



If You're Feeling Unappreciated, Give Someone Else Credit

Josh Baron and Rob Lachenauer | May 02, 2014

Harry is one of our most successful family business clients. A high school graduate, his first job was pouring concrete. Once he joined the family business, he showed a real gift for leadership. Strategically brilliant, disarmingly funny, a driven worker, and still grounded in his deep values, Harry grew the firm at more than 15% per year. He embodies much of what we all admire in leaders.

Yet something was amiss in the culture of the business Harry had created. The co-owners, his sister and cousin, had gotten to a place where they were considering splitting up their successful business. Their working relationships had ground to a halt as they pointed out faults in Harry's leadership. The more he was criticized, the more Harry agitated against their involvement in the business. Core decisions were not being made, as one family member after another threw a monkey wrench into the works.

One day, at a particularly unproductive meeting, Harry exploded: "No one appreciates all the sacrifices I've made for this company. The countless nights spent at industry conferences with people I don't like; the weekends with bankers and lawyers to finish the deals; the sleepless nights worrying about missing bank covenants. You all take this success for granted!" In short, Harry felt under-appreciated, and it was affecting the company's performance.

Appreciation is so fundamental to business success that in our work with family clients we hold "appreciations" sessions – a formal process where family members come together to openly express positive emotions about each other. There are no "yes, buts" – this is not a venue for feedback but rather a way to communicate honest and sincere gratitude about what someone else has done for you and meant to you.

Of course, this is not rocket science, but there is sound theory that supports it. After publishing his best-seller *Getting to Yes*, Harvard negotiations expert Roger Fisher paired up with psychologist Daniel Shapiro to write *Beyond Reason*, which moves beyond the first book in acknowledging the power of feelings to gum up even the most reasonable negotiations. Significantly, Fisher and Shapiro say that to be a top negotiator, people must first learn to express appreciation to each other. That's number one on their list. Appreciation generates the positive emotions that cultivate respect and tolerance for the other person's beliefs and opinions and actions.

Psychologist John Gottman, well-known for his research on couples, has also shown through mathematical analysis that couples that show appreciation to one another have longer and happier marriages. Indeed, a large body of recent research in the social sciences demonstrates that expressing appreciation is also beneficial for the giver, who feels more positive about him- or herself, and more satisfied with social relationships.

But appreciation has to be a two-way street; to create an appreciation culture, the leader has to get the ball rolling. So, instead of feeding Harry's painful plea for appreciation, in the meeting we flipped his request and said, "Harry, we hear you. But we are going to ask you to do something that is going to feel a bit uncomfortable. Look your sister in the eyes, and tell her something that you appreciate about *her*."

Harry was slow to overcome his skepticism to our request, but eventually he dredged up some heartfelt sentiment: "Without you, we'd be nowhere," he told his older sister. "Actually, I'd be nowhere – still pouring concrete and spending all my time flying planes. You recommended me for my first sales job when no one else saw any potential in me. You're sharp and you've guided our people decisions with real wisdom. You've always been there for us, for me. Thank you."

Without any urging, Harry's sister and cousin returned the appreciation, expressing previously unsaid but deeply felt gratitude. They articulated how much they felt Harry had sacrificed for the company, for them. They talked about the joy of being able to go on a good journey together.

The reality that people like and need to be appreciated seems so intuitively obvious that one can only scratch one's head and wonder why it doesn't happen more often. It's a fundamental human need to feel valued by people we esteem, especially by family members. Yet we all feel under-appreciated at least some of the time, not least of all because we assume that other people are taking full credit for our successes.

We all often get trapped in what we call "the credit game." By this we mean that everyone focuses on what he or she did personally for the success of the business,

denying the contributions of others. The problem with the credit game is that it's generally a *zero-sum* game. For Jim to win, Jane has to lose. Placing too much emphasis on individual accomplishments saps everyone's willingness to sacrifice for a collective goal. This is the cycle that Harry and his partners got themselves into – they were playing the credit game in their heads. Speaking their appreciation aloud has helped them to break free.

While family businesses powerfully exemplify these dynamics, they exist in all relationships. Given the demands of many careers today – intellectual, physical, and emotional – and the difficulty of expressing appreciation, you may be particularly vulnerable to feeling under-appreciated at work. But you can't just yell: "Hey! I'm working my tail off! Appreciate me!" Appreciation, as Harry found, is like playing catch – you need to throw the ball to have it come back.

We're aware that appreciations can sound hokey, even inauthentic. But dozens of times we have seen it break through the bitterness corroding relationships. Harry's appreciation was not a silver bullet – there is no silver bullet. But his heartfelt appreciation opened up a space for the real work to get started. That's what appreciations are all about. Try it. Show some appreciation to someone today and see what comes back.

Editor's Note: Some identifying details such as names, identities, industries, and financial information have been changed to protect client confidentiality.



Josh Baron is a Partner and a co-founder of Banyan Family Business Advisors, and author of the forthcoming book *Great Power Peace and American Primacy: The Origins and Future of a New International Order*. Rob Lachenauer is the CEO and a co-founder of Banyan Family Business Advisors, as well as co-author, with George Stalk, of *Hardball: Are You Playing to Play or Playing to Win?* Josh Baron and Rob Lachenauer

<http://d12wy5ngtjttak.cloudfront.net/ipad/blogs/XJvEVD3dTEU.html>