

The Art of Affirmation

In my years of management consultancy and executive coaching, one of the most astounding discoveries is that we lack an affirming culture. Leaders, who are not affirmed, are a threat to the organization. Why?

First, unaffirmed leaders cannot lead effectively.

We all have a gnawing need for affirmation. But CEOs seldom receive it because they are expected to perform. So we go into a comparative mode. We usually compare ourselves with more successful leaders. The more we compare, the more fragile we become. We become jealous of our peers' successes. The result: Insecure CEOs. They lose confidence. The life of the organization deteriorates.

Second, unaffirmed leaders are unfulfilled.

Insecure leaders can be devastating. As their need for affirmation is not met, they become more driven. The more driven they are, the more inhuman they become. They cannot enjoy their success because it is always not good enough. Then, we breed a group of emotionally starved, highly competitive CEOs.

Third, unaffirmed leaders cannot affirm others.

Unaffirmed leaders perceive the more competent subordinates and peers as competitors. In the long run, they deprive their organizations of people who are better than them because they feel threatened. Instead, they choose lackeys. They become more demanding, and less sympathetic. They disdain and despise the success of others. They become overly critical. They then become self-serving.

When leaders lack affirmation, they leave a legacy of
discouraged workers,
unrealized potentials,
demoralized teams,
disillusioned CEOs

We need to reverse this culture. It must begin with us. No one has ever died of an overdose of affirmation but many have been decimated for lack of affirmation.

Affirmation is an art. It is a skill that needs to be cultivated. Meta has eight principles in the art of affirmation.

1. We must believe it

Giving compliments must come from the heart. Anything short of that will not do. It must be consistent with our values. Values like respect, honor, gratitude and honesty are integral to affirmation. Skills without values will be short-lived. Values are the foundation from which the art of affirmation flourishes.

2. We must be sincere

Don't fake it. People will know it when we are insincere. Affirmation must be unconditional, without any strings attached. Some people are afraid of affirmation. One engineer tells me, "I am afraid of being affirmed by my boss. Whenever he does that, it means more work for me!" No wonder, people are afraid of being affirmed. Some leaders only affirm their staff when they have more work for them to do.

3. We must not overdo it

Over-abundance of praise devalues it. Avoid praising people all the time. To be effective, we affirm only when there is something worth praising.

4. We must affirm effort besides performance

Most of us know how to affirm high performance. Very few applaud effort. Nothing is more discouraging to a person when he has put in all the hard work but may not have produced something and then we criticize him. Affirm the effort and correct the lack of performance.

5. We must be positive

The world tends to focus on our failures and can be rather unforgiving. Affirming leaders catch people doing right and doing well. We cannot be affirming if we are self-absorbed.

6. We must be specific

Generalization does not help. Don't just say, "You are great." Be specific when you are complimenting. Praising specific behaviors will motivate the person to repeat those behaviors.

7. We must affirm character

Telling people they are kind, generous and loyal is very motivating. We must affirm character not just performance.

8. We affirm by helping people succeed.

Success can be affirming, especially when we help people succeed. Provide the support and resources they need. Then, applaud their success.

Finally, we must start today

Today is the best day to affirm people. Don't wait. Practice what I call, "Smart- bomb affirmation." Affirm little deeds. Observe the kind word, the generous deed, the charitable act, the loyal friend, the humble subordinate, the caring peer and the humble boss. Make affirmation a lifestyle. You will live a more fulfilling life.

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