



THE POWER OF A PEN

Every leader, supervisor, coach, team member and parent has been told of the value of giving positive feedback. We've heard reasons why. We've heard we don't do it enough. We've learned all of the basics about giving positive feedback successfully: make it timely, make it specific, and when giving positive feedback consider sharing it publicly.

All of this is good advice, but it falls short of the mark if we want to make a long term lasting difference in the self-image, confidence, and performance of others. In short, if you want to give positive feedback, consider doing more than telling people how you feel, consider writing it down.

Why Write it Down

Here are three reasons why written feedback is so valuable.

1. **It is unusual.** While most of us give (and receive) far too little positive feedback to start with, receiving it in writing is even more rare. The time taken to form our thoughts and write them down demonstrates to the receiver how valuable and important the feedback is.
2. **It can be preserved.** Verbal feedback can be preserved, but only in the mind of the receiver. I know that I have had people tell me very nice things that I remember, and in some cases I can even take you to the exact location that they told me. But our memories can fail, and those events can just be lost among the millions of moments in our lives. Not so with something in writing. Not only can the thoughts and comments be preserved, but you can bet that in many cases they will be saved... for a very long time.
3. **It will be re-read and therefore reinforced.** Verbal praise is shared and can be savored by the receiver, but I don't think many people will stop the person giving the feedback and say, "Will you tell me that again please?" Quite the opposite for the hand written note. It will be read at least twice initially, and if the feedback is especially meaningful, perhaps several more times in the coming days - and often far beyond.

Some Ways to Do It

It really is as simple as picking up your pen and writing heartfelt, genuine comments to another human being. Here are some ways to help you get in the habit of giving people positive feedback in writing.

1. **Send a letter.** Writing someone a quick letter doesn't take very long. It doesn't need to be formal, it just needs to genuinely tell the other person how you feel. Don't put it off, just write it.
2. **I like you because.** I learned this from Zig Ziglar. He used to (and perhaps still does) produce small pads that used this sentence stem to make it easier to give someone positive feedback. The was printed with "I Like You Because" then it had several lines for you to fill in your note. I have used this idea for many years in a variety of settings with great success. Create your own pad like this on your computer, or start with a blank piece of paper or index card. Using this sentence starter may help you get started (and help you look for and find) the behaviors you want to praise.
3. **Thank you notes.** An extension of written feedback is the hand written thank you note. Most of us could write more thank you notes than we do, and they serve as an acknowledgement of what someone did for us, but they also serve as positive feedback. Commit to writing more thank you notes, or to adding a bit more feedback to those notes you do write.
4. **Send them an email.** This can be a letter in email, or a quick reply to a project update, letting someone know you thought their approach was good, or you appreciate how they are handling something. While the handwritten note is hard to beat, emails will be saved and re-read too. Don't underestimate the value of a quick three or four line email.

I could tell you stories of how meaningful written feedback has been, both to me and those I know. I could tell you stories of notes kept for years and re-read often. I could tell of people who said that some hand written encouragement buoyed their confidence and helped them through tough times and contributed mightily to their success.

You probably know of some of these stories too - which means you know my premise is right - that written praise can be extremely powerful. Since we know that it is valuable, and we know that it will be more than just appreciated, then it is our responsibility as leaders, teachers, parents, and siblings ... as people ... to give feedback to others in this way.

I'll bet as you read these words you thought of at least one person you could share positive reinforcement with in writing. Since you know who it is, and what to say, and now you've been reminded of the impact that act could have, you have no other choice.

Write that note now.

You'll be glad you did, and so will the recipient. And who knows, you may change another person's life forever.