

Helping Others to Feel Special and Appreciated: Overcoming a “Praise Deficit”

Part I

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A number of years ago I received a draft of an article about disciplining children. One phrase in the article especially caught my attention. The author wrote that many people have a “praise deficit.” As I read the words “praise deficit” I immediately thought about an experience that had occurred years earlier when I was a psychology trainee, an experience that had a marked impact on my life.

As a trainee I was asked to present at my first clinical Grand Rounds. This was the beginning of my career and I was not accustomed to speaking to large audiences. To be honest, I was a nervous wreck. I thought of all of the things that could go wrong, which of course served to heighten my anxiety. Fantasies of forgetting what I wanted to say, of losing my place, of sweating profusely, of collapsing on stage pervaded my thinking. Adding to my anxiety was the fact that most of the people in the audience were staff and trainees I would continue to see every day. While some might say that having familiar people in the audience should lessen one’s anxiety, all I could think about was that if I really fell on my face (figuratively and literally) I would have to face these people day in and day out. I even entertained the irrational fear that if I failed miserably those in attendance would continue to whisper for the remainder of the year, “There’s the psychology trainee who made a fool of himself.” It’s amazing the kinds of thoughts that are triggered when in a state of anxiety.

I spent hours preparing for my presentation, reviewing with my supervisor what I planned to say. The day arrived and before I knew it I was sitting on stage ready to be introduced. I had once read that if you are nervous when giving a speech just imagine that the members of the audience are nude and your anxiety will decrease. I glanced at the audience, but my imagination failed me--I found it difficult to think of my supervisors sitting in the audience without clothes. Before I could consider other advice to lessen my stage fright it was time for me to speak.

Much to my surprise and delight people actually seemed interested in what I had to say. With each word I became increasingly comfortable. At the end of my presentation there was time for a few questions and then I had to rush off to another meeting so I did

not have an opportunity to receive feedback about my performance.

Later that afternoon I returned to the Psychology Department office and there in my mailbox was a folded up note. It was written by my supervisor and must have taken him only five seconds to write, but the moment I read his message, it established the most positive tone for the remainder of my training year. It was so simple and yet so powerful-- 30 years have passed since I read it, but as I recount this story I still remember the wonderful feelings it generated. The note said, "You did a great job today, Bob."

I wondered why had I instantly thought of that "five second note" after reading the words "praise deficit." I believe I did so because that note represented an action that was in marked contrast to a praise deficit. It conveyed to me that this supervisor truly cared about me. His words were to serve as a source of encouragement and support not only during my training year but for years to come. Why would a five second note have such power? One possible reason was that I wasn't expecting it. Another factor was that it arrived when I was feeling somewhat insecure and vulnerable. I am not suggesting that if I had been anticipating my supervisor's note or if I had been more confident that his words would not have been as meaningful. However, the presence of surprise and my need for emotional support certainly contributed to the note's impact.

Over the years I have given much thought to praise deficits and my supervisor's message, perhaps more so as I reached middle age and begin to ponder with greater frequency such seemingly existential questions as, "What is important in life? What is the legacy I wish to leave? How do I want to be remembered?" Those of us who reflect upon such questions are likely to arrive at a wide spectrum of answers. One of my answers is linked directly to my supervisor's actions and can be stated in the following way: "I think one of our purposes in life, one of the most important legacies we can leave, is to say and do things that contribute to others feeling special and appreciated." I am not suggesting that we assume the role of martyrs, always placing our own needs and interests behind those of others. If anything, I believe that emotionally healthy people must first feel comfortable with and appreciate themselves before they are able to appreciate others. To attempt to take care of others at the expense of oneself often deprives the act of overcoming a "praise deficit" of its vitality and meaning.

In my workshops for parents, educators, mental health professionals, and business people I often ask such questions as: "Do you lead your personal and professional life in a

manner that helps others to feel special and appreciated? Because you are on this earth who in the last week or two feels more special and appreciated? What is one thing you said or did with your husband, wife, child, colleague, business associate that you know because you said or did it, the other person felt more special and appreciated?” It is obvious from the facial expressions of the audience that this question provokes much reflection. Let me offer a few examples:

At a presentation I gave for business leaders examining Daniel Goleman’s concept of “emotional intelligence,” I emphasized what may seem like a commonsense, nothing to lose, everything to gain practice, namely, the importance of business executives avoiding a praise deficit. Several of the people in attendance honestly and courageously shared that they were more likely to give negative than positive feedback to their staff. Yet, as we discussed their careers and as I asked them to think about managers they respected and learned from when they were climbing up the corporate ladder, they described individuals who provided a heavy dose of realistic positive feedback, individuals who obviously were not afflicted with a praise deficit. The influence that these managers had on their lives was captured not only by their glowing descriptions but by the nonverbal cues that accompanied their words such as a warm tone of voice, a smile, a relaxed body posture.

