

# HOW TO SAY THANK YOU ... AND HAVE IT BE HEARD

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*“What appreciation is all about is the act of recognizing the best in people. Like real estate appreciates in value, you’re increasing the perceived value people have of themselves.”*  
~ David Cooperrider

How many times have you received a truly powerful “thank you” from someone? One that made you feel that the person had truly experienced something valuable in what you had done, and were deeply grateful? One that made you feel that you mattered, made you feel connected to the work you did and that how you did it really counted for something? Probably the answer is: “not very often.”

Saying “thank you” usually serves one of these three functions:

1. Closure – fulfillment of a commitment, ending of a process;
2. Recognition – identifying an effort that was somehow “above and beyond” what someone might have been expected to do;
3. Gratitude – expressing an awareness of a deep sense that there was something providential or extraordinary in the exchange.

While every “First-Line Supervision” or “Management 101” class talks about making people feel appreciated, most of them fail to suggest more than a regular dose of “ataboys” and an occasional plaque or recognition ceremony. The actual moves that make someone fully experience being thanked are more complex and subtle than that.

Regardless of the function that it is designed to serve, there are qualities a thank-you needs to have in order to be effective: it needs to be direct, specific and experience-based. **Direct** means looking at the person, and addressing them directly and individually, rather than talking to the rest of the group. For example, “Joe did a great job of helping me sort things out “ said while you look around the room, is very different than “Joe, you did a great job of helping me sort things out, “ said while looking at Joe.

**Specific** has to do with giving people sensory data, information that is concrete enough to be useful. For example, “Thank you for doing a great job,” while not a bad thing to hear, doesn’t really tell the recipient of the thank you what he or she did that you found worthy of thanks. If the person values competence and accuracy, and you’re appreciating the initiative, you may actually be transmitting a substantially different message than the one you intend. “Thank you for having taken the time to proof our report, checking to make sure we had the right number of copies and getting everyone on the team theirs ahead of time” gives the person a chance to understand what exactly made a difference for you. Getting good at

specificity also lets you as leader begin to notice your own patterns. What do you consistently appreciate and what do you perhaps, fail to notice that others might *like* to be appreciated for?

You've probably been taught to replace "you" messages with "I" messages when giving feedback. It's equally valuable when giving compliments or thanking someone. **Experience-based** means avoiding generalizations or assessments of character when thanking someone. Instead, you speak directly from your own experience. This results in a much more authentic and grounded thank you, because it requires you to reach inside yourself to find the words instead of using pat phrases. (It's also more work!) It also increases the likelihood that the thank you will be heard in the way you intend it. For example, if you say, "Jo, you are such a kind and thoughtful person!", Jo's internal conversation about "Well, no, not really" is quite likely to drown out the rest of your remarks. How likely is Jo to feel thanked after that? On the other hand, if you say "Jo, I really felt well cared for by the way you had prepped everyone before I got there," it's hard for Jo to think, "No, you didn't!"

Experience-based thank you's ultimately avoid a more subtle leadership trap; that of taking it upon ourselves to define who or what another person is. When we verbally appreciate someone else's qualities, even with the best of intentions, we are labeling him or her. When we just share our experience of the person, she or he is free to define herself or himself. It also means we are more likely to notice changes/ improvements in his or her behavior, because we haven't just dumped the person into a bin with a label on it – lazy, hard-working, generous, tidy, or whatever. Instead we are paying conscious attention to their actions, their contributions. This is important when we work in environments where people are constantly being asked to change; it helps a lot to have someone notice and appreciate it when you are trying a new behavior!

Whether the purpose of your thank you is to acknowledge the completion of some work or the fulfillment of an agreement, to offer recognition for a job especially well done, or to express your deeply held gratitude for experiences or gift you've received, take the time to think about what you're doing. It will have an impact. Paying attention to what you say and how you say it can be the difference between the other person feeling genuinely thanked and potentially transformed as a result, or just the recipient of yet another glib pat on the back.

In the end, to give a powerful thank you, you have to give the other person back in the same currency they gave you – something from deep inside your self. When you do, it can be transformative. If, as a leader, you want to see real behavior change, give real thank you's. And if you want your organization to be its best self, consistently drawing on its strengths to do great work, give that appreciation consistently – and often.

## Thank You Exercise



First, pick a partner. Then think of someone with whom you have an outstanding thank you. It could be to acknowledge that they delivered on a commitment they had made and your business with them is closed, it could be that they deserve public recognition for an outstanding effort, or it could be that they have somehow profoundly impacted your life. Imagine that you regularly set aside time in your meetings to give people time to offer appreciations to their colleagues or coworkers. Now it is your turn. Write out the thank you, exactly as you imagine you would say it in such a setting:

Now check it for directness. Is it direct? Could it be more so? Ask your partner for coaching on how to increase the directness.

Now check your thank you for specificity. Is it specific? Could you add more sensory data to enrich it? What do you learn about yourself from the details you've put in? Ask your partner for coaching on how to increase the specificity.

Now check to see whether your thank you describes your own experience or gives an assessment of the person. If it is an assessment, work to restate it in an experience-based manner. Say the entire thank you aloud to your coach, for one last round of feedback. You'll probably notice it's a lot less smooth and polished, and has a correspondingly *greater* impact!

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