

Co-creating an appreciative working climate: discussing reasons for appreciation, forms and roles from a communication perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – In recent years, various socio-political developments have led to changes in the labor market that place high demands on both employees and organizations. Research has shown that strong employee–organization relationships depend partly on employees’ perceptions of appreciation at work for which different communicators are attributed with responsibility. This study draws conclusions for the role of internal communication professionals in co-creating an appreciative working climate by exploring employees’ expectations on what they want to be appreciated for, by identifying forms of appreciation and by stressing the contribution of communication professionals in meeting these expectations.

Design/methodology/approach – The results base on three focus groups conducted in January 2023 with employees without leadership responsibility working in large Austrian organizations.

Findings – The analysis yields to two areas – “personal characteristics and qualities” and “work-related behaviors” – where employees expect appreciation. In six categories we capture forms of appreciation that reflect employees’ expectations and perceptions. Most of the forms can and should be addressed by managers within an organization—internal communication professionals should follow a communicative professional logic and act as strategic partners and resource providers, enablers and role models.

Research limitations/implications – (1) What do employees expect to be appreciated for? (2) What forms of appreciation do employees expect? (3) What role do internal communication professionals seize in co-creating an appreciative working climate?

Practical implications – Based on social exchange theory, resource theory and the job-demands resource (JD-R) model, this study conceptualizes appreciation as a prototypical generic socioemotional resource at work that is communicative in nature, and key to both motivation and health.

Limitations – There is a need to capture the perspective of managers and internal communication professionals on employees’ expectations in order to deepen the debate about communication responsibilities, practice and critical aspects of appreciation. Furthermore, a comparison of different work cultures (e.g. Asia) and other institutionalized work forms (e.g. start-ups, small enterprises, public agencies) would advance the debate.

Originality/value – The study provides in-depth knowledge of reasons for and forms of appreciation from an employee’s perspective, which is considered relevant to discuss communication responsibilities in light of dependencies.

Keywords Employee appreciation, Internal communication, Leadership responsibility, Working climate, Focus groups

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

“If the past 18 months have taught us anything, it’s that employees crave investment in the human aspects of work. Employees are tired, and many are grieving. They want a renewed and revised sense of purpose in their work. They want social and interpersonal connections with their colleagues and managers. They want to feel a sense of shared identity. Yes, they want pay, benefits, and perks, but more than that they want to feel valued by their organizations and managers” (De Smet *et al.*, 2021, p. 1). Recent years have been marked by several global developments—the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, technological innovations, and various social and political challenges—that created challenges for organizations and employees in particular. As a result, the labor market has changed in many ways: a strong trend toward remote work, organizational struggle with shortages of skilled workers and high turnover rates in some sectors as workers feel dissatisfied with their overall working conditions (e.g. European Commission, 2023; Gallup, 2023; Kniffin *et al.*, 2021; Ratten, 2020). The opening quote from De Smet *et al.* (2021) emphasizes very directly the need to acknowledge employees for their contributions in order to cultivate strong employee–organization relationships. Due to their different work-related communication roles, employees are the basis for organizational functioning and development, especially in times of challenge and change (Heide *et al.*, 2018; Heide and Simonsson, 2011; Mazzei and Butera, 2021). One way to recognize and reward their contributions is through appreciation.

