

The Praise That Actually Builds People Up

Mike Thomas · Founder & Director | 5 min read · May 2026

Tell someone they're wonderful and watch what happens.

More often than not, they'll deflect it. Deny it. Feel vaguely uncomfortable. And the more extravagant the praise, the more pronounced the discomfort — because what they're registering isn't the compliment, it's the judgement.

Most of us use praise with good intentions. The problem isn't the intention — it's the type.

Two Types of Praise

Evaluative Praise is top-down. It positions the giver as the authority — the one whose opinion determines whether something was good or bad. *"You're brilliant." "What a great job." "I'm so proud of you."*

It feels warm in the moment. But over time it creates a problem: people begin to measure their worth by your reaction rather than their own. You've made yourself the centre of their motivation — and in doing so, you've made them dependent.

Descriptive Praise works differently. Instead of evaluating, it describes. It tells someone specifically what you observed — and lets them draw their own conclusions.

"I noticed you checked in with the whole group before making the decision."

Hearing that, a person thinks: *I'm someone who considers others. I'm a good collaborator.* They've arrived at that conclusion themselves. It will stick in a way that *"you were amazing today"* never will.

Why the Distinction Matters

Evaluative Praise creates dependency. Descriptive Praise builds autonomy.

When a child is told *"you're so generous"*, their sense of generosity is now tied to your judgement of them. Remove the praise and the behaviour often follows. But when they're told *"you noticed they were struggling and went to help them without being asked"* — they build their own internal picture of who they are and what they're capable of.

The goal isn't to make people feel good about what you think of them. It's to help them see their own strengths clearly enough to feel good about themselves.

How to Use Descriptive Praise in Practice

Descriptive Praise has two parts:

1. **Describe specifically what you observed**

Not *"great teamwork"* — but *"I saw you check in with everyone before moving on. You made sure no one was left behind."*

2. **Let the person draw their own conclusion**

Pause. Give them the space to process what you've described. The internal *"I must be someone who does that"* is far more powerful than anything you could add.

A Useful Test

Ask yourself: does my praise make people more dependent on my approval — or does it help them see their own abilities more clearly?

If someone would stop doing the right thing the moment you stopped noticing, the praise has been evaluative. If they'd keep going because they've internalised a sense of their own capability — that's Descriptive Praise doing its job.

The person they ultimately need to please is themselves. Our role is to help them see clearly enough to get there.

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