

Languages of  
Appreciation at Work™

Friends,

We have individuals in over 40 countries using our *Appreciation at Work™*, *Rising Above a Toxic Workplace* and *The Vibrant Workplace™* resources and Certified Facilitators in more than 25 countries. So we definitely are finding out that appreciation in the workplace is a valid and useful concept across cultures.

To help facilitate communicating what appreciation at work looks like in different cultures, we are gathering input from our team members across the globe (and I share some of my own experiences). This is an ongoing project, and we will continue to add stories and answers to questions as we get them. But we thought we go ahead and start, even though the information isn't in a highly polished form yet.

I hope you will enjoy reading about how appreciation is communicated in various cultures, and if you have your own story, please email us at [admin@appreciationatwork.com](mailto:admin@appreciationatwork.com) to submit it.

Warmly,



Dr. Paul

Paul White, Ph.D.

President, Appreciation at Work

P.S. For a more complete discussion (and other examples) of appreciation across cultures, I have a full chapter devoted to the issue in my most recent book, [The Vibrant Workplace](#).

## Appreciation Across the Globe

***How are the 5 Languages of Appreciation applicable in the culture you work and how do they differ in their specific applications?***

### **Korea:**

#### **Words of affirmation**

In Korea, “words of affirmation” usually means “praise”. The concept of recognition is scarcely used. It is either you praise someone for the job well done, or it is just not mentioned at all. This is one of the reasons why corporate employees in South Korea do not seem to hear much positive remarks from their bosses.

Recognition can mean a simple statement of what an employee has done. It does not have to be uplifting nor exaggerated. Simple recognition of what this person has done can be viewed as affirmation, but Korean people are not too familiar with the concept.

A term in Korean, “soo go het seup ni da”(수고했습니다) which means “you worked hard” is often used to deliver words of affirmation. It is even used as a form of saying goodbye at the end of the work-day to the entire group. It is a way Koreans affirm each other that we all have put in hard work for the company. As far as written affirmation, it rarely is used and consequently, if a boss would write down words of affirmation to someone, it would be received with great joy and encouragement. Public recognition such as “employee of the month” does occur, especially in sales based groups, where the performance can be visually presented, but in everyday office setting, it is not so common to affirm someone in public.

#### **Quality time**

In a collectivist culture like South Korea, time spent among co-workers can be separated into 2 very different scenarios. The first scenario is a gathering between co-workers in similar position within the company which is totally voluntary and casual. It would be a brief time within the work hour as they may sit for a short period drinking a

vending machine coffee, or take a quick stroll to get some fresh air. Korean workers seem to prefer casual beer or two after work, or a short tea time during the work hour to relax a bit.

The second case is a gathering of the entire team, department, or the people in the same office which is mandatory and sometimes quite burdensome. It is called “hui sik” in Korean and it means “eating as a group.” It is usually organized by the head of the group and people will go to a restaurant or a bar after the work hour for food, drinks, talk, sometimes even a karaoke time. Although it is outside of the working hour, excusing oneself from this occasion is unthinkable and sometimes interpreted as being rude or disloyal. Although this gathering is meant to be a quality time in between co-workers, it is usually considered as an extension of the working hour that is dreaded and unpaid.

### **Gifts**

It is very rare to see an exchange of gifts for a private reason or occasion. But there is a huge culture of giving gifts on national holidays to the entire department or important clients. The manager starts planning what to give and there is a point person who will actually execute the gift sending process. Everyone in the department will receive the same exact gifts through the mailing service and the note will state that it is sent by the company. This is the culture of Korea where the company expresses the appreciation.

### **Service**

Although individual gifts are uncommon in Korea, the act of service can be seen very often in the work place. People are prone to give favors for each other and this may stem from the ancient cultural tradition of the entire town helping everyone’s irrigation, watering, and harvesting. Acts of service within the company are not strictly measured nor accounted for, but instead, given and received very casually. When a co-worker is busy with other important matter, or tied up with a family emergency a common conversation will take a place. “Can you help out with so and so?” “Yeah sure, but you can buy me a drink later.” It is a very pleasant and casual excuse to get together later to relax and have casual talks.

And even physical touch (or share if these actions are not valued or acceptable in the workplace). Physical touch is regarded very similarly to that of United

States. Occasional high fives and fist bumps will take place when celebrating a victory or outstanding performance, but not as a cultural norm or tradition.

