

**A**sk anyone who works in human resources and they will tell you that being recognised would top the list of what employees want from their boss. Knowing that someone appreciates your efforts goes a long way towards job satisfaction.

“Praise is recognition. There’s a human physiological reaction to it — when people like or enjoy other people, or recognise them for what they have done, it’s very natural to thank them, to praise them,” says Josh Bersin, founder of Bersin by Deloitte, a research-based consulting service for HR, leadership development and training organisations in the US.

In fact, being recognised for a job well done has a physiological effect. “It’s the equivalent to giving someone a hug, they actually feel better. Research shows when you are thankful and appreciative, you start a reaction in the other person that creates oxytocin in their system — the same drug they use to induce labour in pregnant women. Oxytocin is a hormone that makes you feel good and makes you trust people more; it’s called the trust hormone. So saying thank you to somebody has an impact on their feelings, behaviours, ability to help others, sense of contribution and ability to contribute,” says Bersin.

But, just like being offered another packet of Tim Tams, too much of a good thing can leave us feeling a bit sickly.

### THE OVERKILL EFFECT

Most of us have a fine-tuned BS meter and can easily decipher whether praise is warranted or not.

“Praise is good, when it’s relevant, genuine, useful and meaningful,” says Dr Jason Fox, author of *The Game Changer*. But praise can be a double-edged sword. Studies into the effect of praise on children reveals that inflated admiration, acclaim or applause can be detrimental to their learning and development.

In a 2013 study published in the journal *Child Development*, Elizabeth Gunderson, assistant professor of psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia, discovered children praised as individuals are less persistent when faced with

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difficult challenges, while those whose efforts have been praised are encouraged to try harder in the face of adversity. In other words, it is better to applaud efforts made rather than lavishing people with lines such as ‘you are so clever’.

Professor of social psychology at Florida State University Dr Roy Baumeister says no matter what age people are, putting them on a pedestal can subject them to high expectations. “Praise can be vacuous, misleading and excessive; it can create pressure and self-consciousness; and praising an athlete or musician before a skilled performance can cause a person to ‘choke’,” he says.

Which might explain the greatest runner-up in golf history — Greg Norman. Perhaps his losing streak was because we praised him out of his A-game? And who can forget the build-up of The Wallabies tour in the 2011 Rugby World Cup? Let’s hope we have learnt our lesson for the 2015 tournament and we refrain from dishing out unwarranted accolades before the players even hit the field.

Not only can praise affect our performance, it can also impact the way we behave in order to receive it. While it’s common for humans to seek positive affirmation, modifying our behaviour so we receive complimentary comments can impact our contribution to work, our development and even our career progression. “The trap can be seeking praise and turning it into an extrinsic

reward — where people modify their behaviour in order to seek [approval] from the praise-giver,” explains Fox. “This widens the power balance between the praise-giver and the recipient, enhancing a sense of hierarchy, and potentially limiting creative and candid conversations.”

### DEFENCE MODE

Sincere praise really does work better than overblown gushing, but criticism needs to be monitored, too.

“While genuine praise motivates us, neurological research shows threatening people by criticising their work or, worse yet, criticising them personally causes their brains to shift to protection mode, and they stop thinking about work, how they can contribute, how they can learn and how they can create. Instead, they protect themselves and become defensive,” says Bersin.

Baumeister captured this effect in a co-authored article published in *Review of General Psychology* in 2001: “Bad emotions, bad parents and bad feedback have more impact than good ones. Bad impressions and bad stereotypes are quicker to form and are more resistant to disconfirmation than good ones.”

This article is entitled *Bad is Stronger Than Good*, and the authors discovered that losing money, being abandoned by friends and receiving criticism had a greater impact than winning money, making friends or receiving praise.

In an experiment in which participants gained or lost the same amount of money, the distress participants experienced after losing the money was greater than the joy experienced gaining it. The conclusion: bad events linger longer than good ones.

A classic example of this is the end-of-year work-performance review. Bersin is not a fan. “It immediately makes you defensive; you don’t listen to the suggestions for improvement because you are so upset about your rating, ►



# A TURN OF PRAISE

*A job done well deserves kudos. But could the way applause is phrased have an overbearing impact on employees' productivity and morale?*

WORDS NICOLE HOGAN



and then you have to live with it for an entire year. There are so many things wrong with it — I couldn't think of a worse way to treat people," he says.

According to Fox, another epic fail is the feedback sandwich — when you start by saying something nice, then say something critical in the middle, and end with saying something safe. Don't be fooled into thinking 'sandwiching' your negative comments will lessen the blow. "It's a typical example of a pattern — once someone becomes aware of it, they know what's coming so it becomes ineffective," he explains.

A little like watching re-runs of *Breaking Bad* — the joy is gone once you know it doesn't end well. "If you use the feedback sandwich all the time, what's going to happen is people will tune out of the praise element because they're going to pick up on the pattern," Fox adds. "They will be listening for the criticism, not the praise."

That's not to say constructive criticism is a no-no. Professor Baumeister notes that "Many good events can overcome the psychological effects of a single bad one." His article quotes a ratio of five to one — after five positive interactions, a person will be receptive to negative feedback.

So how do you get the balance right? Managers need to be aware of the impact they have when they fail to notice staff

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making progress at work, and they should be wary of how critical or negative information can impact on learning and development. The solution is to avoid meaningless praise, and instead provide specific, genuine, consistent praise that is separate from constructive criticism.

"Praise can be a good reality check that we are doing good work," says Fox. "Give praise on progress made and give it in context to the work done. Praise is best delivered when it is in close proximity to the task — don't wait weeks after the event. The key is to simply communicate more frequently. If you see something you think is great, say so." 

**HOW TO PRAISE EFFECTIVELY**

*HR and leadership expert Josh Bersin shares his top three tips.*

**1. MAKE RECOGNITION SIMPLE** Consider new software tools called 'social recognition'; some are almost similar to Facebook in that you can 'like' people. Also, remember to be specific, don't combine praise with criticism, and be timely and sincere in your feedback.

**2. TELL STORIES** Executives should focus on storytelling. It's one thing to stand up in front of staff and say, "We hit our numbers and I want to thank everyone in the department for getting their error rate down". A better approach is to say "I want to recognise so and so for such and such, and this is why it is so important, and what it means to the company". Companies that tell stories in this way have a much more open climate of recognition. They are respectful of individuals because they point out very specific examples of why and how somebody did something. This can be delivered in many forms such as in newsletters or intranet videos.

**3. SCRAP THE PERFORMANCE REVIEW** There is a crusade of companies in the US trying to throw away traditional performance reviews. The idea of evaluating people once a year and giving them a five-point scale really flies in the face of human behaviour. It's threatening, intimidating and puts managers in a god-like position over employees. One company even likened annual reviews to a drive-by ambush because of the shock employees can receive when they learn of a problem that wasn't communicated to them. Instead, HR or business leaders need to encourage continuous, frequent feedback, both positive and negative.