



Notes of Appreciation Can Boost Individual and Team Morale

By Whitney Johnson and Amy Humble

Leaders across the world instinctively know that playing to the strengths of each person on their team will accelerate both personal and organizational growth. But it's easier said than done. Identifying strengths, our own or anyone else's, can be tricky. At Disruption Advisors, the tech-enabled talent development company we co-founded, we've adopted a simple approach to identifying, then playing to strengths across teams. It's the exercise of writing notes of appreciation.

This strategy is especially effective as a wrap-up to our leadership retreats. Each attendee, whether they are the CEO or the newest junior hire, leaves with the same assignment: Write a note of appreciation to each teammate in the next two weeks. To encourage follow-through, they also copy their team leader as well as someone at our firm.

A note of appreciation isn't the generic thank-you note we've all received or, let's be honest, written a hundred times. It demands specificity. The author must offer real-world examples that clearly explain the attribute or action that is appreciated and why it's appreciated.

Consider this real-life note:

I value and appreciate your unique perspective whenever we are facing tough and complex decisions. You bring pragmatism to our conversations, which moves us from theory to action. You weigh if it is the right thing for us to do, which helps us better live our values. You view all situations with empathy, helping us make more caring

decisions. You bring a team mindset to decisions, rolling up your sleeves to help whoever needs the help, and inspiring others to pitch in. You help us make decisions as a team.

The feedback to this activity has been positive. Many individuals have teared up, these notes bolstering them when the going gets rough. One person shared that the outpouring of appreciation was “one of the highlights of their year.”

Why Notes of Appreciation Are So Impactful

1. They help people see their strengths.

It's common for people to not recognize their own strengths. Because our superpowers are reflexively easy for us, we're often not only blind to them, we can undervalue them. We may even be dismissive of them because we do them effortlessly.

Notes of appreciation are a mirror we can hold up to our colleagues to help them see their strengths. It also allows us to explicitly communicate that those strengths are valuable to us and our team. Also, by copying the team leader on the appreciation email, the team lead can identify common themes, better pinpointing specific individual's strengths.

2. They focus our attention on what's working.

Where we focus our attention matters. Neuroscience supports this, as Whitney explores in her latest book, *Smart Growth*. Our brains have a magnificent filtering mechanism, organizing millions of pieces of data using a process called the reticular activating system (RAS). We largely form this filter ourselves (whether consciously or subconsciously) by instructing our brain what to focus on. As with ads on social media feeds, whatever we pay attention to, we receive more of in return.

If we're focused on what isn't working, our brains will learn to look for more of what isn't working. But if our brain focuses on what is working, we will get more of what's going well. When we tell our teammates what they do well in a note of appreciation, we are giving them a conscious push to filter for their strengths.

3. They signal to people that they matter.

Work can become very tactical, and it can be easy to focus more on our to-do lists than our teammates. When we write a note of appreciation, we are indicating to our colleague "I see you, I appreciate the work you are doing." This is not only validating for them, but it reminds us that they are valuable.

If you think this sounds silly, you're not alone. Our human tendency is to think of critics as more discerning, more discriminating, and those who offer praise are less sophisticated.

Most of us want to be seen as sophisticated and discerning. Expressing appreciation therefore becomes much more than writing a note. It's a mental exercise that builds new neural pathways to push against the subconscious bias that elevates criticism over praise. Paraphrasing Gretchen Rubin: "Enthusiasm about a colleague requires social courage. It is an act of humility." It may be difficult, but humility and enthusiasm about our colleagues greases the gears of human interactions.

"Positive attention is 30 times more powerful than negative attention," as Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall have shared. "People don't need feedback. They need attention to what they do best...A focus on strengths increases performance. Therefore, a focus on strengths is what creates growth."

If, as a leader, you want to accelerate the growth of your team, you'll need to play to the strengths of both individuals and the collective. That begins with knowing not only your own strengths, but also the strengths of each person on your team.

And it can start with a simple, well-considered note of appreciation.

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