

# How to Appropriately Respond to Positive Praise

*by Art Petty*

**It's easy to start believing the praise you hear in the hallways about your leadership approach. Easy and dangerous.**

I've always been leery of the unfounded and saccharine-sweet praise that is bestowed upon leaders. While you may call me cynical, I prefer to think of myself as pragmatic.

## **Praise goeth before the fall:**

Your employees may genuinely like and respect you however, **the best measure of your performance is not their praise for you, but rather, it's their performance on your team.**

We like to hear nice things about ourselves, and employees are quick to figure out that you respond positively to their praise. **If there were an Office Olympics, Boss-Praise would be a major medal category.** If there's even the remotest evidence that you respond favorably to subtle or blatant sucking up, I guarantee that you'll be buried under an avalanche of false praise. You need to maintain objectivity at all times. A hunger for praise will compromise that objectivity.

**You start over and earn your leadership credibility every single day. Start believing your own press clippings and you're likely to back off of your own performance accelerator.** Take the praise too seriously, and you're likely to back off the accelerator, pop the performance gear into neutral and start coasting. Downhill.

As for the boss offering up praise for your work, we really love to hear it. **However, knowing that most managers struggle to deliver the constructive kind of feedback, the positive praise may very well be a misguided attempt to manage you by feeding your ego.** It's easier to make you feel good than it is to highlight specific instances where YOU need to improve. And yes, many, many managers will dispense general positive praise only, due to their fear of offering effective constructive criticism.

## **Five Ideas for Coping with Positive Praise:**

Yeah, I know. The words are nice to hear. They help you define your own sense of self-worth. We all want to be appreciated. There are some good habits in coping with positive praise, including:

- 1. Always receive praise graciously.** In spite of my apparent cynicism on this topic, it is possible that the praise you are receiving is genuine and heartfelt.

2. **Look for the nuggets that explain what you did that merited the praise.** You want to find the behaviors that are appreciated and reinforce them in your daily activities.
3. **Teach people through your response to praise.** In an environment where it appears people are seeking favor through praise, politely counter with statements like, "Thank you. Now, what is it that I can do better to help this team succeed?" After a few rounds of those, people will begin to understand that you don't respond to disingenuous praise, and importantly, they will see that you are truly focused on improving your daily performance. That attitude and habit is infectious.
4. **Put a positive-praising boss at ease by seeking out the constructive feedback.** Once you clearly communicate that you genuinely like the constructive input, the boss's fear of feedback may melt.
5. **Teach your team how to dispense proper positive praise.** Liberally dispense positive praise of your own. Ensure that it is behavioral and tied to the business. Your team members will quickly catch on to the pattern.

**The Bottom-Line for Now:**

Always remember that you're not working for praise, you're working for results. Measure your success not in the words of others, but in how well your team members succeed and grow as professionals. Experienced leaders know that the highest form of praise that they can receive is watching those that they've supported go on to successful roles and careers. And every once in awhile, someone will look back and say, "Thank you." Now that's praise that you can take to heart.