



## The Power of Praise

by Garold L. Markle

During a performance review, it's quite common for a direct report to ask you to skip the good stuff and go right to the things they need to change. This is particularly common with high performers who request you to forget the perfunctory preamble about Strengths and jump directly to the Areas for Improvement. If your goal is to influence future behavior and not simply document the file, however, my counsel is to do exactly the opposite. Not only do I suggest that you talk about the good stuff, I want you to do so with gusto.

Never underestimate the power of praise, especially when it is personal. Detailed formal recognition of extra effort and superior contribution is perhaps the most direct route to obtaining a repeat performance. You're not delaying the topic of behavior change when you start a coaching session with praise; you're locking in good behavior. Positive reinforcement, we learned in psychology, helps to avoid "extinction" – where a good behavior simply withers up and dies due to lack of attention.

In addition to reinforcing positive behavior, praise used in a career coaching session has value on several other levels. First, it helps calibrate your credibility as a coach. Most people know what they're good at and recognize the truth in positive statements that others make about them. Hence, once they accept a compliment as legitimate, it makes it harder to discount the messenger. If you go four for four with



Strengths, it's hard for them to argue, even with themselves, that you suddenly can't hit the broad side of a barn with an Area for Improvement. The silent observation that "You don't know me" doesn't work very well once you've done an artful job of demonstrating the contrary.

A third reason that it's important to conscientiously review Strengths before asking for improvements is that it is inherently fair. This has even more meaning if you are reviewing your observations with a layer of management above the person being coached and you're submitting them in writing to the formal record.

To be of ultimate value, praise must be personal. It must be replete with detailed examples.

I once observed a young MBA conduct a coaching session with a senior statesman who held two PhDs and three decades of seniority. It was the first time they'd formally talked since she got the job of Vice President, a position for which he'd also interviewed. She did such a thorough job of detailing his amazing impact as a "Thought Leader" that it literally brought him to tears. After telling her that "No one has ever thanked me for those things," he recanted his earlier declaration to retire. "I can work for you," he concluded.

I witnessed another senior staff member receive praise for a strength his boss called "Ownership." He defined that as "Acting like a family member and doing the right thing for our customers without fear of negative consequences." In defending his assertion, he retold a story of how this gentleman stopped the assembly line in the middle of a production run because he sensed a quality issue. Another supporting story was about how this empowered staff member had gone against protocol to give a customer an immediate refund on an expensive item even though he didn't have a receipt. The customer was so impressed he called the General Manager to praise this uncommon act of faith and to pledge ongoing patronage. Once again the coaching session ended in tears with the plaintive chorus of "I love you, man" stated in unison between these two long term work associates. The practice of Ownership will undoubtedly be cemented for the duration of this employee's career.

A final thought about praise comes from an old family adage: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." If you can find nothing positive to say about someone, simply fire him. You aren't fooling anyone by keeping him around longer so that you can document the file. You're more likely to make a big hole deeper by dumping on him and then keeping him around to document failure.

So, how can you best harness the power of praise?

1. **Coach, don't grade.** Use a performance management system, like [Catalytic Coaching](#), that doesn't require you to label and grade employees like school children. An hour of praiseful positive feedback can be wiped away with one simple expression like "Meets Expectations" or "Needs Improvement."



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2. **Keep notes.** Have both a physical and virtual file with each direct report's name on it and keep copies of documents that demonstrate noteworthy activities throughout the year. Use this Critical Incidents Log to determine themes about Strengths and to come up with the much needed examples of behavior that is praiseworthy.
3. **Personalize.** There is a big difference between "a tree" and "that tree, over there, in the front of the building off to the left hand side. The one with the big knot on the trunk and the initials 'K.G. + J.B.' carved on Eastern side." Detailed observations demonstrate both that you are paying attention and that you care.
4. **Fear of Loss.** If you struggle in finding something nice to say, ask yourself what you might miss most about your direct report if she were gone. An off-the-cuff remark like, "At least she keeps Accounts Receivable in order," can lead directly to a praiseworthy Strength.



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