



Applying the **FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES** *at Work?*

Helping Staff Feel Truly Valued Through Authentic Appreciation

By Paul White

Many teachers, staff, and administrators are familiar with *The 5 Love Languages* (Northfield, 2010), the *New York Times* number one best-selling book by Dr. Gary Chapman (which has now sold over 8 million copies). In fact, it is not uncommon to hear a conversation in the lounge in which someone is talking about his or her “love language.” (And many teachers try to informally use the love languages with their students.) But when you talk “love languages” as they relate to workplace relationships, it can feel a little weird. That is why Dr. Chapman and I explored applying

the five languages to work settings, which resulted in our book *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace* (Northfield, 2012).

Differences Between the Five Love Languages and the Five Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace

While the names of the five languages of appreciation are the same as the five love languages, what the languages look like practically differs quite a bit. There are a variety of factors that make personal relationships and work relationships different.

First, the dynamics of relationships at work are different. There are superintendents, principals, teachers, staff, and volunteers. Besides having your performance evaluated, the authority inherent in work relationships affects whether you will continue to be employed and how much you are paid. Also, work relationships tend to be more formal than personal friendships, so the style of communication reflects this (for example, Mr. Hill, Ms. Sanders). There are additional unique issues that don't exist in personal relationships (for example, the question of the authenticity of the appreciation or the issue of "fairness" between coworkers receiving appreciation in different ways).

Second, it would be inaccurate to assume that your primary love language in personal relationships is the same as your primary love language in the workplace. In fact, some initial research shows that while 65 percent of the time an individual's personal love language is one of the person's top two languages of appreciation, that leaves 35 percent of the population that has significantly different languages. One key (and somewhat obvious) reason is that physical touch is far less important as a language at work than in personal relationships.

Third, the language of physical touch is less important in the workplace than in personal relationships. Physical touch is the lowest language of appreciation for most people in the workplace. This makes sense; there are more boundaries in the workplace, and even appropriate physical touch is not desired by many. But spontaneous, celebratory displays (high fives, fist bumps, a pat on the back) are quite common between coworkers and are an important part of positive work-based relationships.

Finally, a key difference we found about appreciation in the workplace is that *while knowing a colleague's language of appreciation is valuable, it is also important to know the specific actions important to the recipient*. This is because there are so many different ways to demonstrate that language in the workplace, and getting the right action is critical. Take, for example, quality time. In personal relationships, quality time is centered on *focused attention*. In the workplace there are lots of ways people value time: individual time with the principal, going out to lunch with fellow teachers, taking a walk after work, going to a school event together. An additional variable is *with whom* you are spending time—a colleague with

whom you interact a lot, your principal, or a fellow teacher from another grade level whom you don't know that well. You may want to "hang out" with a fellow teacher, but doing so with your administrator could feel awkward.

While knowing a colleague's language of appreciation is valuable, it is also important to know the specific actions important to the recipient.

The Importance of Appreciation

Feeling appreciated by supervisors and colleagues has been shown to be critical to employees' job satisfaction in a variety of settings, and this includes teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and school staff. But the evidence is clear that most Americans *don't* feel valued by others at work:

- Over 65 percent of workers in North America report that they have received no recognition in the last 12 months for doing a good job.
- While 52 percent of supervisors report feeling they do a good job of showing recognition to their staff, only 17 percent of staff members report feeling that their supervisor does a good job of recognizing them for doing good work.
- And 79 percent of the people who quit their jobs cite not feeling valued as one of the key reasons they leave.

When staff don't feel valued, bad things happen over time. Teachers show up late to work or call in "sick" more often. There is more grumbling and complaining, resulting in a more negative workplace. The quality of work goes down. There are more complaints from parents. Staff turnover increases. And, ultimately, there are more headaches for principals to manage.



Most of us tend to communicate appreciation through actions *we* value, but not everyone feels appreciated in the same ways.

Core Conditions for Appreciation

Fortunately, we *do* know how to help employees feel truly valued. In our work with school personnel, we have found four conditions that need to be present for team members to feel appreciated.



1. Appreciation is communicated regularly.

What does *regularly* mean? It varies depending on the work setting, the frequency of interaction between coworkers, and the nature (length, history, and closeness) of the relationship. However, it clearly implies more than at your annual performance review or when someone receives the “Staff Member of the Month” award.



