



CREATING HEALTHY CULTURES IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

Relax into the subtle, powerful, simple art of giving and receiving appreciation. It couldn't be easier. [Alister Scott](#) and [Sophie Stephenson](#) show us how...

Change can be stressful – we know this. But the relentless, breakneck speed of change in most current organisational settings is pushing many people to their limits, causing burnout, relationship breakdown and, often, a substantial loss of productivity, let alone compassion and kindness.

Yet right under our noses there is a completely natural set of behaviours – simple, effective, powerful, enjoyable and rigorously researched¹ – that can help to address these challenges, enabling us to live and work with more ease and effectiveness.

By harnessing these behaviours, we as coaches and people professionals can help create psychologically safe cultures where everyone can be themselves and bring their best, in turn helping to address the challenges of stress and complexity. This brings enormous value to our clients, and we can derive huge enjoyment and satisfaction at the same time.

We offer some practical steps to help build a strong foundation for the culture of your team or organisation, or those of your clients. Building on Nancy Kline's insights into the importance of appreciation, we add two significant areas: encouragement and recognition. Moreover, we complement Kline's simple framework for how to give powerful appreciation with an element that we have consistently found to be missing: how to *receive* encouragement, recognition and appreciation.

In this way, we offer practical, accessible tools to greatly accelerate your ability to create a powerful, healthy, productive culture.

WHY SHOULD APPRECIATION MATTER TO ORGANISATIONS?

When employees know that their work and contribution matter, when they feel encouraged, recognised and appreciated, they are more engaged and more effective in their roles. In fact, our experience is that this helps in all aspects of life!

When leading change, there will inevitably be complexity, challenge, critique and pressure – what we call 3CP. In all organisations, it is common for people to face an unrelenting stream of performance reviews, self-evaluation and 360s, yet we know that people thrive and do their best work in atmospheres characterised by high levels of encouragement, recognition and appreciation. This is what Alister and Neil Scotton, co-authors of *The Little Book of Making Big Change Happen*, call an ERA culture.

In this article we want to:

- Highlight why leaders often find it hard to see and say what they most appreciate in their people.
- Outline some of the powerful benefits of creating an ERA culture.
- Give you some practical tools to take this forward.

WHAT IS AN ERA CULTURE?

Appreciation is the act of acknowledging a person's inherent value. We see something that the person does or says, and we then express

what we appreciate about them. When used most powerfully, the focus is less on someone's accomplishments but rather on their worth as a colleague and a human being. As such it is expansive and not conditional. When we appreciate a quality in another person, it helps them to know and appreciate themselves better. This then enables them to apply this quality to multiple areas of their life, not just to one specific moment or domain.

Encouragement helps people to trust themselves and develop courage and confidence in their own ideas and way of being. It gives people support, hope and confidence as they learn – to try out new things, bounce back from adversity and back themselves.

Recognition is about giving positive feedback, sometimes publicly but often in private, based on results or performance. It tends to be conditional; it's generally in the past and it is based on what someone has already done. Different approaches are required to help different people feel appreciated and valued – verbal words of encouragement, time, a desire to help and your presence can all be experienced as ways of creating a more appreciative culture.

Encouragement, appreciation and recognition sit on a spectrum of acknowledging the good qualities in someone, but they meet subtly different needs: recognition is about what people do; appreciation is about who they are; encouragement is about who they can become.

Put together, these leadership behaviours become a way of being around others: a powerful, positive and costless means to see and name the best in people and situations. These behaviours hit you first on the way out. Not only do you feel good when you offer these gifts to others; it changes your way of seeing life when you are looking for positive things to name, ERA-style.

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We all want to be appreciated for who we are, as well as for what we do. ERA cultures are ones where people receive both. Anyone familiar with the work of Kline and the Thinking Environment will know that an essential component of helping people to think well is having an environment where appreciation is normalised and valued – we notice what is good and we say it. Research has found that in positive, stable and healthy relationships, there is a 5:1 ratio of ERA-type behaviours to 3CP.²

So often, ERA-type behaviours have been viewed as soft skills rather than what we have consistently found them to be: a critical component of helping teams to solve their hardest problems, work creatively, and have the challenging yet constructive discussions and disagreements that enable them to do their very best thinking.

