Deflecting Compliments Is Not Humility, But False Pride

Description

Do you filter out the positives? My experience over the years has been that many people reject or minimize positive feedback. Do an experiment. Go up to someone and provide them with a very specific compliment about something they have done. You will most likely hear such fallback responses as, â??It is nothing,â?• or, â??That is my job,â?• or, â??I could do better.â?•

It seems to be a natural trait for some to brush off positive comments. I find that healthcare people, in particular, are very hard on themselves.

At one time, I thought that deflecting positive feedback was an expression of humility. Yet two experiences in my own life created a shift in my thinking.

The first experience happened when I was in counseling for depression. I just felt lousy about me. After several sessions with the therapist, she said: â??I notice when I compliment you or give you positive feedback, you reject it verbally and even turn your body away. I wonder if one of the reasons you feel bad about yourself is you filter out the positive and let in the negative.â?•

I left that session feeling better than I had felt in a long time. It wasnâ??t that there was not work to do on me. There was. But the awareness that I had been letting in only the negative and rejecting the positive provided me with a clue to making things better.

The second experience happened in church one Sunday. We had a visiting priest, and during his sermon, he spoke of humility and false pride. He shared that humility is the ability to see ourselves as we areâ??the positive and the not so positive. It is not pushing away positive feedback. (This can be an example of false pride.) He shared that when you receive a heartfelt compliment, it is best to accept it, not just for your own sake but for the sake of the other person.

For example, if you are a carpenter and someone compliments your work, say, â??Thank you.â?• To say, â??It is nothing,â?• not only minimizes your own worth, but, unexpectedly, the other person may feel devalued also. They could be doing woodwork themselves and are truly impressed that the carpenterâ??s work is so good. For the carpenter to brush off the compliment sends the message that excellent carpentry is easy. Thus, the person giving the compliment can feel they should not be

struggling. It is important that when others acknowledge oneâ??s skill to let the positives in. I know this explanation resonates with others.

When sharing with organizations some ways to build a better culture, I mention research that shows the connection between feeling good about yourself and feeling good about another person. I have read that the ideal â??compliment-to-criticismâ?• ratio is anywhere from 3 to 1 to 5 to 1. (In other words, we should be giving three to five compliments for every criticism.)

Many humans have a natural tendency to be negative. Read the letters to the editor in any paper. Or ask a person, â??When you get a message to call your boss, is your first thought, *Here comes more positive recognition!* Or is it, *What is the problem now?*â?•

So, we have two challenges. One is that people donâ??t receive enough positive feedback. Two is that people donâ??t accept it when they do receive positive feedback. This may be another example of that chicken or egg thing.

The question I then pose to the group is, â??Do you feel the reason we, and the organizationâ??s culture, are not as positive as we would like is that we tend to filter out the positives and let in the negatives?â?•

I then describe how important it is to let the positives in. It is not bragging; it is acknowledging the person for providing the positive feedback as well as accepting the compliment. I then ask them to start saying thank you when they receive a compliment. To demonstrate, I then provide a very specific compliment and they say thank you. It is evident at first that this is a bit uncomfortable. Why? It takes time to get used to any new behavior.

After many of my talks, people are kind enough to say nice things to me. Some even say, â??You have a gift.â?• My response is, â??Thank you. I get to keep the gift if I use the gift in the right way.â?•

Some tips:

1. This week, test out what weâ??ve covered in this column. Approach a few people and compliment them for something specifically. I am not talking about large, general positive statements. Those are nice and deserved. However, I find individual communication is very powerful. See how people respond. If they brush it off, share what you have learned from this column. Ask them to accept your compliment with a thank you.
2. Remember the â??three to five positives to each negativeâ?• guideline. This ratio is the minimum. You can go much higher if you prefer. Negativity is contagious, as is positivity. Just remember to be specific. If compliments are not specific, they have less value. They can come off as glad-handing.
3. Practice accepting positive feedback yourself. It is not humility to reject the positive; it is false pride. You are minimizing the person providing the positive comment as well as not letting in a deposit to your own emotional bank account.

My own experience is some are naturally more positive than others. I am not one of them. I tend to lean toward the negative. I have to work very hard on myself. With these columns, I find it is easier to write about what is wrong versus what is right. Also, I guarantee each week you are not reading my first draft of the column.

I do find when one struggles with something and wants to be better at it, they study it. This column, along with many others, reflects my experience with learning how to create more positive, thus trusting, personal and work relationships. Do you want people coming to you or moving away from you? I want people to feel safe approaching me.

Finally, Iâ??d like to say that my December 25 column led to lots of emails. I am so glad many of you found it helpful and reached out. We never have to be alone. I wish you my best as we move forward into a new year.

If you or someone you know is struggling, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

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