

Diversity Gazette

Appreciation: More than a Thank You

by Maggie Bailey

I recognized lately that “I appreciate it” is likely my most-used phrase in my professional life. At this point, I feel that it’s become a trite response. Even though I really mean it, does it really sound like I do? Are there better, sincerer ways to express my appreciation?

Organizations grapple with the same questions. The pandemic and countless other stressors have encouraged people to consider and seek out the work environments they value and, critically, that value them. We know that people are happier at work when they feel they are appreciated not only for the work they do, but also for the diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and personalities they bring to their teams. By developing a shared culture of appreciation, our teams can intentionally recognize, engage, and care for its members. A culture of appreciation can also help to counteract organizational dynamics that can leave individuals feeling undervalued, disconnected, and burnt out.

Certainly, there’s no one-size-fits-all approach to this work. But here are some strategies that teams I’ve been a part of have used to our advantage.

Incorporate appreciation into your team values

Values are the foundation for a culture of appreciation. “Appreciation” may not be explicitly named in your team’s values, but it’s surely reflected in how you interpret and act on those values. Having a team conversation

about what matters to the group ensures that your team’s values and how they are practiced reflect the way members want to be treated.

Elevate your teammates’ strengths

This goes beyond simply giving your teammates credit for their efforts. Endorse their specific strengths and ideas to others on your team. This technique can be particularly meaningful for women, people of color, people with disabilities, and other groups who may face power imbalances in the workplace.

Acknowledge effort as well as outcomes

It’s easy to focus on results. They’re (often) easily measurable and visible. However, only emphasizing results loses sight of the fact that process matters. Further, it may discourage someone from taking on a new challenge for fear of making a mistake or slowing the team down. Acknowledging effort creates an environment that supports learning.

Ask how your teammates like to be recognized

Some may like public recognition in a team or organization-wide meeting. Others may prefer a private conversation. Some get satisfaction from recognition at the end of a particularly challenging project, while others appreciate gratitude for the small details they contribute. Whether you’re a supervisor or a peer, know that not everyone needs the same things to thrive.

Create inclusive ways for the team to connect

Make space for the team to come together and develop camaraderie both professionally and personally. Be mindful that different team members may prefer to engage in different ways. Relying solely on happy hours may isolate teammates who don’t drink. Only socializing after hours may be difficult for those with child or elder care responsibilities. Keep religious holidays and cultural observances in mind when planning your team’s calendar.