

# SOLUTION FOCUSED-LEADERSHIP THROUGH APPRECIATION

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Appreciation, recognition, acknowledgment, compliment, motivation, solution-focus, potential, resources, leadership, emotions, heartmath, give, receive, self, others, environment, verbal, nonverbal, team, evolution, need, management, conflicts, resonant, Pygmalion, personal style

*Appreciation is an important part of SF-Leadership. It is the basis that permits us to go where we want to go to – or to lead others where they want to go to.*

*How can we create a positive, creative and safe environment, where people feel appreciated and valuable, have fun and therefore are more effective and motivated learners and workers? How can we appreciate and develop existing resources, and help others realize them?*

Inquiries about motivation factors show it again and again: Appreciation, recognition, acknowledgement is on rank one.

Daniel Goleman says: “The fundamental task of leaders is to prime good feeling in those they lead.... That occurs when a leader creates resonance – a positivity that frees the best in people.” (Goleman, 2002, p. IX)

What can be more positive than to get an appreciation of what you did - of who you are?

Mark Twain said: “I can live for two months on a good compliment.”

We know that people’s capacities are context-dependent – everybody has more or less access to their own capacities and resources depending on their environment, on with whom they work.

Let’s take for example the capacity to speak a foreign language. Have you ever noticed that you speak more or less fluently depending on with whom you speak?

And since every capacity reacts in a systemic way, the main task of leaders is to create a positive, creative and appreciative atmosphere, where people feel safe and valuable. This allows them to develop and use their potential and to become more effective learners and workers.

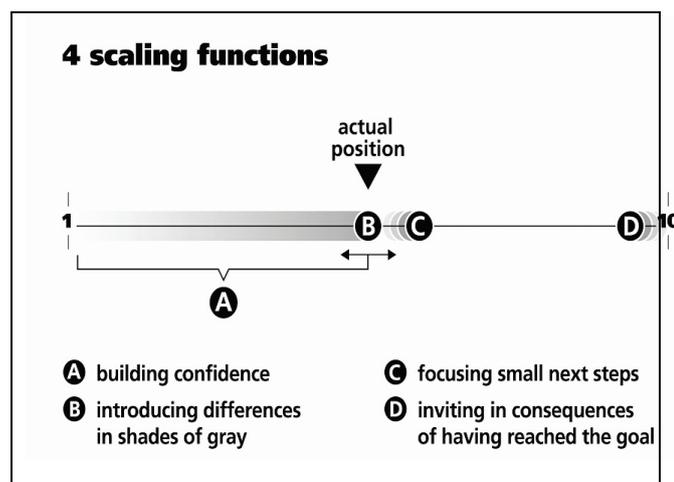
The more we focus on mistakes and errors – the more they are present and imprinted in our minds – and therefore likely to be realized. I remember, when I learned to drive a car, my teacher told me every five minutes *not* to hold my hands “like a squirrel” – and of course I did it – unconsciously - again after five minutes ... till I got a different teacher. He appreciated my way of parking, changing gears smoothly, respecting priorities ... I didn’t even know I did some things well! I began to feel much more confident and at ease.... And I will never forget the moment, when he said: “Congratulations, now you hold the wheel in the good position!” – I hadn’t even noticed it!

So how can a leader better help his co-worker to perceive their own resources, to empower them and to help them believe in a future success – in other words, how can a leader better motivate his people than by appreciating what is already there?

## The SF-Approach

The SF-approach gives us a wonderful and effective tool to appreciate and develop existing resources in others - and first, to help them to realize their own resources.

For example, let's look at the scale-questions. Peter Szabo shows it clearly in the following picture: The whole A-part is about appreciating past and present actions and attitudes - and what is sometimes even more: making them realize by the other person and therefore give him confidence. How often the other person is not even aware of his success? Or he doesn't dare to admit it unmotivated, because it would be a proof of arrogance - we have all learned the importance of being modest.



picture by Peter Szabo (<http://www.solutionsurfers.com>)

An appreciative solution focused talk can start by simply asking a question like:

- *On a scale from 0 to 10, how effective have you been in this project?*
- *Seven.*
- *Good, can you tell me what makes it seven? What are the main successes that made you climb on seven?*

You see, in no time at all, your co-worker evaluates himself his work and appreciates in what he succeeded. This is the first learning step in becoming capable to appreciate others. If you can not appreciate yourself, you can not appreciate others.

I have never met a person who evaluated himself at zero - and as soon as the answer is higher than zero, there is something to be appreciated. You just have to perceive and realize it.

