

“What the psychologist says ...”

Professor Dr. Guido Hertel is the Managing Director of the Institute of Psychology at the University of Münster. He has been teaching and researching there since 2008, specializing in organizational and business psychology. His main topic areas are confidence and management, and also current challenges such as demographic change or digitization of the workplace. After studying at the University of Gießen he obtained his doctorate at the University of Heidelberg, worked as a postdoc at Michigan State University for two years and habilitated at the University of Kiel. Until 2008 he then held a professorship at the University of Würzburg. We spoke to him about appreciation and respect in the working environment.

DBI: Prof. Hertel, you work at a university, we work in a corporation. When did you last have a conflict situation at your workplace in which appreciation played some part?

Prof. Dr. Guido Hertel (laughs): Well, here at the institute we have no conflicts at all of course. We are all psychologists, and get along famously. No, of course that's nonsense. We too have perfectly normal disagreements, though I will not go into more detail about them. That would not be respectful towards my colleagues at all. Which immediately takes us to the subject of your question. How these disagreements are expressed is a very important aspect. We can find many examples where appreciative or respectful dealings between individuals pay off. At the same time it is very noticeable that it is not that easy to actually live this basic attitude.

Speaking of respect, how can appreciation be described to distinguish it from respect? Where do they intersect and where is the difference?



I think they greatly overlap. Basically they describe a very important attitude in our approach to other people. It is a fundamentally positive and unselfish attitude that accepts the other party as an individual. And this acceptance should not be confused with condoning or approving. I don't have to think that everything my colleague does is good, but the way in which I handle that is what expresses respect.

I do not question the right of others to exist. This is a very important foundation for constructive dialogue with others. If we now try to distinguish this respectful attitude towards others from appreciation, we find that appreciation has a more positive connotation. It is about giving positive feedback, and thanking my colleagues. I appreciate what others do, and I say so too.

In your view, what are the particular challenges that arise for a corporation like Daimler in this respect?

The challenge of showing appreciation for others is particularly great for management personnel. It is not enough to be fair and treat everybody the same, it takes more than that to show appreciation. It takes an active, supportive and positive attitude towards team members. This is a major challenge, and no doubt appropriate training is often useful. In fact it is less a matter of how the managers perceive themselves, it is more about how other team members perceive their dealings with the manager.

Let's suppose that a corporation has decided to improve in this respect. What role does communication between employees play within the corporate culture?

It is certainly useful to take a look at specific communication sequences and critically examine them. However, I believe it is much more efficient to examine the basic attitude. This means asking how is the basic attitude perceived with which a manager approaches his/her team? Much more is expressed by this than by specific forms of behavior in different situations.

The confidence that you will not be taken advantage of, that you will be treated fairly and benevolently, is also very important. As is the confidence that all are working together for the team or the entire company. This is even more important than observable behavior. There have been numerous research projects examining how important employee confidence in their manager is. What has so far seen little research is the importance of managers' confidence in their team. Confidence only works if it is actively lived and perceived by both sides. Which brings us relatively close to the question: what can companies do? They can think about ways to increase mutual confidence. This results in more respectful dealings with each other. There is also a great deal of empirical evidence for this.

We are talking about trust and confidence. This also means perceiving others as responsible adults, and giving them space to solve problems themselves. In our preparations we asked ourselves when this turns into overload, and how this can be avoided.

People become overloaded when others use appreciation as an alibi for burdening them with their own responsibilities. Dealing with others respectfully also means knowing how much colleagues can handle, and what is too much for them. It is not easy to find the right measure for this in the workplace, but it helps to listen to colleagues and involve them.

Let's assume I am an employee who feels he is not being treated with appreciation by his manager. How can I address this problem? What ways are open to me in such a situation, and what would be wisest?

It very much depends on the general culture in the working environment. Naturally it would be best if I could speak directly with the manager, and express my criticism in rational form. Depending on the structure, this is not always the best course of action. Using appropriate intermediaries such as shop stewards or works councils to represent employees has proved successful in other cases. I would always recommend first considering whether it is possible to approach the manager directly. This should however be done respectfully, i.e. in a private conversation clearly focused on the problem.

But conflicts also occur between people when the working atmosphere is generally good. How can we generally continue to treat others with appreciation in conflict situations?

Conflicts are not something negative, they are important for innovation and further development. And conflicts are most constructive when they take place on a respectful and appreciative basis. The fact that my opinion differs from that of another person does not mean that I should devalue him. Instead I should ask myself: What can I learn from these differences in view, while fundamentally accepting the other person's character.

Can too much appreciation, too much delegation of responsibility and too much praise lead to a loss of authority?

Interesting that you should ask that. I would answer that precisely the opposite is the case. You show authority by calling a spade a spade, and by recognizing what is good. To show appreciation you do not have to walk from desk to desk smiling and dishing out praise. The whole thing has to have a clear foundation. I cannot praise someone for something that was not good. In showing appreciation to others I also show a high level of professional expertise, and that in turn underpins my authority. I am talking about authority in the sense of respect and acceptance. This form of authority is certainly also more robust than one only created by a formal hierarchical structure.

Is appreciation something I show to every colleague because he/she devotes time to the company?

It would perhaps be a little simpler to talk about respect here. We should have respect for everything and everybody. This is a basic attitude with which we can all live together well. However, this does not mean that I cannot express criticism occasionally. It is possible to do this in a respectful manner. This means that I focus on the causes of the "poor" performance. Not to find excuses for the behavior, but to make it easier to find a solution. Appreciation is therefore also shown by finding areas where I can support my colleagues. In summary I would say this: Appreciation is easiest when there is actually value that is appreciated. Appreciation therefore applies to actions or forms of behavior. Respect does not depend on the work performance shown. It is a general attitude towards every other person.

Thank you very much for your informative answers. Is there anything else you would like to say to our readers?

What I hope for your readers is that they are already experiencing respectful dealings with others, and are able to develop further in this regard.

How does one give constructive criticism?

1. *Don't criticize on the spur of the moment. Plan a conversation and prepare the other party for it. In this way you avoid criticizing because you are in a bad mood, and you are able to prepare.*
2. *Always give negative feedback in private conversation, never in a group of people.*
3. *Don't become personal in your criticism, argue on a factual basis.*
4. *Suggest alternatives to the current behavior.*
5. *Listen to what the other party has to say about your criticism, and take it seriously.*
6. *Establish a target commitment at the end of the conversation, so that words are also followed by actions.*
7. *When giving negative feedback, don't forget to emphasize the positive capabilities of the other party.*