

# Contents

Preface	8
An Update to the Current Edition	11
Introduction	15
<b>Chapter 1:</b> What Employees Want Most	21
<b>Chapter 2:</b> For Business Leaders: Why Appreciation Is a Good Investment	31
<b>Chapter 3:</b> Appreciation Language #1: Words of Affirmation	45
<b>Chapter 4:</b> Appreciation Language #2: Quality Time	57
<b>Chapter 5:</b> Appreciation Language #3: Acts of Service	71
<b>Chapter 6:</b> Appreciation Language #4: Tangible Gifts	83
<b>Chapter 7:</b> Appreciation Language #5: Physical Touch	93
<b>Chapter 8:</b> Your Potential Blind Spot: Your Least Valued Language	105
<b>Chapter 9:</b> The Difference between Recognition and Appreciation	115
<b>Chapter 10:</b> How Appreciation Works in Different Settings	125
<b>Chapter 11:</b> Volunteers Need Appreciation Too	137
<b>Chapter 12:</b> Can a Person's Language of Appreciation Change?	147
<b>Chapter 13:</b> Motivating by Appreciation: Overcoming Your Challenges	163

<b>Chapter 14:</b> What If You Don't Appreciate Your Team Members?	179
<b>Chapter 15:</b> Discover Your Primary Appreciation Language: The MBA Inventory	189
Now It's Your Turn	199
Notes	207
About the Authors	210



## What Employees Want Most

(Gary) was having dinner with a friend who is on staff at a large nonprofit organization. I was giving him a brief overview of the research Dr. White and I were doing on the Motivating by Appreciation project. When I finished I said, “Could I ask you a personal question about your own work?” “Certainly,” he said.

I continued, “On a scale of 0–10, how appreciated do you feel by your immediate supervisor?” “About 5,” he said. I could detect a tinge of disappointment in his voice when he said 5.

My second question followed. “On a scale of 0–10, how appreciated do you feel by your coworkers?” “About an 8,” he said. “How many people work closely with you?” I inquired. “Two,” he responded. “Do you feel equally appreciated by the two of them?” I asked. “No,” he said. “One would be a 6 and the other a 9. That’s why I said about an 8.”

Whether you are a business owner, CEO, supervisor, or a coworker, this book is designed to help you communicate

*Without a sense of being valued by supervisors and colleagues, workers start to feel like a machine or a commodity.*

appreciation in a way that will be meaningful to the individuals with whom you work. Anyone can make a difference in their workplace, regardless of position.

Why is feeling appreciated so important in a work setting? Because each of us wants to know that what we are doing matters. Without a sense of being valued by supervisors and colleagues,

workers start to feel like a machine or a commodity. If no one notices a person's commitment to doing the job well, that person's motivation tends to wane over time. Steven Covey, author of the bestselling *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, feels so strongly about people's need for appreciation that he states: "Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is psychological survival, to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated."<sup>1</sup>

When relationships are *not* nurtured by a sense of appreciation, the results are predictable:

- Team members will experience a lack of connectedness with others and with the mission of the organization.
- Workers will tend to become discouraged, feeling "There is always more to do and no one appreciates what I'm doing."
- Often employees will begin to complain about their work, their colleagues, and their supervisor.
- Eventually, team members start to think seriously about leaving the organization and they begin to search for other employment.

## **WHY “JUST SAY THANKS” DOESN’T WORK**

Communicating appreciation to employees and colleagues sounds pretty easy and straightforward. In many ways, it is. However, we also know that for the communication of appreciation to effectively encourage the other person, several factors must be considered.

First, researchers have found that attempts to communicate appreciation globally across an organization are not very effective. One employee said of his organization, “We’re pretty good at showing recognition company-wide. But I don’t think we do a good job of it individually.” Trying a general “just say thanks” campaign across the company will not have much impact and can actually backfire, sparking cynicism among the ranks. While we all want to know that we are valued, we want it to be authentic, not contrived.

Here are some other differences between recognition and appreciation:

Recognition is largely about behavior. “Catch them doing what you want and recognize it,” the books say. Appreciation, conversely, focuses on performance plus the employee’s value as a person.

Recognition is about improving performance and focuses on what is good for the company. Appreciation emphasizes what is good for the company and good for the person (which may sometimes mean helping them find a position that is better for them than their current role).

The relational direction of recognition is top-down, coming from leadership. Appreciation, on the other hand, can be communicated in any direction. Colleagues want to know how to encourage and support one another.

## THE “ALL-IMPORTANT INGREDIENT”

But the challenge, from the supervisor’s perspective, is to know what actions hit the mark and effectively communicate appreciation to a team member. This is why we developed the MBA Inventory, along with specific “action items” for each language of appreciation. We wanted to develop a tool that provided accurate, individualized actions business owners and organizational leaders can use to show their appreciation for their team members without having to guess about what will be most significant to the employee. We agree with Buckingham and Clifton who state in their bestselling *Now, Discover Your Strengths*: “To excel as a manager, to turn your people’s talents into productive, powerful strengths, requires an additional all-important ingredient. Lacking this ingredient . . . you will never reach excellence. The all-important ingredient is individualization.”<sup>2</sup>

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We have found many organizations that are looking for ways to encourage their team members and reward them for work well done but are no longer able to use financial rewards to accomplish this purpose. This is especially true in the areas of government, schools, social service agencies, and nonprofit organizations. Directors and administrators now must find ways to encourage team members that do not require large amounts of financial resources.