The better the relations are in your team, the better the atmosphere is, the better people feel, the better people work. So one of your next questions can be about empathy - shifting perspectives:

- *And where do you think your colleague would see you?*
- *Five.*
- *And what is it that your colleague would give you five?*
- *He doesn't know that I also did.....*

Of course you don't hesitate to appreciate your co-worker yourself. Either by using the scale:

*- I would rate your effectiveness at eight. And what makes it eight is ..... and ..... and.....*

Or appreciate him in any other way. Just develop the habit of appreciating, of saying whatever positive action or attitude you perceive.

Besides the fact that your co-worker gets markers - i.e. he knows what he does well in your eyes - he also develops his self-esteem and his self-evaluation.

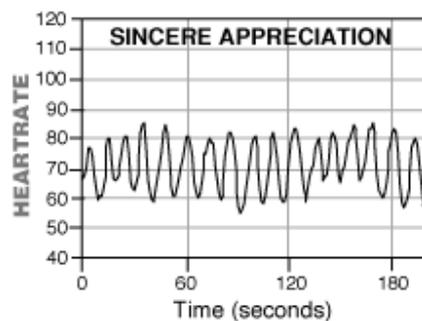
He feels appreciated and proud - and only in this positive emotional state can he perform at his best and develop his potential.

Indeed, positive emotions appear to have this complementary effect. They broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires, widening the array of the thoughts and actions that come to mind.

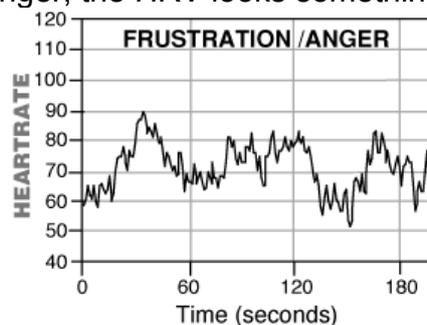
Pride, for example, follows personal achievements. It broadens by creating the urge to share news with others and to envision even greater achievements in the future.

In contrast to "negative" emotions, which carry other adaptive benefits in other situations, the broadened thought-action repertoires triggered by positive emotions build enduring personal resources (Frederickson, 2001, p. 218-226).

Appreciation also has a positive effect on our body - on the variability of the heart rate (HRV) - which reflects our emotional state. The following pictures illustrate this very well: During appreciation you see coherence, i.e. increased heart-brain synchronization. In this state the maximum of the brain is used and therefore we perform at our best:



In a state of frustration or anger, the HRV looks something like this:



You will find more information on this at: <http://www.heartintelligence.com> (Kees Blase)

Let's come back to our SF-talk. You may end it with a Future-Pace-question like:  
*- And what will take you one more point up in a future project?*

This is not only Future Pace, but also a much more efficient way of helping the other to perform better, without focusing on his mistakes and trying to avoid them, but by focusing on the solution and making it happen:

- How can you make it even more efficient?*
  - How can you improve it?*
  - What could you do instead?*
  - How can you change this?*
- and so on.

This means that not you, but your teammate will find himself new challenges. He will be much more motivated to achieve them, because he is in a responsible attitude, he has defined them himself – it is not one of your orders – you trust him, you believe in his capabilities, you give him space to grow.

## **To give and to receive appreciation**

In everyday life, what is it that hinders us sometimes in telling others how important and valuable their work is for us, how important and valuable they are for us?

How often do we not dare to give a positive feedback, because we are afraid that they would become insolent?

Because we are afraid they could become better than we are?

Because we are embarrassed and do not know how to say it?

Because we do not get appreciation neither?

Because we are afraid that they would ask for more money?

**AND** because good work is simply normal! That is what they are paid for – so why mention it???

- Every human being needs five (5!) words of recognition, acknowledgement, appreciation to balance one (1!) word of criticism (Furman/Ahola, 2004, p. 25).
- Appreciation is the fuel that drives people, THE factor that motivates them to go further, to excel in what they do.

Appreciation means telling the other how important he is and how much his/her work is appreciated.

It implies empathy, acceptance and congruence. Empathy means non-judging sympathetic understanding, acceptance implies unconditional appreciation and emotional warmth - and congruence is authenticity, integrity.

So when you “give” appreciation, be authentic, describe what you see/hear - a concrete behavior - and express how this makes you feel.

