

TEAMWORK

Conducting a Temperature Reading

My spell-checker claims that “appreciations” isn’t a word. My spell-checker is wrong. Appreciations are part of a wonderful technique called a Temperature Reading. This technique was created by Virginia Satir, a family therapist whose models and techniques are highly applicable in organizational settings.

A Temperature Reading is a communication tool that helps teams reduce tensions, strengthen connections, improve understanding, and surface information, ideas and feelings that might otherwise be suppressed. It’s one of the tools I most enjoy teaching people because it’s easy to understand, easy to use, readily adaptable to numerous different situations — and so effective.

A Temperature Reading consists of five segments:

1. Appreciations. During the typical run-around-like-crazy workday, teams often overlook or ignore the positive things they’ve experienced or observed. In this first segment, everyone in the team who would like to can express an appreciation to one or more others in the team. An appreciation takes the form: “I appreciate you because . . .” or “Thank you for . . .”

In other words, speak directly to the person (“I appreciate you”), rather than to the rest of the team *about* the person (“I liked when she . . .”). An appreciation can be for anything, whether large or small, and whether critical to the team’s efforts or simply a kind gesture. Although you may initially feel awkward giving or receiving appreciations, over time you may be surprised at how satisfying it can feel both to give and to receive.

2. New Information. This segment is for information sharing. Often, members of a team have information that other team members may be unaware of, may need to know, or would simply find interesting. Anyone with such information can offer it. Issues that might otherwise feed the rumor mill often get resolved during this segment.

3. Puzzles. This segment provides a sanctioned opportunity to describe something you’ve found unclear, confusing or puzzling and would like explained. Often, another team member can quickly provide the needed clarification during or after the Temperature Reading and the mystery is solved.

4. Complaints with Recommendations. In most workplaces, complaints are not welcome. By contrast, this segment explicitly invites complaints. But unlike a gripe

session, this segment has a constructive tone, because the person voicing the complaint offers a recommendation for addressing the complaint or requests recommendations from the group.

5. Hopes and Wishes. In this final segment, team members who would like to can express a hope or wish pertinent to the team, its members, or issues of interest to the team.

Pointers for running a Temperature Reading

1. Have a facilitator lead the Temperature Reading. Any member of the team can serve in this role. Some teams rotate the role of facilitator so that each team member can gain experience in guiding the activity.

2. Conduct a Temperature Reading regularly. A full Temperature Reading takes anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour or more, depending on the size of the team and its circumstances. Some teams do it weekly, some monthly. Some do it at the end of a project or at key milestones during the project. If time doesn’t permit a full Temperature Reading, focus on Appreciations and skip the rest.

3. Adapt the Temperature Reading to multiple settings. For example, you can use it to gather customer feedback by translating the five segments into five questions, such as: What’s working well? What’s coming up that could be important? What problems have you experienced? What improvements would you like to see? What should we keep an eye on as we move forward?

Similarly, a manager who conducts a monthly one-on-one with staff members might translate the five segments into five agenda topics, such as accomplishments during the past month, information and ideas each has for the other, puzzles and uncertainties, grievances with recommendations, and goals for the next month.

4. Tweak the terminology to fit your culture. For example, if Temperature Reading is a name that wouldn’t go over well, call it a team check-in, or monthly review, or project checkpoint, or something else. If you don’t like Appreciations or Hopes and Wishes, you can call them Looking Back and Looking Forward. The terminology is yours to adjust so that it fits the context in which you’d like to use it.

By the way, don’t feel obligated to wait for a Temperature Reading to express an appreciation. Do it when you think of it. It’s a wonderful, and wonderfully contagious, habit.