Research debates several forms of appreciation, such as compliments, saying thank you, or a bonus that promotes employees’ perceptions of appreciation (Stocker *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, studies have shown why it is worthwhile for organizations to foster an appreciative working climate: Perceiving appreciation increases employees’ job satisfaction (e.g. Elfering *et al.*, 2017; Garrido-Vásquez *et al.*, 2020; Muskat and Reitsamer, 2020; Stocker *et al.*, 2010, 2019), work happiness (Gulyani and Sharma, 2018), commitment to the organization (Einwiller *et al.*, 2021), job engagement (Einwiller *et al.*, 2021; Gulyani and Sharma, 2018), and it contributes positively to personal well-being and health (e.g. Kranabetter and Niessen, 2019; Pfister *et al.*, 2020b; Pohrt *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, it reduces employees’ intentions to leave the organization (e.g. Apostel *et al.*, 2018; Davis *et al.*, 2021). From a theoretical point of view, we conceptualize appreciation as a prototypical generic socioemotional resource (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Foa and Foa, 1980) that contributes to individual motivational and health processes at work (Bakker *et al.*, 2023). By addressing employees’ individual perceptions of appreciation, organizations actively foster an appreciative working climate. To this end, appreciation should be expressed in a way that matches employees’ expectations of appreciation, in order to sustainably satisfy their personal relational needs (Blau, 1964). Therefore, the first aim of this study intends to find out what employees want to be appreciated for. The debate about appropriate forms of appreciation that contribute to employees’ perceptions of appreciation is mostly grounded in the analysis of organizational practices (Beck, 2016; Stocker *et al.*, 2014) and limited to common forms (e.g. pay, bonus, thank you by managers). Thus, the second aim of this study is to complement existing knowledge by identifying and systematizing forms of appreciation from the perspective of employees.

As some forms of appreciation (Stocker *et al.*, 2014) have a clear communicative character (Stocker *et al.*, 2019), we argue that various internal communicators seize strategic communication responsibility to address them. From a communication perspective, we define employee appreciation according to Stocker *et al.* (2019) as “communicating that one values someone else; the term may refer to (1) unconditionally acknowledging the person as an individual or (2) acknowledging his or her performance, behavior, or qualities” (p. 333). Scholars emphasize that *coworkers* (Stocker *et al.*, 2014; Weiss and Zacher, 2022) and *managers* are significant communicators of employee appreciation (e.g. Apostel *et al.*, 2018; Beck, 2016; Stocker *et al.*, 2014). Besides, Beck (2016) informs those responsible for internal

communication that “leaders overseeing internal communication can enhance gratitude practices as a strategic advantage for an organization. With their role overseeing internal messaging, these managers can keep the principles of sincerity in mind” (p. 348). From an internal communication perspective, we agree with Beck and consider the contributions of *communication professionals* to cultivate an appreciative working climate as very important, since they are key players in building strategic workplace relationships (Men and Bowen, 2017; Simonsson and Heide, 2021). From a practical perspective, the results of the Internal Communications Monitor (SCM and Staffbase, 2022) reveal the necessity to clarify their role in the sense of employee appreciation: only a quarter of the 284 participating internal communication professionals from large organizations in Europe ranked communicating appreciation among their key roles and functions, alongside sharing information, knowledge transfer, dialog and value communication. However, the latest Internal Communication Monitor identifies appreciation as a future trend for communication professionals (SCM and Staffbase, 2024). Therefore, the third aim of this study is to anchor the debate and to define the role of communication professionals in creating an appreciative working climate.

To accomplish the three research aims, we applied a qualitative research design and conducted three focus groups with employees without leadership responsibilities at large organizations in Austria. This paper starts with a conceptualization of appreciation and delineates the potential role of communication professionals. The subsequent section elaborates on the research design including information about the selection and recruitment processes, a description of the focus group guide, stimulus material, focus group situations, ethical reflections and details regarding the analysis procedures. The findings are organized according to the three main research aims and are discussed in a separate section. The paper closes with the study’s main limitations and suggestions for future research.

Appreciation as a prototypical socioemotional resource

Social exchange theorists argue that workplace relationships based on reciprocal exchanges of resources are beneficial, as organizations give employees something back for their continued engagement and extra-role behavior. Specifically, a reciprocal exchange potentially results in “trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments” (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005, p. 875). Furthermore, strong ties “prevent individuals from exploring alternative opportunities and taking advantage of them to increase their rewards and improve their positions” (Blau, 1964, p. 161). Workplace engagement literature specifies that employees’ job performance is dependent on the various resources they receive (e.g. Saks, 2006). In this context, a resource can be something more concrete (e.g. money), or more symbolic, such as a gesture, facial expression, or language (Foa and Foa, 1980), with the latter primarily conveyed through verbal or paralinguistic behaviors (Foa and Foa, 2012). Cropanzano *et al.* (2001) differentiate between economic and socioemotional resources: they conclude that economic resources are easily monetizable, relatively concrete and associated with material wealth, standard of living and comfort. In contrast, socioemotional resources often “provide an indication of one’s status and value within the context of some social group” (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2001, p. 120). In this study, appreciation is considered as prototypical socioemotional resource, addressing employees’ fundamental social and esteem needs (Stocker *et al.*, 2014) and signaling embeddedness within an organization (Apostel *et al.*, 2018).