It is similar that Korean employees desire proper recognition and appreciation and that when done right, it will greatly enhance motivation that will lead to increase in team spirit and performance. But the major difference is that individual contribution is not so commonly recognized in public. When there is a need for recognition, it is usually given to the team. Moreover, if an individual is recognized, the recognized individual will most likely give the credit to the team or the boss.

John Sung  
Seoul, South Korea

## **Singapore**

Singapore is a multi-racial and religious country; our 4 major races are Chinese, Malay, Indians and Eurasians. Singaporean leaders tend to be more achievement-oriented, task-oriented and being compliant to the designed process, rather than people-oriented and inspiring. Hence, showing appreciation openly and expressively for leaders can be a challenge.

Some leaders also feel that they learned things “the hard way” during their generation; there was no appreciation from their superiors in the past and yet they performed well and were promoted to their current leadership position. Some leaders also feel that staff is paid for the job, hence, there is no need for appreciation.

Leaders also tend to be critical rather than being understanding and showing empathy. They are rather direct, want to get things done efficiently, and typically do not ask for suggestions and feedback. Some leaders also are concerned about showing favoritism to a particular staff through appreciation.

Leaders tend to be “stingy” in giving compliments unless you did a task exceptionally well. They tend to take things for granted and focus more on “catching people doing things wrong” rather than look at the positive part where people are doing things right.

Usually leaders are direct, task oriented and not inspiring as they tend to focus on meeting or exceeding goals. Singaporean men have to serve two years full-time mandatory national service. This may lead to the respect for command and control, and

the emphasis on hierarchy and ranks may undermine expressing one's opinions and ideas that are different from others in the workplace. They tend to conform and control rather than be creative.

### **Words of Affirmation**

- Appreciation through written email is preferred, rather than spoken verbally. If spoken verbally, the message would be one-on-one rather than praising the employee in front of the team.
- Some bosses would text the staff a compliment on what they have done well, immediately after the task is completed.
- It is important that the senior managers knows employees by their name

### **Quality Time**

- There are one-on-one sessions with staff or a group of staff over lunch. Usually the meetings do not focus on work but getting to know one another better.
- If the lunch meeting involves talking about work, staff don't view the time as appreciation but rather as a work meeting.
- Receiving coaching or mentoring from one's supervisor is viewed as a form of spending quality time.
- The supervisor provides a listening ear and hears employee's concerns. More importantly, they take actions to solve problems raised.

### ***Group or departmental celebrations include:***

- Monthly Birthday celebrations and festive celebrations
- Doing a recreational activity together (BBQ, karaoke or bowling). But staff feel that the recreational activity should not be held after work or during weekends as they have been working long hours and prefer to spend time with families.
- Group involvement in community service projects.

### **Tangible Gifts**

- Appreciation lunch/dinner for the team after a project is completed.
- Provide time off or work from home/flexi working arrangement
- Allow staff to leave on time to pick up their children from childcare center.
- The “value” of the gift depends on who provided the gift. If is given by the CEO, Senior Manager or Higher ranking superior, the appreciation will make a difference.
- Generally, Singapore supervisors and managers tend to bond over food and festive celebration such as New Year, Chinese New Year, and Christmas.

### **Acts of Service**

- If a staff face a challenging/heavy workload,
- Provide additional manpower temporarily.
- Re-allocate job duties temporarily to other staff who have a lighter workload.
- Send staff for useful training programs as a form of improving one’s knowledge and skills.
- Provide resources to help the staff work better in an efficient way (upgrade of computers, provide necessary tools and equipment, streamline work process).
- Superiors work together with the team to complete the task.
- Senior Managers and Supervisors visiting the worksite to understand the working operations, conditions and challenges.
- To allow Muslim staff to go for early lunch for their Friday prayers and return to work later

### **Physical Touch**

- Not much physical touch as staff tend to respect their bosses
- However, a handshake from the CEO and Senior Manager will lead to higher satisfaction of appreciation.
- Taking a selfie or wefie with the CEO and Senior Management.

Due to the low birth rate in Singapore, the majority of the workforce consists of Baby boomers and Gen X'ers rather than Gen Y'ers. The multi-generational differences do have an impact as Baby boomers and Gen X'ers are more compliant and show respect towards hierarchy and authority. They also value consensus and conformity, taking consideration of the organization and interests of the majority.

Gen Y'ers being more exposed to education that focuses on critical thinking and innovation, focus more on individual ideas, empowerment and taking care of one's own interests above others.