Several weeks later I received a letter from one of the people who attended this particular seminar. He said that following my presentation he thought a great deal about my supervisor’s five second note and he began the practice of writing brief complimentary notes to his staff. He observed somewhat humorously that since he had not previously engaged in this behavior, he could tell that some of his staff were suspicious of his intentions, probably wondering if he had an ulterior motive. However, once they realized that his motive was free of hidden meanings, that his words came from his heart, that he had a genuine wish to show appreciation and recognize their contributions, the climate of the office changed noticeably. This executive wrote, “People seemed happier. I was more relaxed. And overcoming a praise deficit became contagious. It was obvious that staff members were complimenting each other more and a greater spirit of teamwork developed.”

This kind of comment is not unusual when one begins to communicate encouraging messages. I remember giving a workshop attended primarily by teachers. We talked a great deal about the tone of a school environment and how isolating a profession teaching could

be. Sadly, many educators mentioned that in their schools negative feedback far exceeded positive comments. One teacher poignantly observed, “A vicious cycle develops. You don’t feel appreciated, you don’t feel recognized, you don’t hear compliments about your work and sometimes without realizing it you begin to act the same way towards your students. And when students feel you don’t care about them, they really won’t be as motivated to learn from you.” He then added, “And the same thing happens with your colleagues. We might all be caring people, but we don’t go out of our way to compliment each other.”

Following this comment, I asked the group to share examples of positive feedback that had occurred in their schools. Strikingly, some had difficulty doing so. However, a high school teacher recalled an occasion when a guidance counselor had gone out of his way to tell her that a couple of students had talked very highly about her. She said, “His telling me this made my week, no, it made my year.” Since his comment had such a profound effect on her she decided she would find opportunities to offer positive feedback to her colleagues, which she did. She said that within a short time she could sense a noticeable difference in the school atmosphere and the interactions among staff.

I gave a workshop several years ago about teacher-principal relationships. Several teachers mentioned that they rarely, if ever, received positive feedback from their principals, adding that negative comments were more frequent. A principal responded in a very poignant manner by saying that he had been a school administrator for 12 years and just two weeks ago he received his first positive note from one of his staff thanking him for helping her to deal with a student who was disrupting her class. With obvious emotion he said that the note meant so much to him. We all need this kind of nourishment and support.

Relatedly, years ago in preparation for a book I was writing I asked many adults to complete an anonymous questionnaire. The first question asked them to think back to when they were students and briefly describe an experience in which a teacher said or did something that boosted their self-esteem. One of the answers that appeared most frequently centered around a teacher helping you to feel special. Examples included a teacher calling a student who was ill to find out how he was feeling, a teacher writing the word “beautiful” on top of a spelling test of a student who had been school phobic and recently made it back to school (the person wrote, “I still have that test”), teachers finding a few minutes to talk with you, teachers eating with you, or teachers complimenting your work. The most

positive memories of school did not at first glance appear to be earth shaking events, but what they contained were memories in which a teacher helped the student to feel special.

As you reflect upon the examples I have described in this article I am certain some of you may wonder why is it that more people don't engage in these kinds of activities since they need not consume much time, they don't cost money, and they have such longlasting, positive outcomes. I believe there are several reasons. Some of us seem to fall into a "rut" and do not consider the profound effect that we can have when we help others to feel appreciated. Still others may believe that frequent compliments can backfire, either prompting recipients to expect these compliments all of the time even when not deserved or having the compliments lose their meaning since they are repeated over and over again. I agree that any behavior that is overdone or done indiscriminately will fail to accomplish its purpose. However, I would contend that the judicious use of positive feedback and encouragement can convey a genuine caring and appreciation for the other person.

I have also heard from a number of individuals the following reason for not giving positive feedback and encouragement, especially at their place of employment: "Why should I go out of my way to say nice things to others, no one does it for me." This is a rather self-defeating way of thinking. As I mentioned in the third part of my "stress hardy" series that appeared in my June, 1999 newsletter (the article can be found on my website--www.drrobertbrooks.com), we must learn to focus on what we have control over rather than seeking our happiness by having others change. What we have control over is to modify our own praise deficit. It has been my experience that if we become more positive and encouraging, it sets a tone for others to follow our example. But even if they don't, we will at least know that we did what we thought was the right thing to do.

In my next newsletter I will examine the concept of praise deficit as it applies to family life, especially parent-child relationships. However, what you might wish to do before Part II is published is to think about one, perhaps two individuals who deserve a message of appreciation from you. It might be a colleague, an employee, a student, a relative, a friend, or your supervisor or manager (yes, as that principal noted at my workshop, even supervisors and managers are in need of positive feedback). See what happens when you communicate this message in whatever way you feel comfortable. Many people have told me that their own sense of well-being increased when they took steps to overcome a praise deficit. One man said, "Why haven't I done more of this in the

past?" I hope you will experience the same feeling of contentment and excitement.

I believe strongly that as a society we must strive to eliminate praise deficits and learn to appreciate each other. We must minimize the sense of alienation, prejudice, and ongoing anger that pervades the lives of far too many people and replace these negative feelings with emotions and behaviors that are filled with compassion and caring. If we can accomplish this, we will all be the beneficiaries.

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