Good managers give constructive criticism—but truly masterful leaders offer constructive praise

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Getting feedback from your coworkers is scary. A leader at one of my previous jobs once said that my emotional stability fell somewhere between that of a squalling infant and pubescent teen. (Cool, cool.) Now research shows that not only are most managers bad at giving constructive criticism—they're even less likely to give constructive praise.

In two surveys conducted by leadership development consultancy Zenger/Folkman, each of nearly 8,000 managers, 44% of managers reported that they found it stressful and difficult to give negative feedback. One-fifth avoid the practice entirely. Even more surprisingly, nearly 40% of leaders conceded to never giving *positive* reinforcement, either.

That's a big problem—both for employees and for their boss's ability to manage them effectively. The study found that a boss's willingness to give positive feedback was the strongest predictor of whether their direct reports perceive them to be effective, honest communicators. (Managers' comfort giving negative feedback barely influenced this perception.) Ironically, managers who report regularly giving negative feedback were most likely to *believe* they gave "honest, straightforward feedback," regardless of whether they also used positive reinforcement.

Most leaders "vastly underestimate the power and necessity of positive reinforcement," Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman, CEO and president of Zenger/Folkman, write in Harvard Business Review. An abundance of research shows that giving positive feedback increases employees' sense that they're learning and growing at their jobs, makes them feel valued, and leads to increased confidence and competence. A 2015 Gallup survey found that 67% of employees whose managers communicated their strengths were fully engaged in their work, as compared to 31% of employees whose managers only communicated their weaknesses. One study found that high-performing teams receive nearly six times more positive feedback than less effective teams—evidence that positive reinforcement really does help the bottom line.

So why do managers shy away from a seemingly simple way to motivate their employees? Zenger says that some fear that offering positive feedback will create close relationships with employees they may need to fire in the future. Others think positive feedback will be interpreted as "blowing smoke," or utterly disingenuous. And unfortunately, some managers see positive feedback as "un-macho"—a sign of weakness in competitive, male-dominated industries.

"The final reason, I suspect, is that when you begin to pass on approbation and positive feedback, you are setting yourself up as a judge toward the other person," Zenger says in an interview, "and many of us resist being in that position." It takes self-confidence to tell another person what they're good at and why, with the underlying implication that you're in a position to be able to discern such things.

But once you overcome potential emotional barriers to giving praise, there's a pretty simple formula for offering positive feedback: Be specific, discuss the impact of the other person's behavior, and show your gratitude.

General compliments like "Awesome job on that presentation," or "You're a great writer" may make an employee feel good, but they rarely shape long-term behavior and competency. When praising a colleague, it's essential to single out the specific behavior or trait you observed and when you observed it, says Zenger. For example: "In last week's meeting, I noticed you were willing to question the CEO's vision for our pod's sales goals—I really appreciate your confidence."

Such clarity allows the recipient to reflect on and internalize specific behaviors, without over- or underestimating their general competency. This specificity is especially important when offering praise for uncommon behaviors (like questioning a CEO). If employees don't know that they were right to take a risk, they may shy away from repeating it in the future for fear that they'll be judged.

It's also key to communicate *why* you're praising someone. Managers should always convey how an employee's behavior positively impacts the performance of the organization or team, says Zenger. This context helps instill confidence instead of arrogance by linking an individual's positive behavior to collective goals. It's always nice to be told you're talented. But for the purposes of getting good work done, you're far more likely to be motivated by knowing that because you buckled down and met a tough deadline, you saved the company from losing a big client.

The praise you offer can be short, and should always end with a personalized "thank you," says Zenger. Employees who feel valued report better physical and mental health, and higher levels of work engagement, satisfaction, and motivation.

And whenever possible, Zenger says, it's best to give constructive praise in person. "Effective leadership is all about making an emotional connection with people in order to have a greater amount of influence," he says. "There's no better platform for feedback, positive or negative, then a face-to-face discussion, given the impact of body language and tone of voice." We all assign a lot of weight to nonverbal cues, no matter what's being said: Studies show that people who receive positive feedback coupled with negative emotional cues, like narrowed eyes, feel *worse* about their performance than people who receive negative feedback paired with a smile.

While I was working on this article, my own team decided on an experiment: We created a Google document where each of us did our best to call out one concrete quality or skill that we really appreciated in our colleagues, and explain how it's affected the team or our work. Though we get along well and admire each other greatly, the challenge immediately felt foreign. One colleague suggested keeping the feedback anonymous—evidence of how uncomfortable it can be to get honest with your coworkers, even when you're saying good things.

I found myself periodically refreshing the doc, giddy to see what my coworkers thought about each other, but wary to read about myself. My editor and I both admitted to feeling strangely embarrassed while reading compliments others had given us, perhaps because we've so deeply internalized the narrative—especially as women—that modesty and self-effacement are fundamental to success. But we got over it: The exercise was heartwarming, and as one colleague noted, "Reading about other people's strengths makes me realize the specific ways I want to improve."

In-person feedback is great, but we also found merit in written praise. "I really liked having to consciously think about and put into words what I loved about my colleagues," said one editor. "The process of writing it out (versus verbal feedback) made me think about it a lot more and reflect, and knowing it wasn't ephemeral and that it could be referred back to, and not interpreted in a thousand different ways, is good too."

One thing is clear: Giving and receiving feedback can make you feel pretty vulnerable. But it's worth taking the emotional risk to let your colleagues know just what you value about them. As my editor said, "Giving positive feedback is like giving a present—you fuss over it and worry maybe the other person won't like it, but really, it makes both of you feel good."