Conceptualizing appreciation as a prototypical socioemotional resource brought us to job design theories, which discuss how various work characteristics influence employees’ health, performance and behaviors (Bakker *et al.*, 2023). The job-demands resource (JD-R) model suggests that certain work characteristics—divided into job demands and job resources—foster employees’ health and motivational processes. Job demands refer to different social,

psychological, physical and organizational aspects of a job that have inherent physical and psychological costs, while job resources are those aspects of a job that help employees meet demands, achieve specific work goals, and foster learning and development (Bakker *et al.*, 2023; Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). Individuals' perceptions of demands and resources impact employee well-being, and depend on employees' personal resources, such as self-efficacy, resilience, or optimism (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Bakker *et al.* (2023) posit that some of these job-related resources are profession-specific, while others are more generic. Appreciation is a generic resource that employees need regardless of their work context and job role (Stocker *et al.*, 2014). Research has shown that perceiving appreciation has powerful implications for employees' affective and cognitive reactions, as well as on their work-related behavior (e.g. Einwiller *et al.*, 2021; Garrido-Vásquez *et al.*, 2020; Pfister *et al.*, 2020a; Stocker *et al.*, 2010, 2019). Importantly, its absence limits the experience of a strong relationship to the organization, thereby increasing employees' turnover willingness (e.g. Apostel *et al.*, 2018; Davis *et al.*, 2021). In addition to the job-related effects, the health aspects are particularly worth emphasizing: scholars have shown that employees' perceptions of appreciation are positively related to their affective well-being, specifically aspects such as increased contentment and feelings of serenity, less anxiety, and fewer depressive symptoms (Kranabetter and Niessen, 2019; Pfister *et al.*, 2020b; Pohrt *et al.*, 2022; Stocker *et al.*, 2014). It is further related to lower feelings of resentment (i.e. anger, indignation and disappointment) toward one's organization (Stocker *et al.*, 2010).

Especially in times of organizational crisis and changes, when employees have to contribute in numerous ways, scholars have shown the value of appreciation (e.g. Einwiller *et al.*, 2021; Kim *et al.*, 2023).

Employees' expectations of appreciation

Researchers studying social exchange relationships assert that an individual's satisfaction with a relationship depends on the expectations placed on it and the fulfillment of those expectations (Blau, 1964). Employees formulate certain expectations with regard to rewards. Some of these expectations are very *general*, such as aspirations and achievement needs that are governed by social standards, prevailing values and previous experiences. In addition, employees have *particular* expectations that they formulate with respect to their individual personality, behavior and interactions with others. Furthermore, they have *comparative* expectations, where in they weigh the benefits of being part of the social interaction (Blau, 1964). Pohrt *et al.* (2022) emphasize that fostering employee's perceptions of appreciation is not easy to realize. Organizations have to "think beyond traditional reward systems and recognize the value of a person regardless of their achievements" (p. 384). In this study, we assume that organizations partly fail in employee appreciation because their knowledge of employees' particular expectations is rather limited and related to buzzwords such as performance, behavior and qualities (see Stocker *et al.*, 2019). Employees' perceptions of appreciation at work are thus related to, *first*, their personal ideas of what appreciation should be granted for. To foster a systematic debate, this study asks.

RQ1. What do employees expect to be appreciated for?

