appreciate.

What is their superpower?

What is the superpower this person has that makes them good at what they do?

For example: disciplined, intelligent, conceptual thinking, thorough, focused, aware?

How would you describe them to someone else?

How would you describe them to someone else?

For example: open-minded, intelligent, easy to be around, curious, motivating?

What is their attitude?

What is their attitude, beliefs or thinking?

For example: hungry to learn, committed, positive, generous, open-minded, accepting, happy?

What would you miss?

What would you miss about this person if they left your team?

For example: are they: fun, friendly, do they have a grounded sense of calm, are they responsible, engaging, motivating?

Why do you delegate to them?

When you delegate, why are they the right person for the job? Letting someone know why you have chosen them for a task can even motivate them to do it.

For example: are they creative, responsible, knowledgeable, detail-oriented, structured, timely?

Some tips for making appreciation easy

Appreciating others doesn't have to be a big drawn-out effort. It's something you can do in the middle of a conversation. For example, after receiving a report from a colleague, you might say,

Thanks for the report. I appreciate your attention to detail.

Or perhaps you appreciate their timeliness, commitment, consistency, thoroughness, writing style, graphical depictions or the tone they used in the report.

The point is to put your attention on what makes them good at creating results, then name that in your own authentic words. Keep it simple, easy-going and conversational.

Consider three colleagues whom you can appreciate in this way over the next few days.

Facilitate appreciation in your team

Appreciating individuals one on one will go a long way to helping them feel recognised and appreciated. But you are just one person. You cannot create a culture of positivity and appreciation if you are the only one appreciating others.

Facilitating appreciation in group environments such as team meetings will get everyone involved and encourage them to appreciate others as well.

How to encourage appreciation

Here is an activity that you can try out with your team, for example at a monthly meeting. Have the whole team appreciate one team member at a time.

Consider posing one or more of these questions:

- What is this person really good at?
- What do you appreciate about this person's efforts, output and/or their attitude?
- How do they keep the team productive and thriving?
- How do they keep us producing great results, learning, feeling safe, positive and well cared for?
- What's great about this person?

These questions are ideas to get you started. You can find another question that will focus attention on that person's strengths.

Appreciation exercises for teams

Not sure how to get started? Use one of these appreciation exercises as a structure. Consider giving the group a heads up that you will be focusing on appreciating each other in the meeting, so they have a chance to reflect.

1 minute hot seat

Go around the whole group, allowing one minute per person. Have other people 'shower' that person with appreciative comments. The person being appreciated should be encouraged not to say anything, but just breathe, listen and receive what people are saying - so they really hear it and don't deflect it. Then they get to say "Thank you" (but nothing else).

Examples:

- *"I really like how you lift everyone's mood."*
- *"You are always finding the positive in others."*
- *"You always get your work done on time and that makes my job easier."*
- *"You're really creative, I can always call and talk to you and end up with some new ideas."*

Virtual version:

To prevent everyone speaking over each other without physical cues in the room, nominate two people to be the appreciators. They and the person in the hot seat keep their camera on, everyone else turns theirs off. The appreciators change each time someone new is in the hot seat.

Post-it appreciation

Have people write an appreciative characteristic on a post-it note; have each person write 2 or 3 post-its for each of the other people on the team. Then distribute the post-its to the target person. Remind people to keep it positive.

This way the feedback is anonymous and plentiful.

Virtual version:

Using a collaborative virtual space, create a page or a section of a page for each person in the team. Everyone goes to each person's space and leaves 2 or 3 notes (anonymous if possible), where each note contains one or two words to describe a positive characteristic. E.g., charismatic, friendly, efficient, fun, thoughtful, easy going, etc.

Appreciate the team as a whole

Have everyone focus on the team as a whole. Each person appreciates the whole for how they work together.

Examples:

- *"I really like how we help each other out and we support one another."*
- *"We have a lot of fun together"*
- *"We rock! We create amazing results together! "*
- *"We trust each other."*