Positive Gossip

Idea In Short

When a team's informal talk focuses on frustration, practice sharing specific, positive observations about people's contributions. Positive Gossip uses three short rounds: participants talk about a mentor or supporter, someone in the group, and then the person they are paired with. Keep the comments grounded in behavior, not generic praise, and give each person equal time. Explain the purpose and let participants pass if direct feedback would feel uncomfortable. Close by asking how the exchange felt and where appreciation could be useful in everyday work. The exercise can shift a conversation's tone, but it does not replace honest feedback or address unresolved harm by itself.

Teams often devote more attention to what is late, broken, or missing than to the contributions that keep work moving. Positive Gossip gives participants a short, structured way to notice and talk about what they appreciate in one another. The practice moves through three rounds: sharing positive observations about a mentor or supporter, someone in the group, and then the person in a pair. The structure reflects the Liberating Structures principle "Engage in Seriously Playful Curiosity." It is not an instruction to avoid difficult feedback; it is a way to make appreciation a more visible part of group life.

Move through three rounds

The host introduces the purpose and explains the sequence. Participants form pairs and spend a short time sharing positive gossip about someone who has supported or mentored them. They switch roles so each person has the same chance to speak. In the second round, participants form new pairs and share something positive about a person in the group. In the third round, they pair again and tell their partner what they appreciate about them.

The progression creates a gentle shift. Participants begin with someone outside the immediate interaction, then speak about a colleague, and finally offer feedback directly to

the person receiving it. The host can give the instructions one round at a time so participants do not have to remember every detail. Online, a tech host can set up breakout rooms in advance and post each prompt before the round begins.

Be specific and credible

Positive feedback is more useful when it names an observable contribution. “You are great” may feel pleasant but gives little information. “You asked the customer to explain the problem before proposing a fix, which helped us understand the real issue” tells the person what they did and why it mattered. A facilitator can encourage concrete examples without turning the exercise into a formal performance review.

The listener should receive the comment without dismissing it or immediately returning praise. People often deflect appreciation with “It was nothing” or shift attention back to the speaker. The structure gives participants a brief chance to hear what others notice about their work. If a recipient feels uncomfortable, they can acknowledge the comment simply or pass on sharing. The facilitator should not require a public reaction.

Make appreciation safe

The practice can feel unfamiliar, especially in teams where praise is rare or where positive comments have been used insincerely. The host should explain that the goal is to notice real contributions, not flatter people. Participants should be free to choose an example that feels genuine and respectful. If someone cannot identify a positive observation about a partner, the facilitator can invite them to focus on a specific action or to pass rather than invent praise.

Positive Gossip is not appropriate as a way to bypass a serious conflict or silence criticism. A group may need to address a breach of trust or a performance issue directly. Appreciation can coexist with accountability, but should not be presented as a replacement. The host can say that the exercise is one small practice in how the group communicates and that other conversations may still be needed.

The full session takes about 15 minutes: an introduction, three brief pairing rounds, and a whole-group reflection. A group of at least twelve is recommended for the face-to-face format. In larger online groups, it can be difficult to ensure everyone gets a new partner

each round, so the tech host should prepare breakout rooms. Digital conversations can miss facial expressions and subtle cues; participants should speak clearly and check that comments are being received as intended.

Reflect on the effect

After the rounds, ask participants how it felt to give and receive positive observations. What was easy? What felt unfamiliar? Where could this kind of appreciation help in daily work? These questions help the group notice how its communication habits shape attention. A team can decide to add a brief appreciation round to a retrospective or to make recognition more specific in project reviews.

Research on recognition and positive feedback suggests that people respond to feedback that is timely and specific. Gallup reports on employee recognition and engagement, while the Center for Creative Leadership offers guidance on effective feedback. The practice should be treated as a conversation format, not a claim that praise alone solves organizational problems. 1, 2, 3

Keep the pattern going

The session can help participants see behaviors and contributions they may otherwise take for granted. To carry the practice forward, leaders can model specific appreciation in everyday meetings and make space for colleagues to recognize one another. The group should avoid turning recognition into a competition or requiring public praise from people who prefer another way to communicate.

Positive Gossip makes a small change in what participants notice and say. The rounds are brief, but they can surface helpful actions and strengthen relationships when the comments are sincere. Used alongside candid problem-solving, appreciation can create a fuller picture of how the group works and what it wants to reinforce.

- 1The importance of employee recognition
- 2How to give feedback people can actually use
- 3Feedback that works

Summary

Positive Gossip gives participants a structured chance to name what they value in one another. Its three rounds move from a mentor or supporter to the group and finally to a partner, making appreciation more direct with each step. Specific examples make comments credible and useful. Facilitators should keep the exercise voluntary, avoid turning praise into evaluation, and acknowledge that positive feedback does not erase problems that need attention. The practice can help a group notice contributions it often takes for granted. A brief reflection afterward can help participants decide how to carry that attention into ordinary collaboration. Revisit the conversation as the work changes and new evidence becomes available.