And when you “receive” appreciation, formulate acceptance – for example: “Thank you.” Express your emotion – for example: “I’m happy you like it.” and expose yourself – for example: “I like it too.” (Yoram Galli, SOL-Conference 2005)

Make sure not only to receive, but to also contain the appreciation you get. Never “discount”: “Oh, it is not worth mentioning it – the others did much more than I did.” Especially women have a tendency not to allow themselves to accept and contain appreciation (Mohl, 1994, p. 13-19).

Another bad habit is to try to give an appreciation immediately back, e.g. “Oh you did a good job, too!” Let the appreciation reach you – dare to enjoy it!

Appreciation has to be both, genuine and appropriate. Studies of human nonverbal behavior document that smiles that are ingenuine or otherwise disconnected from current circumstances lose credibility as expressions of internal states (Frank, Ekman & Friesen, 1993). Ingenuine or inappropriate appreciation – i.e. too much or nor not really honest – are not only not helpful, but counterproductive.

Appreciation embraces the whole human being: who you are (being), what you do (doing) and what you have (having). Appreciation is on all logical levels (Robert Dilts), Feedback is on the level of behavior / capabilities (doing):



## Different forms of appreciation

Of course, there are not only words for appreciating others. Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan and Glenn Parker give twenty examples, and invite you to choose for yourself (Thiagarajan/Parker, 1999, page 43):

“Please review the following list of forms of recognition. Check the forms that you would value and like to receive. You may check as many as you like, but check only the ones that appeal to you.

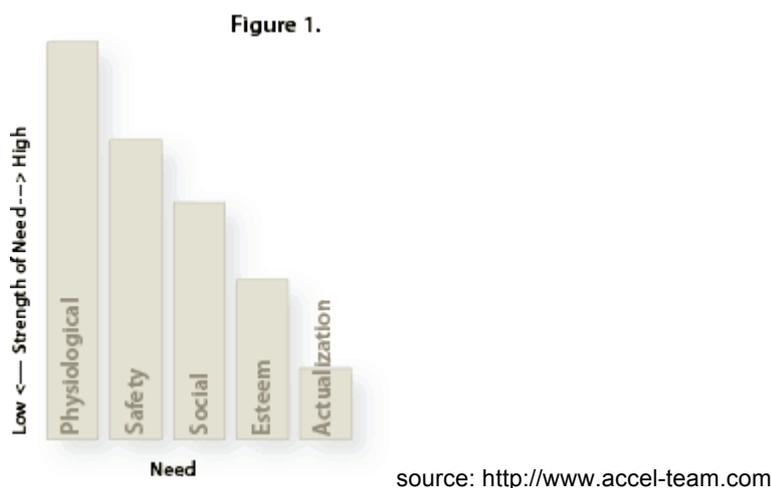
1. Receive positive verbal feedback at a staff meeting.
2. Be asked to take on a tough problem or new challenge.
3. Be asked to give a presentation on your work at a staff meeting or a company conference.
4. Receive positive, handwritten comments in the margin of a document you prepared.
5. Be invited to a barbecue or dinner party at the home of your boss.
6. Be given the opportunity to work flexible hours or work at home.
7. Go to a golf and tennis weekend at a beautiful resort with other award winners from the organization.
8. Be given the opportunity to purchase new tools and equipment to enhance your work.
9. Have your picture and a story about your work appear in the company or community newspaper.
10. Be asked for your opinion on a difficult organizational problem or a new business opportunity.
11. Be given the opportunity to speak about your work at an important professional conference.
12. Be offered the opportunity to learn a new system, operate some new equipment, or in other ways increase your skills and knowledge.
13. In a prominent location, have your picture displayed along with either letters of commendation or a description of your work or both.
14. Be asked to help a colleague get started with a project or solve a particularly difficult problem.
15. Receive verbal recognition for your work from a senior-level executive at a company forum attended by you and your colleagues.
16. A solution that you recommended is being implemented throughout the organization.
17. A customer or other stakeholder sends a letter to your boss praising your work.
18. When you ask for help, your boss offers to pick up some of the load directly, share his or her expertise, or obtain outside assistance.
19. Receive a T-shirt, hat, or mug with your name or other indication on it that makes it clear that it is recognition for your work.
20. Be empowered to make decisions or act in other ways that increase control over your work.”

As you may have noticed, all the impair numbers are extrinsic, and the pair numbers are intrinsic motivators. Extrinsic motivators are forms of appreciation that come from outside the person and appeal to the outer-directed self. Intrinsic motivators appeal to the inner self because they focus on things that may be apparent only to that person. Both motivators have their place, and one is not better than the other.

