

## **Review of Business Books for Educators: How to Praise Others**

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### **Abstract**

This review paper introduces five Japanese businessmen who stated the critical importance in praising others in their business. It also describes their backgrounds, philosophies, and recommendations for effective practices in praise. Praising is an essential teaching skill for any teacher in any grade and any school. Therefore, I assume it may be beneficial for many teachers to learn the claims of these Japanese businessmen.

**Key Words:** Praise, Japan, Business, Teacher

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Although educational psychology textbooks (e.g., Santrock, 2008; Snowman & McCown, 2013) teach the importance of praising one's students as examples of positive reinforcements, praising others cannot be restricted within school settings to its effectiveness. Thus, I would like to introduce the readers to five Japanese businessmen who emphasize the critical importance in praising others in their business in this review paper. As a teacher, I usually do not read any business books and I expect not many teachers regularly read business books. Thus, I hope this review paper will be useful for educators in Japan and other places in the world.

### **Businessman 1: Takayoshi Nishimura**

Mr. Takayoshi Nishimura (2019) is the third-generation president of his family business, real estate companies and hotels. He studied about his family business and worked very hard in his early career. He evaluated himself that he used to be a master of pointing out mistakes and problems of his employees. In 2005, he established a new company of mystery shoppers. At the beginning, mystery shoppers of his company went to the client's store or restaurant and bought something as customers and wrote up the reports that contained only deficient points of the store or the restaurant. Then, he lost many clients due to the reports that pointed out so many problems with harsh words. Because he lost many of his clients, he decided to take the opposite way of doing business: finding out what the employees could do well at the client's store or restaurant and writing a report with positive feedback and a positive outlook. After changing his way of doing business, the first client's restaurant had a 161% increase in sales figures in six months. From this shocking incident, he had an insight: humans grow and do better jobs when we acknowledge what they did and believe they can do better in the future.

In 2010, he established a general incorporated association, Japan Praise Masters Association (*nihon homeru tatsujin kyokai* in Japanese), and now he is working as its chairman.

According to him, you must not use praise in order to manipulate others. We praise others in order to organize our own mind. In order to praise others correctly, we must have emotional leeway in our mind so that we can spend our psychological energy to find hidden value of the people, things, and events surrounding ourselves. By finding the hidden value of others, and informing them of these, we improve our own psychological well-being. Thus, we must not expect any response from the target person who received our praises. He defines praising others as a self-sufficient activity that enriches oneself, not others.

He stated that a correct way to praise includes (a) the thing that the target person did, (b) the contribution to someone of what the target person did, and (c) praising the target person with your subjective judgments. For example, you can say, “You always greet me cheerfully in the morning. Your greetings inspire me to work hard every day. Thank you very much.” In this example, your target person actually greets you every morning as a matter of fact. Then, you inform him or her how much what he or she did contributed to the welfare of others by your subjective judgments. Your target person cannot deny your subjective judgment that his or her greeting is inspiring to you. If you can add other’s praise to the target person, it will become better.

In addition, you should not be reluctant to praise. For example, you have an employee who made three big failures in your organization. Then, the employee did something good, maybe by chance. Then, if you do not praise the person because his contribution was smaller than his past damages to the organization or the success was made by chance, you probably cannot praise the person ever. You should praise someone who did something good, even if it was done by chance, as soon as you notice such an occurrence.

He also said, “We do not praise others because they did good jobs but they can do good jobs because we praised them.” Imagine you have an employee who can accomplish 60% of the work that an average worker does in a particular time. You think 70% is the lowest acceptable level of job performance. When the employee improves to 63% from 60%, you probably would not praise him or her because it does not reach the lowest acceptable level. But it is very important to acknowledge such a small improvement and praise it. If you do so, such an employee will make more improvement and eventually reach 70% of the job performance.

He also introduced a small technique to shorten the psychological distance between you and someone who is unfamiliar to you. You ask a small favor and then thank him or her for

doing such a small favor for you. According to him, this technique is one of the useful ways in praising others.

### **Businessman 2: Koichi Kato**

Mr. Koichi Kato (2018) succeeded his family business: a driving school in Mie prefecture, Japan. When he started to work at his driving school around 1990, his school was filled with Japanese baby-boomers. However, due to the low birth rate in Japan, the number of graduates of all the driving schools in Japan significantly decreased from approximately 2.55 million in 1992 to 1.56 million in 2016, and also more than 200 driving schools closed their business during that time.

