



## Cutting Through Cynicism with Authentic Appreciation

*“Are you kidding me? They don’t care about us.”*

*“They don’t give a rip about me. It’s all about my performance.  
If I bring in the sales, they’re happy. If I don’t, I’m gone.”*

As I’ve worked with more groups across the country, I’ve become aware that a large number of employees have a very cynical reaction to any discussion of positive communication from their supervisors, and sometimes, even their co-workers. The lack of genuineness in communicating appreciation may be the single biggest barrier to positive workplace relationships.

One of the contributing factors to these underlying attitudes of cynicism has to do with performance-based recognition programs. There are fundamental differences between recognition and appreciation, and that is why most employee recognition programs are not working. Two problematic themes of recognition programs have become clear: (1) the resentment of only being valued when one performs well; and (2) a distrust of the genuineness of any positive messages sent by supervisors to their team members.

While the concept of authenticity is not that difficult to understand, there are some deeper questions that raise important issues regarding perceived inauthenticity: Who determines authenticity? Is authenticity based in reality or perception? What causes people not to believe others are genuine?

## Common Reactions

Some work settings seem to just “ooze” cynicism, sarcasm, and a lack of trust. Probably the most intense cynical environments I’ve experienced recently are medical settings and hospitals, public schools, and government agencies. Why might this be? It appears that leadership in many of these institutions have tried to communicate recognition and praise, or have done training on “How to build a positive team”, and it has been largely done through a program-based approach. This leads to a perceived belief of insincerity on the part of the participants.

When employees do not believe that others are genuine in their communication of appreciation, a full range of emotional and negative reactions occur. These include:

- \*cynicism and sarcasm;
- \*lack of trust and disbelief;
- \*“I’ve heard it before” and “Wait and see” attitudes;
- \*Defensiveness, resentment and even anger.

Why do people have these responses? Largely because they have not been communicated to with genuine appreciation. Unfortunately, although well intentioned, many characteristics of employee recognition programs undermine perceived genuineness. (These issues are addressed in our *Appreciation at Work* training).

## Potential Causes of Perceived Inauthenticity

From my discussions with numerous groups, I’ve compiled many reasons why people question others’ sincerity of communication. In my next newsletter, I will share in more detail about how to these reasons for perceived inauthenticity. Let me list just some of them now:

- ***Tone of voice does not match what they are saying.***
- ***Non-verbal cues are incongruent with the message.***
- ***Demonstration of new and different behavior than in the past.***

- **Acting differently in front of others in contrast to private behavior.**
- **Inconsistent verbal messages across time.**
- **Lack of consistency between what they are saying and how they treat you.**
- **Not addressing current (or past) conflict, acting as if it didn't happen.**
- **Questioning the motivation of others.**

These reasons, and more, are all potentially valid reasons for questioning the genuineness of the actions from others in the workplace. The challenge is how to overcome perceived inauthenticity.

### **Getting Past Perceived Inauthenticity**

You can never fully “prove” your authentic appreciation for a person and you can’t “make” someone believe you. At the same time, there *are* practical steps that can be taken that can help get past challenges of being perceived as not genuinely valuing your colleagues.

- **Only communicate appreciation when it is true.** It is not helpful to try to “fake it.” People have good “radar” for communication that isn’t true.
- **Acknowledge the interfering causes.** Statements like, “I know I haven’t communicated much (if any) appreciation to you in the past...” or “I know we’ve had our conflicts and differences in the past...” and even, “I know you may think I’m saying this just because we’ve had the training on communicating appreciation...”
- **State your desire to be viewed as genuine.** The more specific you can be about what the person does or the character quality you value, the greater probability that you’ll be viewed as honest (rather than some vague, general statement -- “I’m glad you’re part of the team.”)
- **Be consistent over time.** If you communicate one message of appreciation every six months, the likelihood of being perceived as being genuine is low. Similarly, if you only communicate positive messages in ways or settings where it is evident to others (especially your supervisor), that also will lead to a perception of your doing the actions just “for show.”

- **Don't focus solely on performance or on situations that benefit you directly.** A nice way to communicate authentic communication is to identify non-work related skills that are positive (for example, their cheerfulness or how they treat others kindly) can be very impactful.
- **Communicate appreciation consistently over time.** I believe the only true way to get past other's perceptions of whether our actions or statements are not "real" is to communicate them repeatedly over long periods of time (months) and potentially in different ways and different settings. It is especially difficult for a recipient to argue that you are not being genuine when you try to find out the ways in which they are encouraged and seek to consistently and repeatedly communicate to them through those actions that are important to them.

## Conclusion

Is the lack of perceived genuineness of recognition, appreciation and encouragement an issue in the workplace? Absolutely. Is it a deserved concern? Most probably. Can it be addressed and resolved? In most cases. Is it worth the time and effort? Most definitely.

When employees and staff members truly feel valued and appreciated good things happen. And being forthright, if your appreciation is viewed as authentic, you will "stick out" from your competitors. Genuine encouragement is, unfortunately, the exception rather than the rule and authentic appreciation is a powerful tool to cut through the fog of a negative work environment characterized by cynicism, sarcasm and a lack of trust.

Fortunately, we have figured out how to help supervisors, managers and colleagues communicate *authentic appreciation* to one another using the **Appreciation at Work** resources we've developed (including our book, an online assessment tool, and training materials.) Let us help you move past cynicism and sarcasm to more positive work relationships.

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