Fagley and Adler (2012) emphasize that organizations need to develop an understanding of how to effectively express appreciation. Therefore, *second*, employees' perceptions of appreciation at work are reflected by various forms that are truly perceived as appreciative. So far, the debate over forms of appreciation addresses mostly organizational practices (e.g. Beck, 2016; Saks, 2006; Stocker *et al.*, 2014). For example, Stocker *et al.* (2014) asked 139 employees in Switzerland to describe appreciative situations at work over the course of a

working week. The analysis yielded to five behavioral categories: “*praise and gratitude* (e.g. praise, compliments, saying thank you, and positive feedback), *trust and responsibility* (e.g. expressing trust, asking the employee for advice, honoring competency, assigning interesting tasks or new responsibilities to the employee), *support and respect* (e.g. emotional support, instrumental support, spending time, listening carefully, respecting my needs, saying sorry), *motivated cooperation* (e.g. motivated teamwork, joy, good mood in team, finding solutions together), and *tangible reward and promotion* (e.g. getting a present or a bonus, being invited, being promoted)” (p. 82, italics in original). These categories clearly highlight the variety of forms that potentially contribute to employees’ perceptions of appreciation. Importantly, Beck (2016) suggests: “To fully reap the benefits of thanking their people, managers need to understand their employees’ preferences. Do not assume that all employees seek the same forms of recognition—they do not” (p. 347; see also Saks, 2006). In terms of organizational practices, Beck (2016) highlights several critical aspects of employee appreciation, including unfairness, withholding appreciation, and undeserved thank you, as well as over-communication and insincerity. A concrete example from the empirical material illustrates the need to reflect on employees’ expectations: “If (gratitude) is expressed, it’s usually verbal, but I feel it’s a bullet point on an agenda” (p. 346). Using established practices for comparison, this study asks about employees’ expectations in order to align them with previous findings. The aim is to find out about what contributes to employees’ perceptions of appreciation by reflecting on the process of sense-making.

RQ2. What forms of appreciation do employees expect?

The role of internal communication professionals

From a communication perspective, several internal communicators are involved in co-creating a working climate, including employees with strong communication agency (Heide *et al.*, 2018; Heide and Simonsson, 2011). However, this study focuses explicitly on the responsibility of those who can and should be in charge of employee appreciation.

An extension of JD-R theory, multi-level JD-R theory, proposes the so-called “trickle-down effect” for the general conditions to create an organizational climate. At the organizational level, the overall management is responsible for strategically deciding on and setting the conditions that HR and other units (like the communications department) put into practice. This includes supporting and training managers according to the strategic agenda, ensuring that job demands and resources are aligned for teams and employees at the individual level (Bakker *et al.*, 2023). Communication scholars have elaborated extensively on the role of communication in co-creating an organizational climate (Men, 2021) and here, specifically, on the communication between managers and employees: managers “have a pivotal role as communicators, as they translate, inform, make sense, support, and give feedback to employees in order to coordinate actions towards organizational goals” (Heide *et al.*, 2018, p. 461). Therefore, it is not surprising that in the appreciation literature *managers* are first and foremost attributed with communication responsibility (e.g. Beck, 2016; Elfering *et al.*, 2017; Stocker *et al.*, 2014, 2019). Scholars have reflected on their influence on the effectiveness of an appreciative leadership style (e.g. Apostel *et al.*, 2018; Davis *et al.*, 2021; Elfering *et al.*, 2017; Kinjerski and Skrypnik, 2006; Kranabetter and Niessen, 2019; Pohrt *et al.*, 2022; van Quaquebeke and Eckloff, 2010). Significantly, Beck (2016) highlights employees’ preferences for verbal and personal expressions of appreciation from managers for specific achievements; the study emphasizes the critical aspect of timing, which is associated with the authenticity of an appreciative gesture. Given this complexity of employee appreciation from a managerial perspective, scholars stress the necessity of educating managers (Fagley and Adler, 2012; Kranabetter and Niessen, 2019; Pohrt *et al.*, 2022), leading directly to the possible involvement of communication professionals.

