

# What to Do When You Don't Feel Valued at Work

by Rebecca Knight

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It's no fun to toil away at a job where your efforts go unnoticed. How can you highlight your achievements without bragging about your work? Who should you talk to about feeling underappreciated? And if the situation doesn't change, how long should you stay?

## What the Experts Say

“There's nothing worse than feeling unseen and unheard in the workplace,” says Annie McKee, author of *How to Be Happy at Work*. “We all have a human need to be appreciated for our efforts, and so when your colleagues don't notice [your contributions], it makes you feel as though you don't belong.” You might also start to worry - justifiably - about your potential professional

advancement. “Self-doubt starts to creep in, and you think, ‘If no one notices what I’m doing, how am I going to get ahead?’” But you are not powerless to change the situation, says Karen Dillon, author of the *HBR Guide to Office Politics*. “There are many ways to make sure people understand and see what you do.” The key, she says, is to find “diplomatic ways to toot your own horn.” Here are some ideas.

### **Be realistic**

Before you take any action, ask yourself whether you’re being realistic about the amount of appreciation “you expect from your boss, colleagues, peers, and clients,” says McKee. “People are very busy. The feedback might not be as much as you want,” but it might be reasonable within the context of your organization. “You are dealing with human beings,” adds Dillon. “Even with good intentions, your colleagues and manager might overlook what you do and take you for granted.” When you’re feeling unappreciated, she recommends running a “personal litmus test” on your recent accomplishments. Ask yourself, “Was my work extraordinary? Was it over and above what my peers typically do?” And importantly, “If I had to ask for credit for it, would I sound like a jerk?” If you’re unsure, seek a second opinion from a “slightly senior colleague” or a peer you “deeply respect.”

### **Talk to your boss**

If your above-par efforts are going unsung, engage your boss in a conversation, says McKee. Granted, this will be easier with some managers than others. “The average boss doesn’t pay attention to human needs,” says McKee. If yours falls into that category, keep in mind that “you’re not going to change that person, but you can signal that you’d like more dialogue on your performance,” she says. “And if your boss is average to good, he might heed the call.” Of course, you must be subtle. “Don’t go in saying, ‘I want more appreciation.’” Instead, McKee recommends saying something along the lines of “I’d like to talk about the past three months and get a sense of where my strengths lie and where I could learn.” Come prepared with specific examples, advises Dillon. She suggests drawing up a list of your recent achievements to jog your manager’s memory of your good work. “Most managers are happy to have that list,” she says.

### **Increase your team’s visibility**

If you manage a team, you also need to look for ways to explain to others the group does and why it’s valuable, says Dillon. “In our hectic daily lives, your boss and colleagues might not be aware of” the ins and outs of your job. She advises asking your manager for a sliver of time to “talk about what your team does, what its goals are, and ways you’re striving to do better.” McKee also

suggests more subtle ways to draw attention to the group's day-to-day efforts. Don't let presentations or reports go out without making clear who created them. "Make sure everyone's name goes on the work product," she says. You want people beyond your manager to see what your team is delivering. Make sure to spread, not hoard, credit when it's due. But don't be afraid to tout your own leadership. "Sometimes, in your efforts to be inclusive and not sound self-aggrandizing, you miss an opportunity," Dillon explains. Women tend to do this more than men, she notes. It's okay to "use the word 'I' as in 'I accomplished X and Y, and I am grateful for the support that I had.'"

### **Recognize others' contributions**

One surefire to get your own work noticed is, "paradoxically," to "praise and appreciate others," says McKee. "By being the person who notices a job well done, you can be the agent of change" in your organization's culture. Most often the "response from the other person will be to return the favor," she adds. If your boss is not one to dispense positive feedback, talk to your team about "what you can do to shore each other up," and generate optimism among the ranks. "Because of the pace of our organizations, what we produce becomes passé or invisible fast," notes McKee. She recommends creating norms in your team such that when a colleague makes an important contribution or finishes a piece of work, "everyone stops for a nanosecond and says, 'Yay.'" But don't get carried away, cautions Dillon. "Sending extensive thank-yous can diminish the message," she says. "Use your judgment. Ask, 'Who really deserves acknowledgement for going the extra mile?'"

### **Validate yourself**

While being appreciated and valued for your work is a wonderful thing, you can't expect all your "motivation to come from honors, accolades, and public gratitude," says Dillon. Intrinsic motivators are much more powerful. "You need to strive to find meaning in the work itself." McKee concurs. "Ultimately over the course of your working life, you want to move away from the need for external validation," she says. "Real fulfillment comes from within." She suggests making an effort to pat yourself on the back regularly. "Try to carve out time at the end of each week to reflect on what went well and what didn't go as well." This is a useful exercise for remembering both what you're good at and why you do what you do. "Be careful not to sink into deficiency mode where you [dwell on] everything you did wrong," she adds. "Catalog the wins."

