



FACILITATION GUIDE

The Specific Thing

Affirmation in eleven seconds, and why most recognition is not it

An Every Piece Matters exercise

Yours to run with your own team.

People by Design

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Before you run it

PRACTICE	Affirming
TEACHING OBJECTIVE	Separate recognition from affirmation. Recognition is about output. Affirmation is about the person and the effect, and it takes about eleven seconds.
TIME	10 minutes standard. 5 activity, 5 debrief. See the deferred version, which is stronger.
SHORTENED VERSION	In a packed workshop agenda, run the deferred version. 6 minutes up front, teach in 4 and write in 2. The three-minute delivery closes the session and is its own debrief.
GROUP SIZE	6 to 200
ROOM	Seated, any room, including video.
MATERIALS	Worksheet or card, one per person. Pens. Perforate or dot-rule the block so it can be torn off and handed over.
MUSIC	None during the writing. Optional warm instrumental during the delivery.
SETUP	Seated. Participants need to be able to see other people in the room.
SOURCE	People by Design original. The three-part structure draws on Zach Mercurio's published work on specificity in affirmation. The exercise and facilitation are People by Design.

The action, step by step

0:00 to 1:30	Teach the three parts
1:30 to 2:30	The contrast, spoken aloud. Both versions, no explanation.
2:30 to 3:00	Announce that it will be delivered. This must come before the writing.
3:00 to 5:00	Write. Fold. Pocket.
5:00 to 8:00	Deliver. Stand, find the person, read it aloud, then hand over the paper.
8:00 to 10:00	Debrief

What participants write on

Reproduce this on a single side. One per person. Face down until you call it.

Write one. To someone in this room.

Somebody you came with. Somebody you met twenty minutes ago. Anybody. If you only just met them, write about what you observed in twenty minutes, because you observed something.

TO

THE SPECIFIC THING YOU DID

THE EFFECT IT HAD

WHY IT HAD TO BE YOU

FOLD THIS. POCKET IT. DELIVER IT BEFORE YOU LEAVE.

BACK AT WORK, WHO HAS GONE LONGEST WITHOUT HEARING SOMETHING LIKE THIS FROM YOU?

Facilitator script

Everything in the ruled blocks is said aloud and is meant to be rewritten in your own words. Everything in a copper block is a stage direction. The timings and the silences are the parts that should not change, because those are load-bearing.

"There are three practices that make a person feel like they matter at work. Noticing them. Affirming them. And showing them they are needed. This next one is Affirming, and it is the one we are worst at, because we think we are good at it.

Here is the test. Most recognition is about output. Great job. Nice work. Thanks for staying late. Output recognition is fine, and it is forgettable, because it is about the thing you produced and it could be said to anyone who produced it.

Affirming is about the person and the effect. It has three parts and it takes eleven seconds. The specific thing they did. The specific effect it had. And why it had to be them.

That last part is the one everybody skips and it is the one that does the work."

Now the contrast, spoken. Say both versions aloud, back to back, and do not explain them.

"'Thanks for handling the Thompson file.'

Versus.

'The way you slowed that conversation down with Thompson on Tuesday kept us from losing the account. Most people would have pushed. You waited. That is a thing you do and I do not think you know you do it.'

Same event. Eleven seconds apart. One of those gets forgotten by lunch and one of those gets repeated at somebody's dinner table."

HOLD. Announce the delivery BEFORE they write. If they think it is private, they write something generic.

"Look around you right now. Pick one person in this room.

Write them an affirmation. Three parts. The specific thing. The effect. Why it had to be them.

Two minutes. Then fold it and put it in your pocket. You are going to deliver it before you leave this room."

Two minutes. Do not narrate. Do not walk the room talking.

Seated and standing

The deferred version is stronger, and it is the one to use when you have the room for longer than this exercise. Have participants write and pocket the affirmation early in the session, then deliver it at the very end. The paper sits in a pocket for twenty or thirty minutes doing quiet work, and the delivery becomes the closing moment of the whole session rather than the end of one exercise. In the sixty-minute Every Piece Matters session this is exactly how it runs.

The immediate version writes and delivers back to back, then debriefs. Use it when this exercise is standing alone.

Delivery is standing, always. Read it aloud to their face, then hand over the paper. Do not let people hand it over silently, and do not let them text it. The eleven seconds of being slightly awkward is the entire lesson.

On a video call, deliver in breakout rooms of two, ninety seconds each, and have them paste the text in chat afterward.

Debrief questions, in order

Ask these three, in this sequence. The order is doing work. Do not add a fourth.

1. Which of the three parts was hardest to write?

It is almost always "why it had to be them." Name that out loud. The reason it is hard is that it requires you to have noticed something particular about the person rather than about the work.

2. How long did it take you to name something specific?

Many will admit it took most of the two minutes. That is the finding. If specificity is hard to produce for someone you like, consider how rarely it reaches people you manage.

3. Who at work has gone longest without hearing something like this from you?

Do not take answers. Let it sit. This is the question people carry out of the room.

The tie-in

"That thing that just happened in here took eleven seconds per person and it cost nobody anything.

Output recognition says the work was good. Affirmation says you are the reason it was good, and here is how I know. A person can receive output recognition for years and still conclude, accurately, that they are interchangeable with anyone who would have produced the same output.

And here is what I keep thinking about. Every one of you already had something true to say about somebody. You had it before you walked in. This exercise did not give you the sentence. It gave you a reason to say it out loud.

Most of your people are carrying one of those around right now."

A 2024 Workhuman and Gallup study found that recognition, done well, could prevent approximately 45 percent of voluntary turnover. Set that against a replacement cost of roughly one half to two times an annual salary and eleven seconds starts to look like the highest-return activity available to any manager.

Behavior named

Deliver one, out loud, to the person at work who has gone longest without hearing it. This week. Write the day.

Fails when

Every one of these has happened. None of them are fatal, and all of them are avoidable if you know they are coming.

- You let people write "you're great." Insist on the specific thing. If somebody genuinely cannot name one, that is not a failure of the exercise, it is the finding, and it belongs in the debrief.
- You skip the delivery. Writing it is half. The awkwardness of saying it out loud is the lesson, and a room that only writes learns nothing it will act on.
- You announce the delivery after they write. Then they have written something private and you have changed the deal on them. Announce it first, every time.
- You pair a supervisor with their direct report. Affirmation downward is comparatively easy and it is not what most organizations are short of. Sideways is harder and more useful.
- You debrief before the delivery in the deferred version. It deflates the moment. Deliver, then close, then debrief only if you still have time.
- Someone has nobody to deliver to. Watch for anyone standing alone. Say it lightly: "if the person you wrote about already left, find anybody and read it to them anyway." It still works.



Everything from Every Piece Matters is free and online.

The Mattering Deficit Diagnostic, the full workbook, both case studies, complete facilitation guides for all three exercises, and every research citation. No email required for any of it.

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*The three-practice framework is Dr. Zach Mercurio's, from *The Power of Mattering: How Leaders Can Create a Culture of Significance* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2025). The Puzzle Philosophy, the Mattering Deficit Diagnostic, and the exercises are People by Design originals.*

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