

The comparison of preferred languages of appreciation between Singapore employees and US employees

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Languages of Appreciation

Feeling appreciated for one's contributions can both inspire job satisfaction and motivate employee engagement (Strack, 2014; Wolock and Martin, 2016). Extensive research has demonstrated that employees differ in what speaks appreciation to them, and five unique Languages of Appreciation have been identified (Chapman and White, 2019):

- *Words of Affirmation*: written or verbal praise acknowledging an accomplishment or a character or personality trait that is valued;
- *Quality Time*: quality conversations or spending collegial time together;
- *Acts of Service*: offering practical assistance to help colleagues, especially during time-sensitive or difficult tasks;
- *Tangible Gifts*: giving a thoughtful gift in line with the individual's personal preferences; and
- *Physical Touch*: a celebratory high five, fist bump, or handshake.

US Employees

Over 175,000 people (~90 percent US employees) have discovered their Primary Language of Appreciation by taking the *Motivating By Appreciation (MBA) Inventory*, and research (White, 2019) has shown that:

- Most employees (46 percent) choose *Words of Affirmation* as the primary way they want to be shown appreciation;
- Appreciation languages *Quality Time* and *Acts of Service*, are desired less frequently (26 percent and 22 percent of employees, respectively);
- *Tangible Gifts* is chosen significantly less frequently (6 percent of the time); and
- Note that *Physical Touch* is not included in the *MBA Inventory* since less than 1 percent of the population select it as their primary language of appreciation, and negative reactions can result from individuals who have experienced sexual harassment.

Singapore Employees

Recent research suggests Singapore employees may value *Acts of Service* more highly than US employees (Qualtrics, 2018). Specifically:

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- A main driver for job satisfaction for Singapore employees was a helpful manager in resolving work-related issues; and
- Receiving sufficient training to perform their job effectively was a key factor behind enhanced job satisfaction, as well as increased desire to go to work and higher staff retention rates.

Therefore, it was hypothesized that the *Acts of Service* appreciation language will be chosen as the Primary Language of appreciation by Singapore employees at a higher frequency than US employees.

Method

Using email domain names and knowledge of company location, this study compared:

- 967 Singapore employees who had completed the *Motivating By Appreciation (MBA) Inventory*; and
- a sample of 921 US employees identified from our general *MBA Inventory* population (of 175,000+ participants) created to match the Singapore employees group on the variables of age, gender and work setting.

MBA Inventory. The *MBA Inventory* (White, 2016) is an online assessment that identifies ways individuals prefer to be shown appreciation in the workplace. The inventory consists of 30 paired statements from which respondents choose, and their primary language of appreciation is identified from summary scores for each of the four languages (Words of Affirmation, Acts of Service, Quality Time, and Tangible Gifts) for each participant. Respondents also endorse action items that would be an especially meaningful display of appreciation to them (not analyzed in the current study). The reliability and validity of the *MBA Inventory* has been reported previously (White, 2016).

Results

The groups were different in their distribution of Primary Languages of Appreciation $\chi^2(3, N = 1888) 47.5, p = 0.00$. Figure 1 reveals that the Singapore group chose *Acts of Service* as their Primary Language of Appreciation significantly more often than did the US employees. Interestingly, *Acts of Service* was the tied with *Words of Affirmation* as the most preferred Language of Appreciation by Singapore employees, whereas US employees preferred *Words of Affirmation* at a higher rate than *Acts of Service*.

Figure 1 Comparison of primary languages of appreciation for Singapore and us employees. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals



Some additional findings were that *Quality Time* was less frequently chosen by the Singapore vs US employees, and Singapore employees valued *Tangible Gifts* even less than the US employees.

Discussion

As the Qualtrics report suggests, workplace leadership positively interacting with employees at the personal level appears to be desired by Singapore employees. For Singapore employees, *Acts of Service* tied *Words of Affirmation*, as the most preferred manner to be shown appreciation in the workplace.

One suggestion to demonstrate appreciation to Singapore employees who value *Acts of Service* is to take advantage of the unique opportunity for trouble-shooting work challenges while having lunch together from multi-ethnic street food vendors. Anecdotally, many Singapore employees who value *Quality Time* often endorsed the action item “Go to lunch together to talk about work issues,” so including this practice may be quite effective in showing appreciation to employees who value *Acts of Service* and *Quality Time*.

Words of Affirmation remain a front-runner way to be shown appreciation for both Singapore and US employees. For someone with this primary language of appreciation, words spoken about them have power to make or break their day. Taking a moment to express appreciation to a team member can serve as the encouragement they need to persevere. This is confirmed by the Qualtrics group report that the most important factor contributing to whether a Singapore employee plans to continue working for the company for at least the next few years is having a manager who consistently acknowledges them for doing good work (Qualtrics, 2018).

Roughly 25 percent to 30 percent of employees feel most appreciated by having *Quality Time* with managers and coworkers. Anecdotally, many US employees tend to prefer spending time with coworkers, whereas Singapore employees desire time with managers, which may be due to cultural differences in respect for elders.

This is the first study to report cultural differences in the manner that employees prefer to be shown appreciation, and suggests that other cultural differences may exist and be worth pursuing in future research. For instance, less-communicative Northern Europeans may value *Words of Affirmation* less than their Southern European counterparts.

Further research is needed before the findings should be generalized to all East Asian cultures, and additional research is needed before conclusions should be made regarding specific cultural differences in action items preferred (e.g., *Quality Time* with managers vs. coworkers). Another possible direction for future research is to examine the relationship between empathetic leadership (Kock et al., 2019) and languages of appreciation. Because empathetic leadership focuses upon the extent a leader invests in understanding their team members from a work as well as emotional perspective, and is intentional to create an emotionally secure work culture, this may be a contributing mechanism behind the success of speaking appreciation to team members.

Due to individual differences – as well as cultural differences – in preferences for what “hits the mark” to speak appreciation, it is important to be mindful to tailor one’s expression of appreciation in the appreciation language unique to each individual. This may be especially important when working as a consultant in a different culture or with a multi-national company. Tailoring appreciation will ensure efforts achieve maximum success, and ultimately enhance employee engagement and productivity.

Keywords:
Employee engagement,
Appreciation,
International differences,
Singapore workforce

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About the authors

Dr Paul White is a Psychologist, Author, Speaker, and Consultant who "makes work relationships work". Dr White is the co-author of three books including, *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*, which has sold over 275,000 copies (written with Dr Gary Chapman, author of the #1 NY Times bestseller, *The 5 Love Languages*) *Sync or Swim* and *Rising Above a Toxic Workplace*. In his most recent book, *The Vibrant Workplace: Overcoming the Obstacles to Building a Culture of Appreciation*, Dr White identifies the top 10 obstacles encountered in trying to build a culture of appreciation and how to overcome these challenges successfully. Paul White is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: paul@drpaulwhite.com

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