Let your team members mark the appreciations they like. Use this information not only for yourself, but share it with the whole team, so that everyone starts to detect what form of appreciation motivates whom and how they also can appreciate, i.e. motivate each other.

## Appreciation in human evolution

Appreciation is a basic need. If you don't have enough of something - i.e. you have a deficit - you feel a need. Abraham H. Maslow saw all these needs as essentially survival needs. Even love and esteem are needed for the maintenance of health. According to him, there seems to be a hierarchy into which human needs are arranged, as illustrated in Figure 1:



The physiological needs at the top of the hierarchy tend to have the highest strength until they are somewhat satisfied. These are the basic human needs to sustain life itself - food, clothing, shelter. Until these basic needs are somewhat satisfied, the majority of a person's activity will probably be at this level, and the others will provide little motivation.

When these basic needs begin to be fulfilled, other levels of needs become important, and these motivate and dominate then the behavior of the individual. And when these needs are somewhat satiated, other needs emerge, and so on down the hierarchy.

In the past, management systems of rewards (appreciation) have attempted to satisfy an individual's lower level needs for safety and physiological security, for protection against deprivation and threat to a worker or his family, e.g. food presents, long term contracts, good insurances (ex. life insurance) and so on.

However, management systems are now – or should be – endeavoring to satisfy the individual's higher level needs for esteem and self-actualization.

Appreciation builds the bridge from the “social”-level to the “esteem”-level: After individuals begin to satisfy their need to belong (social connection), they generally want to be more than just a member of their group. They then feel the need for esteem - both self-esteem and recognition from others. Satisfaction of these esteem-needs produces feelings of self-confidence and pride. People begin to feel that they are useful and have some effect on their environment.

Sometimes people are unable to satisfy their need for esteem through constructive behavior. When this need is dominant, an individual may resort to disruptive or immature behavior; a child may throw a temper tantrum, employees may engage in work restriction or arguments with their co-workers or boss.

Also, employees who don't feel appreciated, make less effort. In their eyes the “psychological contact” has not been respected by their boss/company. They have the feeling that they give more than they receive. So they only do the minimum work to rule, they just wait for the end of work and are only interested in their salary. They become distant to their work and their colleagues. They don't bring in any personal engagement anymore – neither new ideas nor criticism. In short, they have handed in their “inner notice”.(Brinkmann/Stapf, 2005)

Thus, appreciation is not always obtained through mature or adaptive behavior. Sometimes people try to obtain it by disruptive and irresponsible actions. In fact, some of the social problems we have today may have their roots in the frustration of esteem-needs.

Once esteem needs begin to be adequately satisfied, the self-actualization needs become stronger. Self-actualization is the need to maximize one's potential.

In order to do so, you have to “know” your potential – to perceive your resources, and to appreciate them - to use them, and to appreciate them - to develop them, and to appreciate them.

As long as you can not appreciate yourself, you can not give valuable appreciation – and you can not receive (and contain) the appreciation you get from others. So the first step is to start to perceive your own positive sides and to appreciate them – then to perceive the good sides in your co-workers – and to tell them!

“Walk your talk” is the strongest message you can give. Your beliefs and attitude (verbal and nonverbal) are stronger than any method or skill we apply (Hawthorne or Pygmalion effect).

You cannot lead others to where we are afraid to go ourselves.

If you start to experience and understand the effect of appreciation in any human relationship – and within yourself – your relationships deepen and become more satisfying, your self-esteem strengthens and your team-members feel more valuable and more motivated – you are on the way to become a “resonant” leader – i.e. a leader connecting on an emotional level.

People will forget what you said.

People will forget what you did.

But people will never forget how you made them feel.

*Just take a few minutes to reflect about the following questions*

- What rituals do you have to appreciate yourself?
- How do you commonly appreciate others?
- What appreciative words or sentences do you use a lot?
  - In order to appreciate yourself?
  - In order to appreciate others?
- How do you express nonverbal appreciation?
- How could you develop and improve your personal way of appreciating others?
- What elements of appreciation will you start to integrate in your personal form of leadership within the next week?
- How exactly will you proceed?
- How will you know that your leadership has become more appreciative?

😊 Enjoy 😊

## References

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After her studies at the Universities of Berne (Switzerland) and Bordeaux (France), Madeleine began to specialize in holistic methods. Today she runs her own business in Switzerland. She develops and gives courses in communication, personal development and teacher trainings, always connecting mind, body and heart. For years, she has shown a profound interest for the latest developments in teaching, learning and change. Her strength is to run creative and active workshops and to coach teams and individuals in change processes.

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