Jasmine Liew  
Global Premiere Partner, Appreciation at Work  
Organisation & Learning Director  
Breakthrough Catalyst

## **India**

I had the opportunity to speak to a class of Indian Executive MBA students, many of whom were in the field of engineering or computer science, and several were international students. When describing "Acts of Service" as a language of appreciation, three of the students who were from India became confused (and almost agitated). One of them stated:

*"This seems odd to us. In our culture (they were from Hyderabad), providing some assistance or 'acts of service', as you call it, is a normal everyday occurrence. We would never see someone who needed assistance and not help them. So to expect to be thanked for helping someone, or to use it as a way of appreciation doesn't really seem to fit our culture."*

However, in further discussing the issue, the students did agree that when an individual is behind in a project at work, when others do help them out, it feels very encouraging and supportive to the employee – like they are part of the team.

Paul White, Ph.D.

**You have recently previewed Dr. White's new book, *The Vibrant Workplace*. Can you tell us your impressions of how it relates to the workplace in Hong Kong?**

### **Hong Kong**

"I live in the city of Hong Kong, one of the busiest cities in the world. When we talk about the workplace, the adjectives that come to mind are task-oriented, stressful, high-pressure....Yet when I read this book, I strongly believe we do need a vibrant and appreciative workplace here. After all, we spend at least 1/3 of our day in the workplace, and we should all be part of the transformative force as suggested in this book to make our workplace more enjoyable and engaging! I particularly like the chapter of cross-culture consideration in showing appreciation. I agree that showing appreciation is universal positive, but how to make it effective depends on factors like personality, culture and generation."

Andrew Ma, Ph.D.  
Chorev Consulting International

### **Canada**

I've enjoyed speaking and training in Canada – partially because I get to see such beautiful displays of nature! And working together with my Canadian friends and colleagues has been a delightful (and educational) experience.

My experience has been that Canadians are quite proud of their heritage, history and culture, and that they want to make sure that I (as a U.S. citizen) understand that Canada and Canadians are different than the U.S. (I agree!) And obviously, just like most countries are not uni-cultural, Canada has differences both across its 6,000 mile spread and also between the Anglo-derived culture, the French Canadian culture, and the First Nations cultures.

Paul White, Ph.D.



## **Norway**

So – how is Appreciation at Work different in Norway, and possibly Scandinavia? I've heard that consumers in Denmark react differently from consumers in Norway. What Norwegians say when I ask them what they mean by calling the concept “very American”, is different to what our neighbors the Danes mean. According to my “colleagues” in Denmark, the fact that Appreciation at Work is American, is a positive, interesting thing, but here, people really mean commercialized and slightly superficial.

Once I was talking about the concept on national radio. There was a professor whose job was to do research on relationships and health at work. He was very negative, and said before we entered the studio, that there was no way such a simple, superficial concept could possibly make much difference in the work place. He stated that if anything, this concept could take away the focus on the “real issues”, such as too much work load, unhealthy imbalance in work relationships, bad leaders, etc. He thought that focusing on and blaming the “overworked and underpaid” staff for not showing a “positive thinking- attitude” towards each other, was wrong and dangerous. During the radio-show he was stating there was no research showing it worked, and he went on and on about the author (particularly Dr. Chapman) having been a pastor, and that the Five Love Languages was a Christian idea, made up to “possibly help some couples”. He kept on mentioning there being no scientific evidence of it working, let alone it being effective in the work place.

So, why am I mentioning this one person's opinion? I think it represents some of the cultural differences between Norway and possibly Scandinavia, that has us stand out from the rest of the world, when it comes to relationships at work. First, we never mix religion and work. Looking back in my career, I rarely know anybody's religious background or thoughts. It's seen as very private, and I don't think it was ever discussed. It was like a “non-issue”. I don't know what causes this. It could be that the discussions get too emotional for “stiff Norwegian”? There's a saying in Norway; “If you're at a party, you may discuss anything but religion and politics”. As far as I know, this is an unwritten rule, also covering the work place. As the professor was making out, it's seen as “not very serious”, and the person bringing the two together, might lose some respect in the work place.

# Languages of Appreciation at Work™

Norway and other Scandinavian countries are rather secular. As mentioned above, we never seem to mix work and religion, nor hardly ever school and religion or politics and religion. I remember having had a Christian Prime minister, who worked as a priest before leading the country. Looking back, I don't ever remember him or the journalists focusing on this at all. I can't say whether it's good or bad, separating the two. It may make people with different, religious backgrounds feel integrated more easily. I really don't know how it affects us. But, I have noticed how it affects the skeptical critics of Appreciation at Work; they don't like the fact that it's "commercial, capitalistic, religious and non-scientific" all at the same time. We've got a system that isn't as market oriented as some other systems. With this experience, turning my company into a nonprofit, has helped – a lot.

