

Little Attaboy's Mean A Lot!¹

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When I was 16 years old, I, along with a dozen other employees, worked one summer in the assembly shop of a small company that made variable speed transmissions. My father was the shop supervisor.

All of us working at the benches in the shop clocked in at seven every morning. My dad would come in about eight, after meeting with his boss. To this day, I clearly remember what he would do each morning when he arrived, a behavior that has influenced me throughout my career.

Before doing anything else, he would systematically move from person to person, spending a few moments visiting with every employee. He knew his people well and took an interest in their personal lives. It wasn't just, "Morning, Harry, how are you doing?" It was "Morning, Harry—how did your son's birthday party go last night?" He knew things about each of them and their families. He acknowledged important events in their lives and sympathized with and consoled them when negative things happened to family members or friends.

I believe that simple activity, that personal touch with his people, was why the morale and productivity in his shop was always very high.

Employees want their managers and supervisors to pay attention to them as individual people. They want recognition when they do something well. Unfortunately, all too often in our fast-paced business world, managers don't take the time to praise someone for a job well done, but, never hesitate to come down on them when they do something wrong.

The need to be acknowledged develops from infancy. We learn from the behavior of our parents to expect praise and even rewards for things we do well. This is what builds our self-confidence and grows our self-esteem.

But, again, many managers are too intent on protecting their own reputations. That's why, they are so quick to jump on people when they make mistakes. I have seen this complaint from employees over and over again in the many employee surveys that I've conducted over the years. Consider, for example, this quote from a clerk in an Accounting Department:

¹ From: <http://arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm> —Please take a moment to look at Arnie's site: www.arniedahlke.com

“Praise? No one seems to notice or care. It is rare to receive praise around here. In fact, it is quite the contrary. I do a lot of work above and beyond my job description but I’m never recognized for it! I only hear from my supervisor when I do something wrong. He *never* tells me I’m doing a good job.”

In spite of all of the talk I have heard over the years from disgruntled managers about lazy employees and the decline of the work ethic, I have found, by and large, that most people are motivated to do a good job. It is no wonder they feel de-motivated when managers and supervisors rarely pat them on the back and only talk to them when things go wrong.

The *Attaboy Matrix* is a device I use to get managers in the habit of praising people for the good jobs they do. It is a simple matrix that the manager creates at the beginning of every week. The columns represent days of the week and the rows represent the people who report to him or her as shown in the following example:

AUGUST: Week One					
Employee	M	T	W	Th	F
Holly	✓				
John			✓		✓
George					✓

To use the matrix, I instruct managers to be alert every day for opportunities to praise or compliment each employee for doing something well—finishing a job on time, resolving a customer problem, finding a way to improve a work process, etc. I tell them to put a checkmark in the appropriate cell for that day.

Their initial goal is to find ways of praising every employee who reports to them at least once every week. Their long term goal is to develop an attaboy habit. After a few weeks, I have found that most managers no longer need the matrix, because they succeed in developing an automatic attaboy habit.

However, I do caution them to be careful, to not overdo it. If they constantly praise people, or praise them for nothing, their praise eventually won’t mean as much. People will look at them and think, “Oh, he’s always complimenting people—he’s such a nice guy.”

But, I do encourage them to make a practice of praising. There is no doubt that people who are told by their managers that they are doing a good job will feel good about themselves and what they do. It will help them build their self-esteem. People with high self-esteem communicate more effectively and perform at higher levels. *They feel good about themselves and what they are doing!*

