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## Article

### Secrets of Positive Feedback

by Douglas R. Conant

Have you ever noticed how a pat on the back makes you feel great for days? If the praise comes in handwritten or email form, maybe you frame the note and put it on your wall so it can lift you up on a tough day or help you feel more engaged at work. (Years of studies by Gallup and other research groups have shown that engaged employees are much more productive.)

Sadly, kudos from bosses are all too rare. Believe me, I know. Back in 1976, I was a 25-year old MBA when I took my first job as a marketing assistant at General Mills in Minneapolis. I had never held a job beyond teaching tennis and managing a tennis camp, and my starting salary was a whopping \$10,500 a year. My co-workers tried to help me along, but the culture demanded crisp critical thinking skills that I had yet to fully develop. It seemed as if there was something wrong with everything I did. At my six-month performance review my boss said, "Doug, I like your determination, but to be honest, your performance has been very mediocre." And his boss's comment? "Doug should look for another job."

I was devastated, of course. I'd busted my young butt, and I knew that with a little time and encouragement I could master the work. But my boss's boss was not inclined to give me the benefit of the doubt, much less the time of day.

Ultimately, I went on to another division, where the general manager recognized my efforts and patted me on the back when I deserved it. Eventually, I mastered the job and received several promotions. Whew.

Over the years, I've worked on acknowledging others for their efforts. I've managed to marry tough-minded performance standards with tender-heartedness. As I've looked back over the more than 30 years that have passed since my career began, I have come to realize that there are three rules for building appreciation:

1. **Make a personal connection early on.** Your associates can tell when you are being direct, sincere and authentic. When you are, you establish trust. When you aren't, you don't. I have developed a practice that helps get things out in the open the moment a new hire meets me — I declare myself. I tell the person I'm meeting about my background, my values, my leadership philosophy, my expectations and even my favorite quotes. I then ask him or her to share something with me. My goal is to take the mystery out of our relationship as quickly as possible. This has proved to be a very powerful tool for relationship-building.
2. **Look for opportunities to celebrate.** My executive assistants and I spend a good 30 to 60 minutes a day scanning my mail and our internal website looking for news of people who have made a difference at Campbell's. For example, as of this writing I just learned about a woman named Patti who just got promoted in our customer service area, so I made a note to congratulate her.

3. **Get out your pen.** Believe it or not, I have sent roughly 30,000 handwritten notes to employees like Patti over the last decade, from maintenance people to senior executives. I let them know that I am personally paying attention and celebrating their accomplishments. (I send handwritten notes too because well over half of our associates don't use a computer). I also jump on any opportunities to write to people who partner with our company any time I meet with them. It's the least you can do for people who do things to help your company and industry. On the face of it, writing handwritten notes may seem like a waste of time. But in my experience, they build goodwill and lead to higher productivity.

I've also have found that what goes around truly does come around. After I was involved in a very serious automobile accident in July 2009, I was flooded with get-well notes from people all over the company and beyond. As my wife and I sat and read them in the hospital room, I could feel them helping to speed my recovery. The blessings of their notes reminded me that the more supportive feedback you give to others, the more you may very well receive in return.

What kind of difference has a bit of praise made to you?

*Douglas R. Conant is President and CEO of the Campbell Soup Company, headquartered in Camden, New Jersey. He is the co-author, with Mette Norgaard, of the upcoming Touchpoints: Creating Powerful Leadership Connections in the Smallest of Moments (Jossey-Bass, May 2011).*