Reviewing the literature, we find no explicit discourse on the role of the communication department in co-creating an appreciative working climate. This lack of attention is also reflected in practical settings (SCM and Staffbase, 2022, 2024). Partly, it can be explained by “the fact that few people would doubt its importance, implying that it is assumed to be a matter of course rather than something requiring a special focus” (Semmer *et al.*, 2016, p. 15). However, we argue that communication professionals’ contribution is of central importance as scholars have shown in numerous ways how communication professionals serve as “facilitators, trainers, relationship managers, motivators, but also experience designers in the organization” (Men, 2021, p. 7). As experts in communication, these professionals are primarily concerned with “the strategic management of internal communication in managing interdependence and building mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and its employees” (Men and Bowen, 2017, p. 12). Since managers themselves are not only important sources of employee appreciation, but also recipients (Stocker *et al.*, 2014), we assume that they are partly dependent on the work of communication professionals to fulfill their responsibilities. Diving deeper into the practices of communication professionals, Simonsson and Heide (2021) provide two theoretical perspectives: From a managerial logic, communication professionals use communication primarily for information distribution and as a tool for control, to support the functions and processes in an organization. To this end, the communication department mainly produces and creates content delegated to managers who are seen as key communicators. From this perspective, communication professionals mostly engage in hierarchical informational communication to managers and employees. When it comes to employee appreciation, we see the limits of this logic with regard to its relational aspect, the potential for their strategic involvement and the need to support managers. The alternative is a professional communicative logic, wherein communication professionals view themselves as enablers and facilitators of other members of the organization. Communication is thus seen as an active sensemaking process in which various actors partake (Simonsson and Heide, 2021). Following these perspectives, we discuss the role of communication professionals as co-creators of a climate and stress the limitations of a managerial logic in internal relationship-building.

RQ3. What role do internal communication professionals seize in co-creating an appreciative working climate?

Research design

Taking an employee-centered perspective on appreciation, we applied a qualitative research design and conducted three focus groups with employees from Austrian organizations. This method draws on the interactions of participants to capture deeply held beliefs and perspectives (Carey and Asbury, 2016). Besides the advantage of obtaining expectations and ideas related to employee appreciation, the detailed narratives enable critical reflection on communication responsibilities and dependencies in the co-creation process of an appreciative working climate.

Participants’ selection and recruitment process

Potential participants had to be employed at least part-time (20 h per week) at an Austrian organization with more than 250 employees. The study was open to all job positions and levels, except for those with leadership responsibility. Since we sought to discuss the role of internal communication professionals, we focused on larger organizations that are supposed to have a department that is specifically responsible for internal communications. For the same reason, employees of universities, government agencies, schools and hospitals were not considered for participation as these organizations mostly differ from the corporate sector (in e.g. budgets, communication frequency, legal frameworks, Liu *et al.*, 2010). In addition,

“management techniques cannot be exported successfully from one sector to another because of differences in organizational environments, goals, structures and managerial values” (Boyne, 2002, p. 118). To recruit suitable participants, an invitation letter with information about the study and participants’ rights was sent via WhatsApp and e-mail to our own personal network. As compensation for their time and effort, participants received 25 euros which was the level of the minimum wage in Austria at that time (for an expected focus group duration of two hours), in line with the recommendations of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The focus groups were conducted in January 2023, with a total of 19 participants; Table 1 provides an overview.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the IRB. Because the data collection process involved direct field contact with study participants from diverse backgrounds and their interactions with each other, several ethical reflections were made: The invitation letter contained a clear description of the study procedure, including information about the setting, audio recording practices, data storage, data usage, and opt-out options. The consent form was also read at the beginning of each focus group to ensure that all participants knew their rights and felt comfortable talking about their experiences and ideas on the recording. At this point, we emphasized that the audio recordings would be transcribed and then deleted; furthermore the transcripts were anonymized or pseudonymized so that no information could be traced back to the participants, their employers, or their coworkers. Participants provided their written informed consent to participate. We established communication rules for the discussion to ensure a respectful and comfortable setting where thoughts and opinions could be freely expressed (e.g. no right or wrong answers, all experiences and expectations are valuable and contribute to our understanding). In terms of our own appearance and actions, we reflected on our professional and personal roles by developing a role statement that we offered to the

