

## **How to Prevent Praising Co-Workers from Backfiring on You**

Communicating appreciation and encouragement to your colleagues is not without some risk. If not done appropriately, attempting to share positive messages with others at work can actually backfire and create more problems than if you didn't communicate anything at all.

Generally speaking, the messages given from individuals who are trying to honestly and sincerely express appreciation to their team members are received well, but here are some situations which can lead to problems.

\*Ignoring tension in a relationship with a colleague and communicating appreciation anyway. If you are in a work relationship that has been tense and conflictual in the past, trying to communicate appreciation without acknowledging the previous issues or attempting to resolve the disagreement will most probably lead to a cool reception of the message. Trying to act as if nothing has happened or that there is no issue between the two of you will not go well.

\*Moving from a difficult conversation to encouragement too quickly. Sometimes, in the normal course of a work day or week, we have difficult conversations with our colleagues. We may disagree with a decision, or have been confronted (or confront others) about a lack of follow-through. While it is appropriate to have these conversations, moving too quickly (for example, right after the difficult meeting) to try to express your appreciation for, or encouragement to, your colleague will feel awkward and disjointed.

\*Changing from virtually no communication at all to a lot of positive communication in a short time period. Some individuals, in an attempt to respond positively to instruction, can try to change their behavior too quickly. Previously, they may have been fairly distant and non-communicative. But in the context of the appreciation language process they, all of a sudden, become significantly more positive and effusive – to the point you don't "recognize" this new person.

\*Communicating different messages in different settings. If you "chew out" one of your team members in a private conversation and then later praise them or compliment them in front of others, you can appear duplicitous or two-faced. The sincerity of your compliment will be questioned, with it looking like you were just trying to impress others – especially if the message is given in front of your supervisor or someone it is believed you want to impress.

\*Giving positive messages with your words but your facial expression, tone of voice and gestures communicate a different message. It is sort of like the child who is forced by their parents to say, "I'm sorry", when their tone of voice, lack of eye contact and angry expression doesn't convince you they mean it. Similarly, going through the motions of verbally (either through spoken word, written messages or other actions) of expressing "appreciation" when you have unresolved issues interfering will cause the recipient to question your sincerity.

\*Trying to share appreciation with a person who has had numerous or significant experiences of others taking advantage of them. Unfortunately, a number of people in the workforce have had difficult lives – either growing up in dysfunctional families, having experienced abusive relationships or treated poorly by previous employers. In these situations, your colleagues may have developed a style of needing to protect themselves. They don't trust others easily and mistrust any positive actions by others as an attempt to take advantage of them. Their initial response will almost always be one of believing you have an ulterior motive for the positive message you are giving.

\*Sharing positive messages shortly after a lay-off of employees or reduction in pay. When an organization or company has to downsize because of financial difficulties, or if staff members' salaries have had to be reduced, trying to be encouraging or "upbeat" in communication can create significant negative reactions from team members. They often are hurting, are anxious and fearful for the future, and may be grieving the loss of close colleagues. If a supervisor tries to be overly positive in the midst of difficult times, they can be perceived as being either insensitive and crass, or as being disingenuous and a fake.

### **How Do You Avoid These Pitfalls?**

1. Check your motives. Try to only communicate authentic, genuine appreciation.
2. Be aware of the context. While expressing appreciation or encouragement is usually beneficial, there are times and settings where it is better to wait.
3. "Check in" with a trusted colleague. If in doubt -- either of the timing, your message or how it may be received -- first, touch base with someone who knows you and the situation well and who will give you honest feedback. They may be able to give you some tips of how or when would be best to share your message.
4. If in doubt, wait. Almost always, taking time to assess a situation and making sure that the message will be received well is worth whatever time goes by. A delayed message communicated well and received well is far better than a rushed message that misfires.