One day, he found a newspaper article that reported an empirical study that found receiving praise improved finger-tapping performances, like playing a piano, of the participants (Sugawara et al., 2012). After reading it, he started to wonder how he can incorporate praising practices into his school's teaching curriculum. Then, he invited guest speakers (e.g., Mr. Takayoshi Nishimura in the previous section) and they had several similar workshops. When he asked his employees about a new idea of praising education in his driving school, many of them claimed that they were not confident with their praising skills of others. So, he started a pair-work of praising one's partner during every morning assembly of his school. In this practice, every employee must praise his or her partner for a minute. He noticed that these employees first praised external characteristics (e.g., hair style, clothes, decorations) of others. But later, they started to praise internal characteristics (e.g., actions, statements). After receiving such praises from the colleagues, they felt that other colleagues observed them carefully and could build trustful and friendly relationships with one another. Later, he introduced two different types of praising exercises. The first one was praising a particular object (e.g.,

whiteboard, tissue paper) in turns. The second one was group work of approximately ten people. Each person in the group received praise from other group members in order. After these practices, he noticed the atmosphere of his school changed significantly. Many employees used to wear grim faces, but now they looked relaxed and smiled often. Indeed, the employee turnover also decreased.

His school started a new curriculum of acknowledging and praising students to the skies (*homechigiru* in Japanese) in February 2013. After introducing such a curriculum, three major benefits emerged at this school. First, the number of student enrollment increased significantly from 1748 students in 2013 to 2177 students in 2016. Second, the passing rate of driving tests increased from 81.4% in 2014 to 85.9% in 2016. Third, the accident rate of the graduates decreased from 1.57% in 2013 to 0.76% in 2015.

He emphasized that his school used to teach students by informing them what they lack to satisfy the acceptable standard of the test criteria but the new curriculum teaches students by informing them how much they have already achieved such criteria. In other words, it means informing what students have already achieved and acknowledging students' efforts and progress from the past.

I would like to end this case by introducing his recommendations. First, it is important to praise others as soon as you find something good in others in order to make your praise efficient. Second, he recommends praising others when you meet them for the first time. If you praise him or her at the first meeting, it is easier to make a good human relationship with that person in the future. Third, he recommends asking questions to the students about why he or she succeeded or failed in a particular task. If a student knows the reasons for his or her success or failure in a particular task, he or she will be motivated to try it more. Fourth, when you notice a tiny, good deed that someone did, you should say thanks which include the deed and the

benefit that was made from the deed. For example, if someone made a copy for you, you could say, “Thank you for making a copy. I can ask you this task with full confidence because you always make a crisp copy.” Fifth, he recommends praising someone in comparison with the general public or yourself. You can say, “Your achievement cannot be reached by other ordinary people.” But you must not make a comparison statement with a particular person, except yourself. You can say, “You had much better performances than I did when I was in your situation.” Sixth, he recommends praising someone’s skills like a professional. If a person is praised for achieving a particular skill at a professional level, it would be the greatest praise. Seventh, he recommends praising any questions from the students. As long as you praise any questions, it shows your appreciation to the students who are more motivated to study more than other students. Eighth, he suggests informing people that someone else has praised them. Indirect praise, such as “Our section chief praised you.” is effective. However, you must not tell a lie. Try to share the good deeds of your praising target with others always and remember the praises of others. Ninth, instead of giving direct praise, you can give positive responses, such as, “Wow!” or “I never had such an idea!” This results in indirect praise. Humans tend to talk to themselves when they express what they really think. Tenth, he recommends ending the lessons with praise, even though the lesson did not work well. You can give positive messages to the students so that they can keep higher motivation for further learning.

### **Businessman 3: Hideo Matsumoto**

Although Mr. Hideo Matsumoto (2020) inherited his family business of a gas station, he was stuck in his business. Then, he changed his career at the age of 45 and became a contract worker with a commission system at a foreign non-life insurance company. Although he visited more than 70 different companies every day to sell his insurance, he was not

successful at the beginning. One day, he noticed that successful colleagues surrounding him use the magic word: “Thank you very much.” very frequently. Therefore, he changed his statements intentionally by using such appreciations. For example, he used to say, “I am sorry to use your time for my sake during your busy schedule.” But he rephrased it to “Thank you very much for using your time for my sake during your busy schedule.” After starting such a rephrasing practice, he started to win more insurance contracts, won the Rookie of the Year Award, and became one of the best salespeople of the company. According to him, “Thank you very much” is the best praise word because it praises both the actions that the target person did and the target person himself or herself and it can be used to anyone and in any situation.

According to him, one of the most important skills in praising others is a careful observational skill. Such an observational skill includes not only observation itself but also listening to what the target person says carefully and asking meaningful questions so that you can find and understand his or her hidden value. One day, he visited a difficult and complaining customer who asked his non-life insurance company to change the contact person three times. He met the customer who was a president of a start-up company and having listened to the complaints carefully asked the question, “President, why do you have six printers, although there are only four computers in this office?” The president smiled and said, “We are printing 3,000 direct mails in order to inform many customers of our services. You are the first contact person who noticed such a fact.” It seemed that the president wanted a contact person who understands his passion for informing customers of his new business. Later, the start-up company became a large customer for his non-life insurance company.