Having said that, Appreciation at Work, and also The 5 Love Languages for that matter, has very little to do with religion and culture. In its core, it's really about human's deep, psychological needs; being seen, loved and appreciated. Whether it's at home, at work, in your football club or at school, makes no difference. We need to feel secure about our relationships working, for us to be productive, and for us to function well as human beings. We get to be our "best versions of ourselves" if our love or appreciation tank is full. Also, to be capable of filling up people's appreciation tanks effectively, you need to be true and honest, and focus on what works and what there is to appreciate – regardless of cultural background or country. Therefore, I believe Appreciation at Work, as well as the 5 Love Languages will be a success and a concept longed for, all over the world.

To me, the opposite is also true: If we're walking around with empty tanks, we may end up being the worst versions of ourselves. For me personally, it probably means I'm sulky, that I'm quieter than normal, and really blaming my poor partner (or boss/colleagues) for everything that doesn't work – for me. I can feel how I interpret things in the wrong way, often hiding this and silently avoiding responsibility for my own and other people's wellbeing. I get self-centered and think that people should be "mind readers" and that they should understand my needs and feelings (even though I may say "nothing" and carry on, if someone asks what's wrong). Being a victim, "making other people wrong", (even secretly, yet they know), has very little to do with culture nor religion. I won't be as good and generous to others, as I would with a full tank (I'm rather kind, generous and loving to be around). Nor will I be as effective, focused and positive at work – again regardless of religious or cultural believes.

If I become so childish, self-centered, bitchy and silently rude and ineffective, that may be bad enough. I think there's a more serious side to this as well. Having worked as a leader of a residential institution for teens within child protection, I've seen the effects closely. The teens had all sorts of different, cultural backgrounds. What they had in common was child abuse and often complex trauma in early childhood. They had not had their basic needs met, and the same people (mostly parents) who were to give them their care, were also the ones who abused them. When they moved into our residential care, they didn't come with empty love tanks – they had huge cracks in them.

I wish everybody would get to see and experience the difference using the Five Love Languages made on these teens. At the same time, we used the 5 Languages of Appreciation on the staff. It became a culture of appreciation. The results were magic; the teens transformed from being dangerous and abusive, to becoming “normal” and sometimes loving human beings. I saw our numbers- reducing violence, self-harm, drug abuse and run away rates- decline. Again – true magic – regardless of culture.

I believe this is the case for most human beings. I think some school shootings and terrorist attacks could be avoided in a culture of good relationships and full love tanks. I know there's research showing that loneliness, previous bullying and isolation in society are factors a lot of societies' most dangerous people have in common. I believe it's true for some terrorists around the globe, as well as most of the school shooters and “our own” Anders Behring Breivik, killing innocent children. When I interviewed a group of dangerous Neo Nazis 20 years ago, it was all the same; they had been excluded and bullied at school, and they felt that these groups allowed them a common goal, time together and – not surprisingly – they felt appreciated – often for the first time in their lives. Who knows what motivates people to join the IS?

Having said that, I notice there are interesting differences between how we can use the appreciation languages, in all areas; at work, school or home. The Chinese will greet someone by bowing their head (apparently in different angles, depending on how much they respect you? At least - so I heard), whilst some of us do a hard hand shake. I've met some parents avoiding eye contact, as they greeted me, apparently because I'm a woman. We've all got different twists of “appropriate” ways of speaking all five languages. Personally, I find the cultural differences very interesting and fascinating. For example, how my partner's body still stiffens as my best friends from Serbia arrive or leave our house – doing all the kissing on the cheeks.

# Languages of Appreciation at Work™

But – it's also interesting in the work place. I did a course in a residential care home, for staff working with elderly with dementia. We were discussing quality time, and the different dialects within that language. We found out that a Norwegian lady felt it was quality time to be on her own for a few minutes in the morning, whilst drinking a cup of coffee. Her colleague (from Thailand), had taken this action personally for more than ten years. She'd felt so disliked and rejected, as quality time for her was having a chat with colleagues. Talking about this made her cry, and I could see a relationship transforming right in front of our eyes.

Anita Fevang  
Founder, JOBBMOTIVERT