

Debug Your “Work Language”

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ABSTRACT

Incorporating the principles of “Love Languages” within technical teams can meaningfully enhance interpersonal communication and strength team dynamics.

Just as there is no universal solution in programming, the ways in which individuals feel recognised and appreciated also vary. Whether through words of affirmations, collaborative support, thoughtful gestures, focused one-on-one interactions, or appropriate physical acknowledgements such as a celebratory high five after a successful delivery, understanding these diverse preferences allows for more effective communication and team building.

This personalised strategy not only minimizes misunderstandings but also builds trust, enhances morale, and increases engagement. When employees feel genuinely valued in ways that resonate with them, they are more likely to contribute meaningfully, collaborate effectively and perform at their best. Embracing these principles is not just about enhancing individual relationships, but about building a workplace culture rooted in mutual respect and empathy, where every team member thrives.

INTRODUCTION

Do you feel you are appreciated at work?

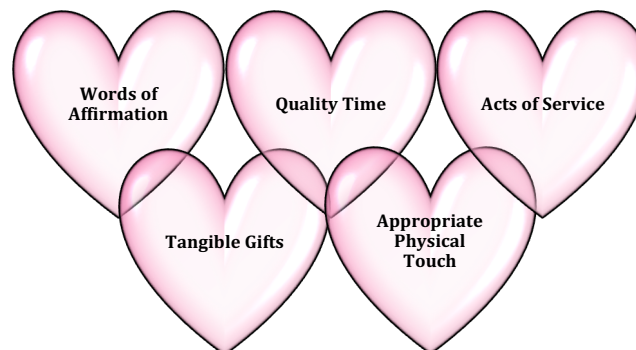
This simple question can significantly predict employee satisfaction, engagement and retention. Numerous organisational psychology research studies have consistently demonstrated that employees who receive regular recognition and feel valued are more engaged, motivated and productive in the workplace. Conversely, it follows that employees are more likely to seek other opportunities owing to a lack of appreciation and recognition rather than “the job” itself.

In fields such as the fast-paced world of clinical trials where technical teams require to be adaptable in their approach to handle unique complex data analysis, tailoring recognition to individual preferences can transform interpersonal dynamics, reduce misunderstandings and foster a culture of empathy and high performance which in turn will drive those technical deliverables forward as they are ultimately driven by people.

The Five Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace?

The concept of the “Five Love Languages” was originally developed by Gary Chapman. He later co-authored an adaptation “The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace” with psychologist Paul White to offer a practical framework for understanding how different people perceive appreciation.

Whether you’re a senior manager, team leader or programmer in the early stages of their career mastering the art these five styles have the potential to transform and unlock a more rewarding work environment.



Words of Affirmation

Words of Affirmation involves using specific, genuine verbal praise or written recognition and encouragement instead of the vague “good job” that often falls flat. It involves acknowledging someone’s positive character traits, effort and achievements or output.

In programming teams this might look like saying:

“Your ability to adapt quickly to deliver that urgent post-submission request was impressive. It helped the team stay on track and met a critical regulatory deadline.”

For team members who value this language sharing encouraging words with a colleague may not seem like a lot but a well-timed compliment whether in person, via a team’s chat or in a team wide email could be just what they needed during a hard week, and you’ve given them that much needed motivational boost.

Quality Time

Quality time centres on offering focused attention and being able to engage in meaningful conversations and dedicate undivided, undistracted time on collaborative projects. In the workplace this manifests as being fully present during one-on-one meetings, collaborative problem-solving sessions or taking time to mentor a colleague.

This could perhaps mean planning a session with a colleague to have a walk-through of a new system to ensure they fully understand its capabilities and how best to utilise it rather than simply sending on documentation.

These quality interactions not only allow you to understand them more and how they respond in certain situations, but this also helps to have open and honest communication which leads to higher team efficiency and cohesion.

Acts of Service

For some individuals’ actions speak louder than words.

Acts of service involve showing appreciation by offering practical support. This may include assisting someone debug a complex macro, sharing the workload to lighten a colleague’s burden, offering to proof-read an email to a stakeholder or mentoring to help a colleague’s professional growth and propel their career forward.

These supportive actions demonstrates that team members can rely on each other and signals a collaborative spirit and commitment to shared success.

Tangible Gifts

Tangible gifts do not have to imply extravagance rather thoughtful tokens of appreciation.

Examples could include:

- A coffee voucher after a project milestone
- A personalised item like an office mug with programming code on it – who doesn’t want one of them?
- Offering access to training opportunities to upskill in R or Python or certification in SAS
- Recognising an employees’ birthday, work anniversary or personal milestone with a card or collection

These gestures when genuine and relevant reinforce a sense of belonging. It’s about showing them “I see you and value what you bring to this team”.

Appropriate Physical Touch

This language must be approached carefully, with clear consent and cultural awareness and always respectful of boundaries.

In office environments this could include non-intrusive gestures like a handshake, pat on the back or high-five. In remote or hybrid teams a celebratory emoji, virtual applause or GIFs can evoke the same sense of encouragement and serve as inclusive and light-hearted alternatives.

