



Praising the wrong way can undermine Motivation and Performance

The work of Carol Dweck PhD (Department of Psychology, Columbia University) has become well known over the last few years. Her research on what people tell themselves about their abilities, and in particular intelligence, has had a noticeable effect on how we train, coach and lead in our workplaces today.

Smart organisations and their leaders are realising the benefits of using her findings to enhance performance at all levels.

In the past, it was believed that praising intelligence was helpful for motivation and engagement. Six studies (by Claudia M. Mueller and Carol S. Dweck) have shown that, contrary to this popular belief, praise for intelligence has more negative consequences for a person's achievement motivation than praise for effort. People praised for intelligence were found to care more about performance goals and achieving a fixed outcome, than people praised for effort. After failure, they also displayed less task persistence, less task enjoyment, more low ability attributions, and worse task performance than those praised for effort. Finally, those praised for intelligence described their abilities as a fixed trait (one that was present from birth and could not be changed) more than those praised for their effort and hard work. These people believed their abilities and intelligence to be subject to improvement.

These findings have important implications for how achievement is best encouraged in our workplaces, at an organisational, leadership, team and individual level.

Praise for a person's ability or achievement at work is a common response to a job well done. Nothing seems more natural than to recognise an individual's achievements by congratulating them on their abilities or "Mark" in some way.

It's not unsurprising that this type of praise has been widely accepted as a popular tool in the development and maintenance of an individual's achievement motivation, behaviours, and strategies. (Brophy, 1981; Koestner, Zuckerman, & Koestner, 1987; Schunk, 1983, 1994; cf. Delin & Baumeister, 1994; Kanouse, Gumpert, & Canavan-Gumpert, 1981).



Consequences of Praise for Ability Given After Good Performance

Having good performance linked to high intelligence may influence a person by changing their goals for achievement and by altering what they attribute for their success. Praise for ability and achievement alone may negatively affect a person's responses to achievement situations in two different ways.

First, praise for ability or achievement may lead a person to adopt a **performance goal** orientation toward their achievement. This means that the 'result' or outcome of their performance is all they are interested in. It becomes their primary goal rather than putting in any effort or wanting to learn.

This means, telling people they are smart when they perform well may cause them to want to continue to prove that they are intelligent by receiving high 'Marks'. (Think about most organisation's Performance Management processes and how this might inadvertently play out!)

Dweck and her associates have demonstrated that people who hold the outcome and "Mark" as their measure of success are likely to sacrifice potentially valuable learning opportunities. This is particularly true, if these opportunities hold the risk of making errors, and do not ensure an immediate good performance "Mark" (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). This means "being challenged" and "learning" are rejected in favour of being seen as "smart".

It's also interesting to note that an emphasis on a good performance "Mark" has been linked to a 'learned helplessness' response. (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliott & Dweck, 1988).

Second, praise for ability or achievement, after a good performance, may teach people that intelligence is a stable trait that is reflected in and can be easily read from performance rather than from effort.

If people take away this lesson, they may correlate low intelligence from poor performance and therefore that their abilities are fixed not only for their successes but also for their failures.

In one of her Studies, Carol noticed that praise for intelligence, even when it followed a genuine success, taught people that they can measure how "smart" they are from how well they do, their "Mark"

What type of praise is more effective

If praise for intelligence and achievement has unwanted consequences for people's achievement after failure, what type of praise is more effective.

In her research, Carol compared the goals and achievement behaviors of people praised for intelligence with those of people praised for effort (i.e., hard work).



First, effort-related praise may lead people to focus on the process of their work and the possibilities for learning and improvement that hard work may offer. Because of this emphasis on their efforts, people may feel able to focus on the development of their skills through the mastery of new material. In other words, they may focus on their learning goals, as well as continued displays of persistence, enjoyment, and good performance in the face of setbacks (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliott & Dweck, 1988).

Second, people praised for their hard work may learn to attribute their performance to effort, which can vary in amount, rather than to a stable or fixed ability. Therefore, they will interpret subsequent poor performance as indicating a **temporary** lapse in effort rather than as a deficit in intelligence. Praise for hard work may lead people to display more adaptive achievement behaviors after failure than those praised for solely for intelligence or achievement.

The importance for organisations

People with a growth mindset are more effective in their work in several ways.

- They became more open for feedback and criticism.
- They became more effective in solving difficult problems by putting in more effort and by searching for more effective approaches.
- Those who were managers became more effective in coaching.

Organisations can help their people develop a growth mindset if they:

- Train and inform them about the growth mindset.
- Encourage them to know they can perform, control and develop growth mindset behaviours.
- Help them foster a positive attitude about the growth mindset behaviours.
- Actively reward them for demonstrating a growth mindset and model it at all levels.
- Demonstrate their commitment to it and show that it is expected and supported in the organisation.

If the success of an organisation is based around the performance of its people, then there is a real need to hire and to foster the growth mindset. Organisation's need to be looking for people with potential, not natural skill. Organisations need to focus on creating an environment that allows people to improve rather than having to prove themselves.

If you would like more information or to have a consultation about how to foster a growth mindset in your organisation please email us at enquiry@careerclarity.net.au or call us on 1800 80 65 88.