As you see in the case above, praising does not always mean giving a compliment to others. According to him, praising means finding value (that is often hidden) in someone or something and communicating such a fact to the target person. According to him, a Praise

Master (*homeru tatsujin* in Japanese) is someone who is good at finding value (that is often hidden) in someone or something.

After he became a senior position in the sales department, he used the merit point system, instead of demerit point system to evaluate his junior sales people. He praised what the junior sales people could achieve in their work, and then advised how he or she could do better. Just two years after the Lehman shock, he became a trainer for a branch office that had 500 sales people. His company's business performance was stagnant at that time and he and other trainers started a 3-month campaign of praise. In the campaign, there are five major praising activities. First, sending praising emails to these 500 sales people every morning. Second, praising the quality of insurance services they sell. Third, praising the staff and the supervisors who support the sales people. Fourth, praising each sales person by making a poster with the face pictures of all 500 sales people. Fifth, praising the sales people who won successful contracts for their deeds and challenging spirits at the video conferences that connect all the branch offices in Japan. As a result, the sales figure became 130% of that of the previous year.

According to him, praising means giving a psychological reward that works as psychological fuel to motivate someone to take more action. Many Japanese business people are evaluated by their job performance with their salary and titles but they feel that their daily challenges, efforts, changes, and growth are not acknowledged much by others. It means that they do not receive positive feedback from others regarding their daily actions. Some managers and executives complain that their employees are not working for the purpose of receiving praise. But he says that doing business means contributing something good to the customers and receiving money is an expression of the customers' satisfaction. In other words, the money the customers pay is the customers' praise. The relationship between the contribution and satisfaction can be understood well with the relationship between employee satisfaction and



customer satisfaction. If a person works and contributes something good to another person and the beneficiary is satisfied, the satisfied beneficiary works and contributes something good to a different person and that person is satisfied. It is a chain of contribution and satisfaction. It means that we need to make a culture of praise in order to make employee satisfaction, and satisfied employees make satisfied customers and the business as a whole flourishes.

He also noticed there are some people who are against praising others. He distinguishes an old-style praise from a new-style of praise. The old style of praise was evaluating the results of someone's actions from the upper-level individuals in order to manipulate that person. The new-style of praise means acknowledging someone's daily challenges, efforts, changes, and growth to make better results as the sign of empowerment of both those who praised and others who received the praise. In the new-style of praise, someone who praises others actually becomes happier because he or she can find more value in others and things that surround himself or herself. According to him, "It is a matter of course." is a dangerous phrase because it blinds us from seeing value that is hidden in people, things, and incidents. A Praise Master can find value, charm, and future possibilities in the surrounding people, things, and daily events. Although we often hear the phrase: "Even though we cannot change others and the past, we can change ourselves and the future.", we can change the past by changing our viewpoint of it. Of course, we cannot physically change the past events and the actions of others. But we can change how we interpret them. For example, we can reinterpret the past failures as something that brings our growth. According to him, "Your failures are your assets." When we did not get our expected results, we usually call the incidents as failures. But because of such experiences, we learn something new and try it in a different way and then we grow as a human being through such processes. Thus, according to him, another one of the

most important skills in praising others is changing our viewpoints in order to find hidden value in people, things, and events.

#### **Businessman 4: Kunio Hara**

Mr. Kunio Hara (2020), who is now preaching his original “praise education (*homeiku* in Japanese)” in 17 different countries including Japan, grew up with lots of praise from his parents, especially from his mother. However, he first did not notice the miraculous power of praise to make a better performance in business.

In his early career, he worked at a ramen-noodle chain restaurant. Because of his hard work, he was promoted to restaurant manager from the lowest-ranked dishwasher within 1.5 years. Then, he started a very strict management because he wanted his restaurant to become very successful. Every day, he pointed out mistakes five to ten times per staff member. At the beginning, he had twenty-five workers in his restaurant, but later he had only a deputy manager and four part-time workers.

One day, a part-time worker asked him, “Who is our MVP (Most Valuable Player) of this month?” when his restaurant made better sales performance than a rival store. That statement made him shake his head because he always thought that he is the only valuable worker and all others are valueless in his restaurant.

He chose a particular female part-time worker as the MVP of that month by saying, “Maybe, Ms. Y (i.e., pseudonym) is the MVP because she is always cheerful and liked by our regular customers. In addition, she worked when the other workers could not work, found what she should do for the sake of the restaurant by herself, and dealt with waiting customers perfectly.” When she heard such an unexpected statement from him, she was puzzled a little but said, “Thank you very much! I will continue my best next month.” He thought, “This is it.”

when he saw her happy smile. It was the turning point in his life. He decided to shift his attention from what each worker failed to do to what each worker succeeded at.