Group	Age	Gender	Sector	Working h/ week	Home office h/ week	Size of organization
1	29	Male	Environmental protection	38,5	19	250–500
1	28	Female	Retail	27	0	1,000 and more
1	30	Male	Event industry	38	0	250–500
1	29	Male	Social/Health service industry	30	0	1,000 and more
1	28	Female	Gambling industry	38	0	1,000 and more
1	31	Female	Urban industry	32	**	1,000 and more
2	30	Female	Pharmaceutical industry	38	0	1,000 and more
2	29	Male	Telecommunications	40	16	1,000 and more
2	31	Female	Retail	38	10	1,000 and more
2	30	Male	Medical engineering	30	20	1,000 and more
2	29	Female	IT industry	20	12	1,000 and more
2	27	Male	Manufacturing industry	38,5	20	500–750
2	32	Male	Broadcast Electronic	32	0	750–1,000
3	30	Female	Social service industry	35	0	250–500
3	23	Female	Public broadcasting	35	0	1,000 and more
3	30	Female	Construction industry	35	7	250–500
3	25	Male	Business consulting	40	30	250–500
3	44	Male	Health service industry	40	10	250–500
3	30	Male	Banking and Insurance	40	10	1,000 and more

Table 1.
Overview focus group
participants

Source(s): Created by authors

participants at the beginning of each focus group. Moreover, we prepared some exit strategies for difficult situations (e.g. arguing, emotional struggles) and offered the participants the opportunity to leave whenever they wanted.

Guide and stimulus material

We developed an open, narration-generating guide and a stimulus encouraging critical reflection on appreciation. In a pretest with colleagues, we evaluated the comprehensibility of the questions, setting and audio recording after which small changes were made in the stimulus material and starting questions. The discussion comprised multiple phases: First, participants were invited to introduce themselves, reflect on what contributes to their personal well-being at work and discuss the questions: “What should employees be appreciated for?” and “What should this appreciation look like?” Second, the discussion focused on negative experiences and critical reflection on the reasons for such experiences. Third, participants discussed the responsibilities to address employees. Fourth, drawing on the stimulus material – (i.e. pictures of various forms of appreciation, such as a gift basket, an email from the management, a thank-you note, and coupons) – participants were asked when they perceive appreciation efforts as authentic. Finally, participants discussed what appreciation means to them in their personal lives.

Focus group setting

All focus groups were moderated by the same person and the same co-moderator, the latter of whom was responsible for technical issues and acted as contact person for personal concerns. The focus groups took place at the University of Vienna, at the same time of day and in the same room. The discussion began with brief introductions from the main moderator, followed by the co-moderator. After that, participants introduced themselves, gave some information about their work and shared some thoughts on what makes them feel good at work. For the first two questions (i.e. reasons to appreciate someone at work and appropriate forms of appreciation), participants were invited to take notes. Both questions were discussed very carefully with multiple examples. Then, the discussion addressed negative examples, forms of appreciation, responsibilities and personal meaning of appreciation at work. At the end, all participants filled out a short survey on their sociodemographic data.

The first focus group took place on January 24, 2023, with six participants, and it lasted just over two hours. One week later, on January 30, 2023, the second focus group was held with seven participants. Interestingly, the thematic focus concentrated more on the financial aspect of appreciation than that of the first group, even though the participants had much higher income on average; in addition, after the official part, further off-the-record discussion lasted much longer than in the first group. In all, it was slightly more difficult to clarify the most important questions with seven people. The last focus group was conducted on January 31, 2023, with six participants; two people canceled their participation for work-related reasons. Although the setting and procedure were the same as in the other two focus groups, there were some disruptions: one participant pulled out both of his cell phones several times, which disturbed the moderator’s concentration. Also, one participant tried to analyze very intensely the other participants’ input which made them feel misunderstood. Nevertheless, the participants made their views clear, and the discussion also lasted two hours. In the analysis process, we reflected on these disruptions, and we concluded that neither aspect biased the participants’ statements and therefore they did not impact the results.

