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Communication

A Simple Compliment Can Make a Big Difference

by Erica Boothby, Xuan Zhao, and Vanessa K. Bohns

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Establishing a positive organizational culture, one in which employees and managers support one another, should be a top priority for organizations. Expressing praise and gratitude is particularly important for keeping up morale. Gratitude makes people feel valued, and positive feedback has been shown to mitigate the negative effects of stress on employee performance. Neuroscientists have even shown that the brain processes verbal affirmations similarly to financial rewards. As Alan Mulally, former CEO of Ford, has been quoted as saying of his employees, “It’s all about appreciating them, respecting them and thanking them at every step of the way.” While the importance of expressing praise and gratitude for establishing a positive organizational culture is clear, our research suggests that people may not follow Mulally’s advice because they underestimate the positive impact of kind words on others.

In two independently conducted lines of research, we asked participants to estimate how another person would feel after receiving a compliment. We then asked those same participants to actually compliment another person, and we compared how that person actually felt after receiving the compliment to how participants imagined that person would feel. Using the same basic experimental paradigm both with friends and strangers, we consistently found that people underestimated how good their compliment would make the recipient feel. Compliment-givers tend to believe the other person won’t enjoy their interaction as much as they actually do; in fact, they often believe that their exchange will probably make the person a little uncomfortable. Yet, consistently, receiving a compliment brightens people’s day much more than anticipated, leaving them feeling better, and less uncomfortable, than givers expect.

From the outside, it seems obvious that receiving a compliment would make someone feel better. Who doesn’t like when someone praises their

way of handling a tense situation at work, their choice of attire, or their presentation skills? Indeed, when asked, nearly 90% of people believe that they should compliment each other more often. And yet we tend not to give them in practice. In fact, only 50% of people in one experiment who wrote down a compliment for a friend actually sent the compliment along when given the chance, even though they'd already done the hardest part — coming up with something nice and thoughtful to say. That is, despite the widely shared desire to give more compliments, when faced with the decision people still often forgo low-cost opportunities to make others feel appreciated and valued.

These experiments highlight a critical psychological barrier to creating more positive organizational cultures: your mistaken expectations. When it comes to deciding whether to express praise or appreciation to another person, doubt creeps in. We find that people are overly concerned about their ability to convey praise skillfully (“What if my delivery is awkward?”), and their anxiety leaves them overly pessimistic about the effects their messages will have. Sadly, people’s pessimism causes them to refrain from engaging in this behavior that would make everyone better off.

To make matters worse, even after giving a compliment, when we asked people to reflect on how the other person felt, they were unable to adequately update their beliefs. They couldn’t realize the full benefit, and still underestimated their compliment’s value, suggesting this bias is particularly sticky.

One way to overcome this bias is to look at your compliments the same way the recipient does, focusing less on how competently you are conveying them and more on the warmth they convey. Indeed, one experiment found that focusing on the warmth, sincerity, and friendliness their compliments convey increases people’s interest in giving compliments to others. Absent a reminder to focus on warmth, however,

people are left to their own devices, and their tendency to focus on their own shortcomings may prevent them from giving as many compliments as they would like.

It's not just compliment-giving that suffers from undervaluation. Research shows that people also underestimate how much recipients appreciate gratitude. In one study, participants wrote gratitude letters expressing their appreciation to someone. The recipients of these letters were then asked how they felt receiving them. When the researchers compared recipients' feelings to senders' expectations, they found that senders underestimated how positive recipients would feel and overestimated how awkward they would feel. Here again, people's overly pessimistic beliefs can prevent them from doing others an act of kindness that would increase their feelings of appreciation.

You might worry that the positive impact of these kind words comes from their rarity, such that giving compliments too often will devalue one's compliments or make them seem less sincere. Our research suggests this is simply not the case. Although people in one experiment expected that those who received one compliment a day over the course of a week would feel increasingly less positive each day and find the compliments increasingly less sincere, contrary to expectations the compliments actually brightened recipients' mood similarly each day. The kind words did not become tired words. Just as people must eat regularly to satisfy their biological needs, the fundamental need to be seen, recognized, and appreciated by others, as it turns out, is a recurring need at work and in life.

There is ample evidence that giving someone else a boost, whether giving compliments or expressing gratitude, has a mood-lifting effect and contributes to well-being. This means that everyone benefits — givers and receivers alike. Creating a positive organizational culture is important, perhaps now more than ever. But we often hold back, unnecessarily,

because we aren't well calibrated to the actual effects our positive messages have on others.

As Aron Ain, CEO of Ultimate Kronos Group has said, “Gratitude is not about a one-time holiday party, day off, or spot bonus...It is about creating a *culture of gratitude*.” Creating such a culture is important now more than ever. But to get there, we must recognize the value of regularly expressing appreciation to one another, and what a positive impact such gestures can have.



Erica Boothby is a postdoctoral researcher at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, where she teaches negotiations. Her research broadly focuses on social connection and the psychological barriers that inhibit connection, with consequences for people's personal and professional lives. Prior to arriving at the Wharton School, Erica completed her PhD at Yale University and worked at Cornell University's Behavioral Economics and Decision Research Center.



Xuan Zhao is a Research Scientist at the SPARQ Center (Social Psychological Answers to Real-World Questions), Stanford University. She studies how to help people connect, offer and appreciate different perspectives, foster meaningful conversations and positive interactions, and create inclusive environments. She also studies how people perceive and interact with/via robotic technologies and their downstream consequences. Xuan received her PhD in psychology from Brown University. Contact: xuanzhao@stanford.edu



Vanessa K. Bohns is an associate professor of Organizational Behavior at the ILR School at Cornell University. She is the author of the forthcoming book, *You Have More Influence Than You Think* (W.W. Norton, September 2021).