Finally, there is a bit of good news for these business leaders. When leaders actively pursue communicating appreciation to their team members, the whole work culture improves. Ultimately, the managers report that they are enjoying their work more. All of us thrive in an atmosphere of appreciation.

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## WHEN APPRECIATION MISSES THE MARK

We have found that each person has a primary and secondary language of appreciation. Our primary language communicates more deeply to us than the others. Although we will accept appreciation in all five languages, we will not feel truly encouraged unless the message is communicated through our primary language. When messages are sent repeatedly in ways outside of that language, the intent of the message “misses the mark” and loses the impact the sender had hoped for.

We all tend to communicate to others in ways that are most meaningful to us—we “speak our own language.” However, if the message is not expressed in the appreciation language of the employee, it may not be especially meaningful to them. That is why many employees are not encouraged when they receive a reward as part of the company’s recognition plan—it doesn’t speak in their preferred language of appreciation.

“I’ve gotten various gifts over the years for anniversaries or recognition for ‘above and beyond’ effort,” says one woman who works in a mid-sized company. “But since gifts are my least-favored language, these don’t do a lot for me. You know what makes me feel good? Having a really interesting conversation with my boss or other senior leaders about what’s going on in the organization.” This woman’s primary language of appreciation is *Quality Time*. For her, trinkets miss the mark.

Then there’s Ellen, who consistently leads her department in sales and with the highest marks in customer service. At their department’s quarterly meetings, she is regularly called forward to receive a reward. For Ellen, this is like torture. She hates to be in front of groups and she doesn’t want public attention. What she would value is time with her supervisor



regularly where she could share her ideas on how to improve customer service. Ellen's primary language of appreciation is also *Quality Time*, not *Words of Affirmation*. Giving her public recognition is embarrassing to Ellen and a negative experience for her—clearly not affirming.

This process of miscommunication can be frustrating to both the sender and the recipient. Consider the following scenario:

“What’s the matter with Elliot?” Claricia asked a colleague. “I tell him he’s doing a good job. I even bought him tickets to the Lakers game this weekend to show him how much I appreciated the extra hours he put in to get the project done. And yet, he mopes around here and tells Alex that he doesn’t feel the management team really values what he does. What does he want?”

What Elliot wants is help from his teammates when a project needs to be done. He doesn’t like to work by himself, although he will if necessary. He values *Acts of Service* and would be really encouraged if either his colleagues or his supervisor would stay late with him some evening and pitch in to help him get the project done. Telling him “Thanks” or giving him some tangible gift after the fact is okay, but it doesn’t really meet his emotional need for feeling appreciated.

### **APPRECIATION = ENGAGEMENT**

When we began our research, we visualized supervisors using the principles of *Motivating by Appreciation* to enhance the work relationships with those they supervise. However, as we tested the model across a variety of organizations, we found an interesting response. The concept of encouraging colleagues and showing appreciation to coworkers was valued by individuals in virtually all roles and settings. Repeatedly and consistently, team

members were excited about using the concepts with their peers and colleagues as much as within the context of supervisory relationships. Our conclusion is that people want to encourage and show appreciation to those they work with regardless of their role in the organization.

As a result, throughout the book, you will find that we switch back and forth both in our terminology (*supervisor, manager, coworker, team member, and colleague*) and in the examples we use. In essence, the principles can apply regardless of the type of formal positional relationship you have with others.

This leads to the overall thesis of this book. We believe that people in the workplace need to feel appreciated in order for them to enjoy their job, do their best work, and continue working over the long haul. Tony Schwartz, president and CEO of The Energy Project, puts it well: “Whatever else each of us derives from our work, there may be nothing more precious than the feeling that we truly matter—that we contribute unique value to the whole, and that we’re recognized for it.

“The single highest driver of engagement, according to a worldwide study conducted by Towers Watson, is whether or not workers feel their managers are genuinely interested in their wellbeing.”

Understanding what makes you and your coworkers feel encouraged can significantly improve your relationships in the workplace, increase your sense of engagement, and create a more positive work environment. It is our intent to provide the tools, resources, and information to help you gather this knowledge and apply it in a practical, meaningful way in your work setting.

## MAKING IT PERSONAL

*Reflect on the following:*

- 1. On a scale of 0–10, how appreciated do you feel by your immediate supervisor?*
- 2. On a scale of 0–10, how appreciated do you feel by each of your coworkers?*
- 3. When you feel discouraged at work, what actions by others encourage you?*
- 4. When you want to communicate appreciation to your colleagues, how do you typically do so?*
- 5. How well do you believe you and your coworkers know how to express appreciation to one another?*