

# The Dispatch

## November 2020: Kind Words in the Family Business

In this issue of the Dispatch we focus not directly on the Thanksgiving-appropriate topic of gratitude, but on its near-neighbor, praise or compliments. Bill looks at measurements of praise or blame in a few recent studies, while Davon attests to the value of compliments in the family business. Lance wraps up by referencing the Biblical imperative and imagery around kind words. We wish you a Happy Thanksgiving and, as always, we invite your response.

---

### Kind Words

Dr. Bill Long

A [2013 Harvard Business Review article](#) set the business world abuzz when it attempted to quantify or measure the way that praise or blame were related to employee performance. We all have an instinctive answer to the question, “Do you think that praising or blaming yields the most positive results in work performance?” yet, until the study on which the article was based, we had no metrics to answer the question.

The short answer is that the authors discovered after interviewing 2.5 million employees in multiple organizations that the highest-performing teams received five times as many positive or affirmative supervisor comments as negative ones. Conversely, the lowest-performing teams received three negative comments for each positive one.

Though the issue is much more nuanced than simply reciting these figures, it tends to confirm what had long been suspected—that the way to get the most out of people who work with you is to send (sincere) praise their way. Helpful negative comments were reserved for two situations: where a team was about to “go off a cliff” because of bad judgment and needed to be called back from the brink, or when an employee consistently did small things incorrectly and needed to be instructed in the right way.

Interestingly enough, another scholar found that approximately the same ratio of praise to blame was characteristic of the most successful marriages. For those who ended up in divorce, the ratio of positive comments to negative ones was 3:4.

When I was a college professor, I would spend a good deal of time grading papers and helping students express themselves more clearly. I found over time that emphasizing what students did right made them more attentive to my critical comments. Praise and blame has to be carefully given, to be sure, but erring on the side of kindness and affirmation has a greater upside than the reverse.

---

### Complimenting—Your Family!

Davon Cook

Bill’s article notes that the return on compliments applies in marriage as well as the workplace. I recently heard a husband compliment his wife in such a powerful way that I wrote it down. His words were, “She is *gaining depth*, even at this late season in our lives.” Wow! That specific observation indicated he had reflected on their relationship *over time* and placed high value on her. And, in a broader sense, it acknowledged that the spouse we think we know completely still may be growing and changing--and that’s a good thing.

Applying this approach to all the family members we work with, regardless of age, can be powerful in building, or

---

rebuilding, relationships. If you step back and objectively observe the growth you've seen in a daughter, a brother, a cousin, a parent, a spouse—and then celebrate it with sincere words—do you think it will be appreciated? Almost certainly, yes.

During generational transitions, we can get so focused on imparting practical tools and hard-won wisdom that our interaction frequently comes across as instructions for improvement. That's not because we intend to be negative, but because we are anxious to help and guide.

Taking time to share praise can be transformative. I once heard an adult son recall, "I can remember the exact aisle at Sam's Club I was in when Dad called and told me what a great job I had done in the last year." I have a similar memory working with my father!

In tense partnerships that have accumulated years of frustration or tough interactions, it's easy to fall into a pattern of only communicating when there's a problem. Try taking stock of what the other person is doing *right*. And be courageous and thoughtful enough to say so.

---

### **Faith and Family Business: Proverbs and Power in Our Words**

Lance Woodbury

Bill and Davon point out that kind words make a difference at work, in our marriages, and especially in our family business transitions. There are a number of Biblical references to the importance of kind words, sprinkled throughout the book of Proverbs, offering a spiritual dimension to our choice of language. Indeed, the Bible presents wonderful imagery around the value and benefit of speaking kindly to others. Consider just one of the verses, Proverbs 15:24:

"A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit."

Having spent the last 20 years and most summers of my adolescence in western Kansas, I can attest to the importance of trees. I spent many summer evenings with my grandfather hauling water to individual trees placed strategically around the ranch, hoeing around rows of pines or cedars, or moving hoses to offer refreshment to saplings battered by the wind and heat. For me, trees represent *intentionality* and *diligence* through one's efforts to plant, water and nurture; *respite* through their shade; *protection* from wind; and *legacy* through a tree's multi-generational existence. My grandfather even kept track of the number of trees he planted, one man's tally of his efforts to create life amidst High Plains wind and dust.

The idea that what we say has the potential to be such a life-giving and long-term influence on a person should cause us all to ponder the power of our words. That you can "break the spirit" of a person with your words, suggesting that words are even more powerful than violence to the body, also reminds us of damage our words can do.

A [Dale Carnegie](#) quote sums up this issue of the Dispatch quite nicely: "Perhaps you will forget tomorrow the kind words you say today, but the recipient may cherish them over a lifetime."

Well said!