

‘It’s quietly damaging your credibility.’ Stop the Fake Compliments



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e’ve all been there. We’re frustrated with a colleague, but instead of addressing the issue, we do something a little odd: We offer a compliment. Are we just praising someone’s idea or work—even when it doesn’t hit the mark—in order to avoid conflict?

That’s a fake compliment. And while it may seem harmless in the moment, it’s quietly damaging to your leadership credibility and your team’s culture.

Many leaders avoid giving direct feedback because they fear discomfort. They rationalize their choice with comments like “I’m not ready to have the conversation” or “I need to grow more before I can lead others through this.” Some internalize the issue entirely (“Maybe I’m the problem”), then hope the situation resolves itself.

It rarely does.

Fake compliments create confusion. People can sense tension even when it’s unspoken. When your

words are positive but your energy says otherwise, you send mixed signals. This erodes trust and leaves team members second-guessing themselves, unsure of what’s real and what’s performative.

Worse, it contributes to what I call the “quiet war”: a workplace culture where people smile in public, but air grievances behind closed doors. This leads to passive-aggressive behaviors, gossip, and a breakdown in communication. Instead of building connection, fake praise fuels distrust.

THE REAL PROBLEM

At its core, false praise reflects a fear of honest dialogue. Leaders who default to flattery over feedback often prioritize being liked over being effective. This doesn’t just stunt their growth—it limits their team’s.

Sometimes, the issue that’s bothering you isn’t even something the other person needs to fix. You



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might need to change how you communicate, set expectations, or manage your own sensitivity. That’s why the first step is self-reflection.

Ask yourself:

- Am I being clear in my expectations?
- Have I created the right structure or boundaries?
- Am I being overly critical or too quick to judge?

Fixing yourself first isn’t weakness—it’s leadership. It builds trust and can help resolve the issue before it escalates.

WHEN FEEDBACK IS NECESSARY

If the problem persists, then it’s time to give real feedback. And that takes preparation. Before speaking, clarify what the issue is, what needs to change, and why it matters. Then deliver the message in a way that the person can hear and understand.

Lead with the facts:

- What’s the behavior?
- Why does it need to change?
- What’s the benefit if it does?

Feedback done right creates alignment and

momentum. It gives people the opportunity to grow and course correct. It also reinforces your leadership as honest, consistent, and grounded in integrity.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Workplaces thrive on authenticity. That’s how trust is built. That’s how teams feel safe to take risks, speak up, and collaborate. When people walk on eggshells, unsure of what’s real, performance suffers—and culture unravels.

Integrity in leadership means saying what needs to be said, even when it’s uncomfortable. It also means resisting the urge to fake it just to avoid that discomfort.

So if you’re tempted to offer a compliment you don’t mean—pause. Ask yourself what the real message is, and whether it’s time to deliver it. Your team doesn’t need false praise. They need clarity, honesty, and a leader willing to show up authentically.

That’s how great workplaces—and great leaders—are built. ▀

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