These gestures of acknowledgement can release feel good endorphins, reduce cortisol levels thereby mitigating stress and create moments of positivity and shared celebration across the team.

Embracing the Five Languages: Next Steps for You and Your Workplace

How can we move forward from theory to action and meaningfully integrate the Five Languages of Appreciation into our teams to drive real, measurable outcomes?

A common pitfall is expressing appreciation in the way we personally prefer to receive it rather than considering what resonates most with the individual we're trying to recognise. What feels meaningful to one team member might go unnoticed or even feel uncomfortable to another. For example, a heartfelt thank you may deeply resonate with one person, while another may feel more appreciated through hands-on support or quality time spent problem-solving together.

To make a real impact, appreciation efforts must be intentional, personalised and embedded into day-to-day team interactions not reserved solely for performance reviews, promotions, or milestone achievements. This requires a shift in mindset from sporadic, one-size-fits-all praise to ongoing, tailored acts of recognition that align with individual preferences.

The following steps offer a practical roadmap for implementation:

1. Raise Awareness and Build Understanding

Firstly, you want to begin by introducing the Five Languages of Appreciation to your team. Share the rationale behind the approach and explain how different styles of recognition can influence motivation, morale and teamwork. The goal is to create a shared understanding of the concept and encourage curiosity about how each person prefers to give and receive appreciation.

2. Assess Individual Preferences

Understanding how each team member prefers to be appreciated is crucial. This can be done through:

- Workshops/Informal knowledge sharing
- Team discussions or stand-up meetings
- One-on-one conversations
- Anonymous surveys
- Observation to identify which language resonates most with each team member

Encourage team members to reflect on past experiences: When did they feel most valued at work? What kind of recognition felt most meaningful to them? Understanding these preferences helps avoid assumptions and ensures recognition efforts are well-targeted.

3. Tailor Appreciation Efforts to Each Team Member

Once the preferred language of appreciation is identified, you can personalise your gestures to match individual preferences and aim to integrate it into your day-to-day interactions. Tailored appreciation builds stronger trust, reinforces positive behaviours, and helps people feel seen and respected.

4. Incorporate Multiple Languages of Appreciation

While focusing on a team members primary language of appreciation is important, incorporating other languages can further enhance the impact. Using a mix of approaches ensures that no one is left out and helps build a more inclusive appreciation culture.

For example, pair a verbal recognition with a small token of thanks, or follow up a quality time session with a written note acknowledging the person's insights. Just like effective communication, effective appreciation benefits from flexibility.

5. Lead by Example

Be proactive and intentional in showing appreciation. Practice using each of the five languages of appreciation with team members. Show genuine appreciation by using their preferred language and tailoring your gestures to their individual needs. Leading by example reinforces the importance of appreciation and inspires others to do the same.

6. Encourage Ongoing Feedback and Continuous Improvement

Make space for open conversations around appreciation. Invite feedback regularly to understand if your efforts are having the desired effect. Adjust your approach as needed and embrace a learning mindset. Ask what's working, what feels forced and whether their preferences have evolved. This flexibility shows your commitment to fostering a supportive, respectful environment.

Considerations for Diverse Teams

Cultural Differences

Appreciation is culturally shaped. In some cultures, public praise may be uncomfortable or inappropriate while in others direct verbal recognition is expected. Being culturally sensitive and asking team members about their preferences helps ensure inclusivity by adapting your approach accordingly.

Generational Differences

Understanding how different generations prefer to give and receive appreciation is essential to fostering an inclusive and motivating work environment. Today's workforce is more age-diverse than ever, often comprising up to four generations working side by side: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials (Generation Y) and Generation Z. Each group has been shaped by different social, technological and professional influences which can significantly affect how they interpret and respond to recognition.

The key however is to avoid assumptions based on age alone and instead engage team members in the strategies mentioned above that promotes self-awareness and helps others show appreciation effectively across all age groups.

Benefits and Drawbacks of Implementing the Appreciation Language

Benefits:

- Improved morale and team engagement
- Reduced miscommunication
- Higher job satisfaction and retention
- Strong peer-to-peer collaboration

Drawbacks:

- Over reliance on one language may alienate others
- Cultural missteps or boundary crossing
- Insincerity or inconsistency can undermine trust
- Requires ongoing effort and consistency

These challenges can be addressed with clear boundaries, transparency, and inclusive policies along with emotional intelligence and ongoing reflection.

CONCLUSION

Appreciation in the workplace is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Just as technical teams rely on adaptable solutions to tackle unique problems, recognition must also be tailored to individual needs. By embracing the Five Languages of Appreciation, you can cultivate a culture of respect, psychological safety, and high performance especially in technical teams where communication is often transactional and task focused.

Make appreciation a daily habit in your workplace not an annual performance ritual. When team members feel truly valued and supported, they bring their best selves to work and are more likely to stick around.

Start today. Talk to your team, listen to their needs, tailor your recognition and observe the positive cultural shift unfold.

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RECOMMENDED READING

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