## **Consider moving on**

If you continue to feel undervalued and unappreciated by your company, it might be a sign that it's not the right place for you. "We all stay in jobs that aren't perfect for a lot of reasons," says McKee. Maybe you need the experience, or perhaps you can't move because you need to be in a certain geographic region for your spouse or partner. But if you've tried to make the job more validating and fulfilling, and nothing has worked, it might be time to look for a new one.

## **Principles to Remember**

### **Do:**

- Seek a second opinion on whether the amount of appreciation you expect from colleagues is realistic. Remember: people are busy.
- Praise and appreciate others' contributions. By noticing a job well done, you help create a more positive culture.
- Looks for ways to make your work more visible.

### **Don't:**

- Overlook the need for self-validation. Carve out time at the end of each week to reflect on what you did well.
- Hoard credit for your team's accomplishments. Highlight everyone's contributions.
- Stay in a job or at a company that doesn't value you longer than you need to.

## **Case Study #1: Help shift your organization's culture by praising others**

Sally Srok vividly remembers feeling unappreciated at work. At the time, she was head of the hospitality department at Francis Ford Coppola Winery. Her supervisor had left the company, and Sally and her team were under new senior leadership. In addition, the firm had recently closed its home office and combined locations.

"As a result, many people were telecommuting, and the culture started to feel fragmented," she recalls.

Sally liked her boss and regarded him as a "strong, caring" leader. She knew that her feeling unappreciated "was not personal" or targeted. "Rather, it was a reflection of the company going through changes. His role simply required him to prioritize other divisions."

Still, Sally could feel her morale dipping, so she knew she needed to act. “I reminded myself that I was in a leadership position, and it was my responsibility to be of service to others,” she says. “If I was struggling with feeling unappreciated, surely others were too.”

She realized that she could help shift the culture by making a special effort to notice her colleagues’ contributions and publicly thank team members when they went above and beyond expectations. “I talked about gratitude in our morning meetings, and it had an impact within the hospitality teams.”

But beyond the hospitality group, nothing had changed. Sally’s colleagues in other departments felt unappreciated and taken for granted. “I realized the dilemma was systemic. I thought: ‘How could we make it easier to thank one another at work?’”

Sally spoke with her boss and together they brainstormed ideas. The result was the launch of “Grazie” cards, which employees can give to one another as a way of expressing gratitude. “People were thrilled to give and receive them,” says Sally. “Once I stopped thinking about myself, and putting my efforts into changing the culture, appreciation started to flow.”

Today Sally is the principal of Inner Compass Consulting and continues to emphasize the importance of thanking others for jobs well done.

## **Case Study #2 Find creative ways to raise your profile by showcasing your (and others’) contributions**

Anna Brockway started her career as a junior account executive at a very large ad agency in San Francisco.

She loved her job and her main client, Levi Strauss, and she worked incredibly hard. Still, it was difficult to stand out among her peers, and she often felt that her efforts went unnoticed. “I was spending extra hours developing new programs and ideas for [my client], but the work was getting lost in the sea of projects already in flight,” she recalls. “I was struggling with how to get my work to be more visible so I could be more appreciated.”

On reflection, Anna realizes many young women tend to wait for recognition, rather than seeking it. “I think we’re taught implicitly or explicitly to be demure,” she says. “Showcasing your work is like running an internal PR campaign. You don’t want to gloat, but you also don’t want to be invisible.”

One day, Anna saw a colleague make a client presentation about a new idea and realized that transparency was the key. “It wasn’t that the client didn’t care,” she explains. “They just didn’t know what I was doing!”

Anna developed a simple, 15-minute description of all the work that she’d done to help the company better showcase its newest products on the front aisle of stores. This not only highlighted her efforts but also that of the Levi Strauss’s designers, who had recently added new finishes and fits and “were seeking a way to get their work noticed too.”

“I remember the head merchant saying how honored he was” to be included in the presentation and thanked for his own work.

Two years later, Levi Strauss brought Anna in house, and she later became the head of its worldwide marketing group.

Today she is the co-founder and CMO of Chairish, the online marketplace for vintage decor, furniture, and art. Every Monday at 2pm, she writes a personal, “good, old-fashioned” thank-you note to one of her team members. “I believe people feel most valued by recognition,” she says. “Money, promotions, and more are really nice but personal validation is the most meaningful.”

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Rebecca Knight is a freelance journalist in Boston and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in The New York Times, USA Today, and The Financial Times.

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