

# Learning to compliment effectively

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## 1. Advocates and skeptics of complimenting

Complimenting is attractive for many people. Most people prefer to and view it as more constructive to say something positive than to say something negative. After all, who does not want to be appreciated for what he does? Although everybody makes mistakes now and then, most people mean well, don't they? This way of reasoning is surely plausible which may explain why I frequently hear people saying that is good and important to compliment frequently. They claim that this is the best way to motivate people. It is correct that complimenting can be useful. An adequate compliment provides us with the type of feedback that can help us become aware of which of our behaviors are effective. Furthermore, a compliment can make you realize that there is someone who is paying attention to you and who feels involved with what you do. This is why complimenting effectively can be useful in different contexts like parenting, education, management and co-operation.

But is complimenting really always so pleasant and motivating? There are also people who are skeptical about the use and value of complimenting. Some say that they often see compliments as insincere and exaggerated as if it were some kind of trick. Others say they often get suspicious when they are complimented ("What does he want from me?"). Still others say they don't like to be complimented because it gives them the impression that the other person looks down on them ("Who does he think he is to judge me?").

What's the deal with compliments? Are the advocates right or the skeptics? My answer is that both the advocates and the skeptics are right. Complimenting can be valuable but only in certain circumstances and when done skilfully. In those cases the advantages can be achieved while negative side effects can be prevented. Below I will first explain some negative consequences which can occur when complimenting is done ineffectively. Then I will give some practical suggestions for complimenting effectively.

## 2. Possible disadvantageous effects of compliments

Alfie Kohn once wrote the remarkable book *Punished by Rewards* (Kohn, 1993). In this book, the author shows that using rewards to get something done from people is often ineffective and even harmful. One chapter of this book is dedicated completely to what Kohn calls: The praise problem. He sums up ways in which praising people can be detrimental to people's performance.

One example of damage cause by compliments can occur when you compliment someone for having accomplished a simple task. This can give this person the feeling that little is expected of him or her ("apparently this is all that is expected of me..."). As a second example Kohn explains how complimenting can lead to less persistence and concentration. He speaks of praise paralysis with which he means that telling someone how good

he is can lead to stress and performance anxiety. A next example of the negative effects of praise is that it can make the praised person risk averse. The last example Kohn mentions is that compliments of undermines the intrinsic motivation which inspires people do their best.

A special situation in which compliments can do harm is described by Geoffrey Cohen and Claude Steel (2002). These American researchers describe how teachers teaching students from minority groups sometimes overpraise these students. Teachers who fear there are viewed as prejudiced may respond by avoiding to give any critical feedback and only giving praise, even when the performance of the student is low. This response undermines student learning because they miss important critical feedback (which they could have used to their advantage) and the praise for low performance may send the message that little more is expected from that particular student. Further, overpraise may be viewed as patronizing and even insulting.

### 3. Process compliments work better than trait compliments

In the book *Improving Academic Achievement* the American researcher Carol Dweck has written a chapter titled *Messages that motivate*. In this chapter she explains the importance of beliefs about intelligence. Carol Dweck describes two mindsets: the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. Children who hold a fixed mindset see intelligence as a more or less fixed trait: you have a certain amount and there is not much you can do to change it. Children who hold a growth mindset see intelligence as developable. They view achievement mainly as a matter of effort. Carol Dweck has shown convincingly through many elegant experiments that which mindset you hold, has a dramatic impact on achievement. The table below summarizes the differences between the fixed and the growth mindset:

	Fixed mindset	Growth mindset
View of intelligence	Intelligence is a fixed trait.	Intelligence is malleable and can be developed.
View of effort	Effort is a sign of weakness.	Effort is the path to mastery.
View of challenge	Challenges are threats.	Challenges are opportunities to learn.
View of failure	Failure is a reflection of one's ability.	Failure is a reflection of one's effort.
View of success	Success is a reflection of one's ability.	Success is a reflection of one's effort.
View of criticism	Criticism is a reflection of one's ability.	Criticism is a reflection of one's effort.
View of praise	Praise is a reflection of one's ability.	Praise is a reflection of one's effort.

Clearly, the growth mindset is more attractive in many ways. The chapter gets even more interesting when Dweck goes on to a practical level. How can educators and parents help children develop a growth mindset? In particular, what is the role of praise? Two forms of praise are compared: process praise and trait praise. With process praise you compliment the child with his or her effort or strategy ("You must have worked hard", or: "You must have used a good strategy to solve this"). With trait praise you compliment the child for a trait, some kind of fixed internal quality ("You have done well, you must be very smart."). The table below shows the different impacts these two styles of praising children have.

	Process praise	Trait praise
Impact on achievement	Increases achievement.	Decreases achievement.
Impact on effort	Increases effort.	Decreases effort.
Impact on challenge	Increases challenge.	Decreases challenge.
Impact on failure	Increases resilience.	Decreases resilience.
Impact on success	Increases satisfaction.	Decreases satisfaction.
Impact on criticism	Increases resilience.	Decreases resilience.
Impact on praise	Increases satisfaction.	Decreases satisfaction.

### 4. Practical tips for complimenting effectively

The research by Carol Dweck shows that complimenting about trait can have harmful consequences. These don't occur with process compliments. Alfie Kohn (1993) provides four practical suggestions that fit well with Dweck's findings and that limit possible damaging effects of praise:

1. Don't praise people, only, what they do
2. Make praise as specific as possible
3. Avoid phony praise
4. Avoid praise that sets up competition

From the solution-focused approach some additional suggestions can be deduced:

1. Compliment only on things which are important to the other person. When using the solution-focused approach you don't just compliment about everything. Compliments have a specific function. They are pointers to solutions (Jackson and McKergow, 2002). Any compliments you make are focused on behaviors which seem to be related to progress in the direction of the desired situation.
2. Use the ABC of compliments (source: <http://www.gingerich.net/>). A- Accurate: The compliment has to accurately refer to what has happened and what the person has done. B – Believable: The compliment should not be an exaggeration but realistic. C – Constructive: The compliment should refer to what the person wants to achieve and be useful for making progress.
3. Compliment with questions. Instead of complimenting directly (for example: "Well done!") you can also compliment indirectly. This means that you invite the other through a question to describe what was good about what he or she has done and what has worked well. An example of an indirect compliment is: "Wow, how did you manage to finish that task so quickly?". I like to call such kinds of questions affirmative questions. It is also possible to include the perspective of other people in compliments. An example may be: "What do your colleagues appreciate in how you work?" An advantage of complimenting through questions is that you activate the other person. Also, there is less chance that he or she will feel embarrassed or will turn down the compliment ("It was nothing special"). Instead you challenge the other person and make him or her reflect ("Actually, how did I do that.... let's see.....?").

#### 5. Summary and invitation

A brief summary of the suggestions provided here is: if you want to compliment be sincere and specific and focus your compliment on something you know is important to the other person. Focus your compliment of behavior instead of on presumed fixed traits (like intelligence) of the person. Use affirmative questions so that the other person gets activated and will reflect on his or her own behavior.

My invitation is to try these suggestions. You are welcome to share your experiences.

#### References

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