

Technical Tip: Praise Practice--A Model for Specific Praise

“When we receive expressions of gratitude, my research shows, we are more likely to persist when the road gets tough” (Gino, 2018, p. 173). Providing praise is critical because it not only prompts pride in the work and the desire to repeat a behavior, it motivates us to keep working hard. Too often, though, even when leaders provide what they believe is praise, the praise itself fails to make a difference for two primary reasons: 1. Leaders feel like they’re delivering praise, but workers don’t recognize the comments (written or verbal) as being praise, and 2. The praise is so ambiguous that the workers have no idea why they are being praised in the first place. This means that employees simply don’t feel as if their work is valued, which is the primary element in motivation.

In this Technical Tip, we provide a model for specific praise so that using praise can be replicable and explicit. If leaders struggle to find the right words and phrases, then the work lies in deliberate practice using very direct language that is undeniably the leader’s celebration of the employee’s work.

Let’s use instructional feedback as an example. There are any number of reasons to praise the work of teachers, but leaders often find themselves striving to improve instructional practices. This is a place where praise can work perfectly to motivate. The conundrum is that it will motivate when done well and demotivate when done poorly.

As we make our way into classrooms, we want to support the strategies that work best for student learning. This means that we want to praise teachers for using pedagogical approaches that are both research- and evidence-based. We know that approximately 95 percent of what teachers choose to do with students on any given day will work with an effect size of between .20 and .40 (Hattie, 2009). As instructional leaders, we’re looking for strategies that leverage the

highest effects on learning. And while average effect sizes hover around .40, there are numerous strategies that have effect sizes that double the average.

But we're not talking about instructional practices here as much as we're learning to use a technical tip, specific praise, as a motivator. That said, motivation is directional, and we want to face the teacher in the right direction as we motivate her to push forward. Specific praise is the motivational technique.

In the use of praise for instructional practices, it's used when we see teachers doing something very specific that we want the teacher to be *proud* of doing and *repeat* in subsequent scenarios. Praise is used for *pride in the work* and *replication of the practice*. Finally, in our model of praise, we advocate that specific praise should be kept for use in only scenarios where we see either effort or excellence (what we call E²)—and nothing else. This means that teachers are either praised for working hard (as in trying something new) *or* for excelling in an area of focus.

The magic in this type of praise is specificity--the teacher knows for certain what is being recognized because of the choice language that specifies the observer's delight. Because leaders need to be focused on these two areas--specificity and appreciation--our format helps them with what we call *Praise Practice*. Let's take a look.

Specific praise has a unique format that can be used in a number of ways, but these two formats work well in the development phase of learning to provide praise more often:

1. Make a praise statement, be specific about what you're praising, provide a rationale for the praise, make a praise statement.
2. Be specific about what you're praising, make a praise statement, provide a rationale for the praise, make a praise statement.

Notice that it's a four-part model, and although the parts are interchangeable, it's critical to use specific praise statements twice to anchor what is being recognized. Let's take a look at two samples of an administrator praising a teacher:

1. Mrs. Jones, I really like your planned collaborative structures today. The specificity of the partnering strategy ensured accountability for all students. Students benefit from that level of direction for peer-to-peer interactions because it supports retention and quality collaboration and communication. You did an awesome job with the lesson today.
2. Mrs. Jones, your students were really working together within your planned collaborative structures today; the directions were crystal clear. It was impressive. We've been focused on cooperative learning, and it's critical that our learners are supported with structures like this one. It was a model activity that reflects the level of excellence that we are looking for in our classrooms.

In the praise statements above, you'll notice how the four-part model is used and how we doubled-down on the praise statements. You might emphasize what you're praising or the rationale, either one works well, but be sure to use two praise statements to avoid ambiguity and to truly recognize the great work being done. A teacher should feel recognized and valued after reading your praise.

Always remember that we cannot give enough genuine specific praise. For any given lesson, you might provide three pieces of specific praise during one classroom visit, which supports the teacher and reinforces what they are doing with at least 6 praise statements. The more praise you and give, using specific examples of what works within the lesson, the greater the chance that the teacher will duplicate those practices in upcoming lessons. Praise becomes the fulcrum for consistently excellent classroom practices.

As leaders, we should always consider two questions regarding the language we use when giving feedback:

1. What do I want the teacher *to think or feel* based on the feedback?
2. What do I want the teacher *to do* based on the feedback?

The answer when using specific praise should always be the same: 1. I want the teacher to feel proud and affirmed in her work, and 2. I want her to repeat this behavior again. Let's examine a simple scenario.

Scenario: Mrs. Greenwald is a third-year teacher in your school, and she's always open to feedback about her lessons. It's not uncommon for her to quickly check her computer as soon as you leave the room after a walkthrough so that she can read your comments right away.

Today, her students are in "centers." There are 5 centers total with 6 students at each one. The students are working in groups of three so she has two groups at each center. You walk over to the first center and the kids are ready and eager to share what they're thinking and doing.

Students are collecting evidence from different reading passages. The first part of the center experience is a silent read of the article/passage, then students have roles for evidence collection onto a graphic organizer, and they work together to gather all the information they need. Mrs. Greenwald supports students by circulating the room, and she spends a good amount of time at each group. She's asking high level questions to prompt thinking.

You stay long enough for her to transition students to the next activity. The passages are short so they only have 12 minutes at each table. It's great to see this amount of reading, summarizing, and collaboration in a science classroom. You ask the students what they'll do with the information, and they say it's an individual essay with a group presentation. You hit send and move to your next walkthrough.

Sample Feedback with Specific Praise:

Mrs. Greenwald,

I really like the energy in your room today as I entered. Students were up and moving around in a controlled manner, timed by you, and making their way to the centers to collect evidence from the reading passages you planned for them. Student movement is supported by brain research, and it's critical for our learners to move around. Very well planned. Thank you.

I also liked how they read quietly for a short time, and then talked about the reading. It's so important that they have quiet time coupled with think- and talk-time. Be proud of the way that transpired.

I really appreciate the collaborative structure you used with the groups of three. It was thoughtful of you, and I could tell that they all had specific roles. The students could explain the focus for the day and that the end-goal is an individual essay along with a group presentation. The rigor with the essay is on grade level, and you continue to support communication and oracy with the presentation outcome. I am thoroughly pleased with what I saw.

Finally, your support for the school literacy initiative is evident and clear. You have students reading with specific time spent on short passages, summarizing text, and synthesizing

evidence from multiple passages. I commend these efforts, and I'm excited to read an essay or two when the students are finished. Fantastic visit.

-- Mr. Hoover

Note that Mr. Hoover was able to provide four pieces of specific praise using the four-point model.

Activity:

Independently, or with your team, identify the four parts of the model in each of the four paragraphs, noting where the feedback uses praise statements, specific actions, a rationale for the feedback, and a second praise statement. Note also how this type of feedback is likely to make Mrs. Greenwald *feel* and how she may *respond* in return.