2. Appreciation is communicated through language and actions important to the recipient.

Most of us tend to communicate appreciation through actions *we* value, but not everyone feels appreciated in the same ways. Some people appreciate words of affirmation, and others are encouraged when someone helps them with a task. Spending time is another way to demonstrate support. One teacher reported, “I just want my principal to stop by my room once every two weeks and listen to me vent for 10 minutes.” Bringing a colleague a cup of coffee when you know he or she has had a long day can be a pick-me-up. Even a celebratory high five or a fist bump when a difficult project has been completed can be valuable.

One assistant principal shared that he didn’t really need to be told that he was appreciated. This is because when he was growing up, “if someone praised you, the next thing that was coming was an ‘ask.’ They would ask me to do something for them or loan them money. So when I receive a compliment, my first response is, ‘What

do they want?’ ” His language of appreciation was quality time. He was a coach, and if you hung out with him at practice, he lit up and almost couldn’t stop talking about his players.



3. Appreciation is personal and individualized.

Recognition of a group is a good start, but if the appreciation doesn’t relate to what each team member did to help achieve the goal, the communication can fall flat. People want to hear about what *they* have done—that you appreciate that they stayed late after the parent meetings to help clean up or that you have noticed them coming in early to provide extra instruction to a struggling student.

To effectively offer words of affirmation, follow these guidelines:

- *Use the person’s name.* People like to hear their name. In larger schools, a cafeteria worker may wonder if the principal even knows who he or she is, and the personal touch is especially important.
- *Specifically name what the person did.* Just as students respond best to specific praise, so do colleagues. Describe the valued action—“Juanita, I really appreciate how you answer the phone and greet visitors cheerfully”—rather than just give a global compliment such as, “You are doing a great job!”
- *Tell the person why that action is important.* Often team members follow through on actions, but they are not sure why it is important: “Marquees, when you get your reports to me on time, it makes it easy for me to compile my reports and get them to administration on time as well. Thanks!”



4. Appreciation feels authentic.

If the recipient does not believe the appreciation is genuine, nothing else really matters. So what makes appreciation seem inauthentic? People we've worked with mentioned these factors:

- A person's tone of voice, posture, or facial expressions don't seem to match the words.
- How a person relates to you in front of others differs from how that person interacts with you privately.
- The individual has a history of saying one thing and doing another.
- The person offering the praise appears to have an ulterior motive.
- The actions suddenly appear after training or implementation of a program on appreciation.
- Relational conflict in the past hasn't been addressed.

How do you get past people's perception that you don't truly value them? There is no magic bullet. Ultimately, it comes down to a person's assessment of your actions and motivation, over which you have no control. The best course of action is to repeatedly and regularly communicate appreciation in the language and actions important to your colleague about specific actions or character qualities that you value. Over time, you may be able to convince them that you truly mean what you are saying.

Given the increased complexity of effectively communicating appreciation, we created the Motivating by Appreciation (MBA) Inventory. The MBA Inventory creates an individualized report identifying each person's primary and secondary languages of appreciation, his or her least valued language (which can be a

blind spot in relating to others who value that language), and the actions most valued by the recipient. Additionally, because of the unique characteristics of working in school settings, we have recently created a version of the inventory specifically for schools. For example, an action item for acts of service is "covering your lunch room duty so you can get some other work done."

After having his staff take the MBA Inventory, one elementary school principal remarked, "I found out I was missing the mark with my team—trying to show appreciation in ways that weren't meaningful to them. I now can stop wasting my time and energy in doing things that aren't effective and use the languages that are impactful for my team members. Thanks!"

Take the time and effort to find out how your colleagues truly feel valued.

Conclusion

Christian school administrators, faculty, staff, and volunteers often want to know how to encourage and show appreciation to their colleagues, to live

out the New Testament commands: "Be kind to one another" (Ephesians 4:32, NKJV) and "Encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:11, NLT).

While we may be thankful for those with whom we work and we may try to communicate our appreciation to them, if we don't use the language and actions important to *them*, we can wind up "missing the mark" (as well as wasting time and energy). The biggest risk may be that we leave them feeling unappreciated because, even though we sent them a message, they couldn't "hear" the encouragement we tried to send their way!

Take the time and effort to find out how your colleagues truly feel valued, start to act on that knowledge, and you'll be taking the initial steps to help your school environment become more positive and supportive.

Paul White, PhD, is a Christian psychologist, speaker, and consultant who makes work relationships work. He is coauthor of *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace* with Dr. Gary Chapman, author of the *New York Times* number one best seller *The 5 Love Languages*. For more information on how to communicate authentic appreciation in your workplace, go to www.appreciationatwork.com or e-mail admin@drpaulwhite.com.