Both of us have focused on appreciation in our work over many years and have seen it bring extraordinary results:

- The CEO of a national charity was in a thinking pair with a board member who had been a thorn in her side for years. Yet, given

the chance and mandate to appreciate her, he had so many positive things to say that she did not have a chance to give him appreciation back in the allotted time (she did so later). She told one of us: 'This has transformed my relationship with him, and my whole sense of foreboding before board meetings.'

- A senior manager who was quite tricky in a first meeting ended up being in a thinking pair with one of us in the second meeting and, in the appreciation, said: 'You saved my marriage. I got home after that last meeting and after 10 minutes my wife said to me, "You're actually listening, aren't you?", so I carried on with this listening and started saying what I appreciated about her – which I had always felt but not often said – and everything has changed for the better!'

Appreciation

Make it sincere,
specific & succinct

See what you value and say it.



Receive with gratitude

Allow, Acknowledge, Accept.



Make it a practice

Aim for a 5:1 ratio of appreciation
to challenge and critique.



Encouragement

When people are lacking confidence
or belief in themselves or when they
are trying something new or
challenging.



Recognition

Notice what people are doing
well, look for their potential &
give them opportunities to
shine.



Graphic designed by Sophie Stevenson

There are three guiding principles to giving appreciation with skill. An easy way to remember them is as the three Ss:

- Be **sincere**: above all else, only share things that you feel.
- Be **specific**: so the recipient can recognise the link between what you value and something that they have done.
- Be **succinct**: most people find it hard to take in too much ERA at one time. Interestingly, the more succinct we are, the more generally the appreciation can be applied.

In principle, giving appreciation should be simple, but we've discovered that people find it far from easy.

What appears to stop people from giving appreciation with confidence and ease is a combination of time and skill. We don't slow down long enough to look for and recognise what we value. And, when we do, we lack a vocabulary of appreciative qualities – and practice.

Drop by drop, word by word, this intangible, powerful feeling, being like water, can douse the fires caused by the stresses you face, and feed the seeds of your confidence, creativity and generosity

We have also found that what often stops people giving appreciation is an unwillingness for it to be accepted. It is hard to give authentic appreciation if we don't allow it to be received – and people can be very reticent about hearing good things being said about them.

However, if it is true that thinking something good about someone and not saying it is like wrapping a present and not giving it, what might be the significance of the counterpart to that, namely an unwillingness to receive a gift? In the same way that there are three Ss to giving good appreciation, we suggest that there are three As of receiving encouragement, recognition or appreciation:

- **Allow** the words to enter your system, so you can actually feel the positive emotions they elicit. Recognise and allow a few moments for the appreciation to be fully absorbed. Research indicates that it takes about 10-12 seconds to absorb positivity fully into your body.³
- **Acknowledge** that what the other person is saying is true for them, so probably contains some truth about you – even if you feel some initial doubt or resistance!
- **Accept**: receive it, write it down, capture it somehow and, drop by drop, word by word, this intangible, powerful feeling, being like water, can douse the fires caused by the stresses you face, and feed the seeds of your confidence, creativity and generosity.

Different people will feel these three As should go in different orders – that's fine. Whatever works! If you are following the principles and their spirit, you won't go far wrong.

Three final tips to start generating more appreciation:

1. At the start of a meeting, take a moment to say briefly what you've noticed the team or each individual doing well.
2. Send your team members a handwritten card on their birthday to share what you value in them.
3. Look for the potential in those around you and find opportunities to help them to shine.

We have repeatedly seen how even small drops of ERA can act like magic in organisations – better relationships, more resilience and, paradoxically, a greater willingness for people to critique themselves or accept suggestions for how they can improve. So, next time you are with a group, try creating some moments where people can offer each other some ERA. This can be one of the most powerful things you will do for them – and yourself.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Sophie Stephenson is a teacher, facilitator and faculty member of Time to Think. She has over 25 years of professional experience working in leadership, coaching, facilitation, strategy and personal development. Her CV includes The Royal Navy, The Prince's Trust, the Australian wine industry and a master's in teaching from Melbourne University. She has run her own business, The Thinking Project, for the past 12 years. You can find her at www.thethinkingproject.co.uk.



Alister Scott is a leadership advisor, systemic coach and movement builder. He is one of the co-founders of the Compassion Practices Collective, a co-director of the Global Rewilding Alliance and co-author with Neil Scotton of the acclaimed *Little Book of Making Big Change Happen*. Alister is also the resident poet for *Coaching Perspectives*.

compassionpractices.net
rewildingglobal.org

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