

# **We should all learn how to praise, and be praised**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

A FEW years ago I attended a corporate training program which was geared towards building team spirit and management skills among executives of a certain company.

There were many predictable activities over the weekend, lots of climbing up and over things, team work and games to help the exclusively male group to bond. As a journalist invited to report on the program, I too joined the activities, throwing myself from tall trees, engaging in trust exercises, navigating myself out of human spider webs, solving problems and having lots of fun.

The last process was the hardest for the group. Being a finance journalist for many years and fraternising with many corporate doyens, I had seen powerful men like these take on huge challenges. But this particular task was to be almost insurmountable for some.

The group was guided through an ancient healing ritual called a sharing circle. Each member was to have a turn at sitting in the middle of the circle, being praised by his colleagues. The amount of blushing and wincing that went on was alarming.

It's not just a male thing. Most of us find it incomprehensibly difficult to sit passively and accept compliments and positive feedback, or to dish it out. More so for corporate executives trained in using language for certain purposes to revert to a floral, heartfelt, affectionate form of lingo.

In the beginning there were horrible silences as team members searched their minds for something nice to say to the person in the middle: ``Ummmm you're a great bloke mate!" or ``Yeah, you're a really good bloke."

The facilitator had to cut in and tell the group to say more specific things like: ``You do everything with great skill. You give 100 per cent and it shows in the results.' Then something personal. `I really trust you as a friend.' `I feel safe opening up to you'."

Over time words emerged, and it was truly humbling as the men became more personal and more giving: ``Mate, you are seriously funny. I often go home and tell my wife things you have said. You make me feel good."

``You have a big heart. I've really learned to be more patient and understanding working close to you." The receiving was no less difficult. Several men became red and fidgety, others pulled at their faces. One fellow had his face completely covered. He was in tears.

I had a lump in my throat the whole time. But the energy afterwards at dinner that night was not one of discomfort or shame for the emotions shown, rather of peace and nourishment, completion and team spirit.

The magical transformation that occurs when we honour someone or are honoured in return, is indescribable. Most of us go through life without ever saying the things we should be saying to those around us who support us, nurture us and provide a stunning role model.

Likewise, we are not told enough about the things we do for others which expand them, make them more courageous, or make them smile.

Sure we all say lots of thank-yous, or uninspiring comments like: ``You are very good to me''. But we don't go into the details: ``What I find so amazing about you is the wild, electric spirit inside you which makes me feel plugged into life. Whenever I am with you I'm a braver, better person, and I can see that you have that effect on all those around you''.

Wow! What would we pay to hear things like that said about us, and how much healthier would we be emotionally and physically if we were praised for our small daily achievements rather than derided, and encouraged to self-criticise for all the things we are not.

This is leading up to the point that on the weekend a friend of mine turned 50 and rather than throw a party, she held a women's sharing circle, much like the one I have described.

Twenty close friends sat around showering her with appreciation, saying things that made her see her own beauty, making her feel perfect the way she is, and expressing to her in detail how valued and nourished we all felt by her friendship. It occurred to me that this open sharing usually only happens at funerals and wakes, where the dead never get to see how cherished they were.

In life, we should do more sharing circles. Or at the very least more ceremonial acts of validating or praising others, and teaching others how to give us feedback in return.

In one circle I once attended, participants had to bow down to each other. No words -- just the simple act of bowing in honour of the beautiful divinity present in the other. It was so exquisite, so healing.

And of course, it should all start at school where our self-image is moulded. My daughter's school has personal development as part of the curriculum, and they often do praising exercises which are fantastic for confidence and self-esteem.

More importantly, the kids learn the language of praise -- which is so mandatory for our wellbeing as we venture through life.

[www.ruthostrow.com](http://www.ruthostrow.com)

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