He started to hold a monthly praising meeting with all of his staff members. In the meeting, he thanked each worker by praising him or her for what he or she did with a concrete example of his or her contribution to the restaurant. Then, he started to show his appreciation to each worker on a daily basis. As a result, the sales figures of his restaurant significantly increased, the employee turnover decreased, and the salary and hourly wages were increased.

I would like to end this case by introducing his original technique to give full marks of praise to others. He explained three major steps for it. The first step is making a good relationship with others. In particular, you need to show your willingness to understand others more deeply by nodding and giving affirmative responses (e.g., “Right”, “Yeah”, “uh-huh”). The second step is finding appropriate points of praise regarding the target person. In order to detect the appropriate points of praise for the target person, he offers three effective questions. The first question is asking what he or she likes. By learning what he or she likes, you can guess his or her personality. He also recommends continuing a further investigation by asking why he or she likes it and especially which part of it he or she likes in order to deepen your understanding of that person. The second question is asking what he or she continues doing. By learning what he or she continues doing, you can guess his or her way of life from the past to the present. He also recommends continuing a further investigation by asking why he or she could continue it such a long time through tough times and what he or she wants to continue from now on. The third question is asking what he or she cherishes. By learning what he or she cherishes, you can guess his or her value. He also recommends continuing a further investigation by asking why he or she cherishes it and what he or she wants to cherish from now on. The third step is praising the target person in affirming his or her whole life from the

past, to the present, and the future in considering what he or she has achieved by overcoming the hardships in tough times.

### **Businessman 5: Yoshiyuki Suzuki**

In 1997, Mr. Yoshiyuki Suzuki (2009) established a new company that trains professional coaches. It was the first company of that kind in Japan. He explained the praise in terms of coaching. In the coaching framework, acknowledgement includes the concept of praise because it includes all the words and deeds that acknowledge the existence of the target person.

According to him, acknowledgement satisfies basic human needs to be confirmed as a member of a particular group. Throughout history humans have had to be part of a group in order to survive. Thus, acknowledgement increases motivation of the target person because it gives psychological relief to him or her and fuels him or her to do more actions.

According to him, praising someone means giving acknowledging words or deeds to the results of someone's actions. However, humans are not satisfied if they are acknowledged only when they have made noticeable results. Many workers wanted to be acknowledged when they made new efforts. Therefore, supervisors should make frequent acknowledgments instead of praise. You do not have to give compliments but communicate to him or her that you acknowledge his or her actions. You simply need to convey the messages of acknowledgement of his or her existence and actions (e.g., "You got a new tie.", "I heard you visited three new companies this week and informed them about our services.", "You usually come to work around 8 a.m."). Such acknowledgements are the daily bread for the human mind because they are fuel for humans to do more actions.

He also emphasized that acknowledgement is effective to make better relationships with your children and spouse. For example, you can say, “I am glad to see you are helping your mother in doing household chores.” or “You are working hard on your club activities nowadays,” to your children. In other words, you need to give showers of such acknowledging words to your children and spouse to inform them that they are precious and irreplaceable to you.

When supervisors teach their young employees about appropriate behavior in business, it is very important for supervisors to explain clear reasons for each appropriate action. Excellent coaches in any sport carefully explain to young athletes that this is what this practice is for and this is what this rule is for. Such a practice is also effective to teachers in schools when they teach their own students.

If we want to praise someone efficiently, we must find appropriate words that the target person would like to hear from others. Praising others is a skill that you can learn but you must observe the target person and find appropriate words for each person.

There are two major ways to acknowledge others. The first is the “you” statement. It explains the target person’s behavior. “You wrote an excellent report.” or “You are a hard-working person.” are such examples. Second one is the “I” statement. It explains how much the target person contributed to the welfare of others. “I could do this project easier because of your support.” or “I become more energetic due to your existence in our office.” are such examples. The latter statements are more long-lasting than the former statements because humans can acknowledge their value in learning their positive influence on others.

As you see from above, these Japanese businessmen have their own philosophies in praise. It is up to each reader to choose and apply the ones he or she prefers. As for me, as a teacher, I think it is good to know the following regarding praise in my teaching practice.

1. Careful observations of each student are necessary to find his or her hidden strengths.
2. When a student did a tiny change or improvement, a teacher should praise it as soon as it happens, even if it was just by chance.
3. Acknowledging the existence and the actions of each student is important.
4. Informing each student of his or her contribution to the welfare of others is crucial.
5. Giving any compliments is not always necessary but acknowledging the actions, efforts, and changes are necessary for each student.

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