Data management and analysis

The audio data was stored on a server of the University of Vienna until the transcription was finalized. Participants notes, sociodemographic questionnaires, and other materials were

digitized and are also stored on the university server. Initially, we developed a deductive code scheme with seven main codes (i.e. forms of appreciation, reasons for appreciation, effects of appreciation, responsibility for expressing appreciation, authenticity, negative and positive experiences) based on the research questions that are related to previous literature. The code “responsibility”, for example, is meant to clarify employees’ expectations of who should communicate appreciation to them in a first sense. Since internal communication professionals are rather invisible players for our participants when it comes to appreciation (see Results), their role was not specifically highlighted. Here, it was the researcher’s task to relate known logics (Simonsson and Heide, 2021) to the expectations of employees. Additionally, negative and positive examples were coded to understand and describe the forms of appreciation and their characteristics. The thematic analysis (Kuckartz, 2014) was conducted in MAXQDA20; it started with reading the three transcripts in order to gain an overall understanding of the material. Then, we thematically coded along the main categories, with openness for inductive extensions. The main codes were divided into various sub-codes involving a clear definition and at least one example to distinguish each code. The coding scheme and assigned text passages were discussed in several workshops.

Results

Reasons to appreciate employees

Participants explained in great detail what they want to be appreciated for at work. We categorized their expectations into two sub areas: Employees’ personal characteristics and qualities, and employees’ work-related behavior (see Table 2).

Personal characteristics and qualities. With regard to the first area, participants emphasize the significance of receiving appreciation for their individual personality that they bring to the organization – i.e. for the people they are, their character and their personality traits:

In general, everyone deserves appreciation as the person he or she is. For his or her strengths, but also weaknesses. (Quality management employee)

I want to be valued as a person where I do my part. (Journalist)

Similarly, they emphasize the importance of receiving appreciation for professional competencies and prior work experiences. In addition, participants mention that honesty (e.g. regarding their personal feelings at work, their workload, work-related problems and mistakes), punctuality and reliability (i.e. that one can rely on the other person and on their conscientious conduct) should be appreciated, but these qualities are often taken for granted. In light of high turnover rates and shortage of skilled workers, employees want to be

Personal characteristics and qualities	Work-related behavior
Individual personality	Completion of regular work tasks • Individual achievements • Job-related extra effort • Non-job-related extra effort • Situational extra ordinary engagement
Professional competence, experience	Neutral efforts
Honesty, punctuality, reliability	Team spirit
Social competence	Organizational communication
Spontaneity, flexibility	Contribution to organizational development
Loyalty (commitment)	Contribution to organizational success

Table 2.
Reasons to appreciate employees

Source(s): Created by authors

recognized for their loyalty (i.e. their general attitude of being committed to the organization). Furthermore, the focus group discussions reveal that employees contribute to organizational functioning with their social skills. Finally, participants highlight the value of appreciating spontaneity, and flexibility; these include the ability to adapt to unexpected changes, help others, and be kind and friendly in workplace interactions.

Work-related behavior. The second area comprises employees' desire to be appreciated for their work-related behavior. The focus groups reveal that employees primarily want to be appreciated for completing their regular work tasks. One participant aptly said: *If you deliver what is asked, then I think that should be appreciated. Not just when you bring in more. After all, you're doing the job you're supposed to do* (Consultant).

Furthermore, employees want to be appreciated for their success-neutral endeavors. Not every task and project yields measurable success, but they involve personal cognitive and emotional effort and have the potential to influence tasks and ideas in the future. General efforts need to be seen—but they frequently go unnoticed. A quote illustrates this in detail:

It is unrealistic to always fulfill tasks flawlessly. It is not possible. However, it does make a difference when someone actively strives to do so. You may not have reached that standard, but you deserve appreciation for your efforts and continuous improvement. And maybe you will do worse at times but have the will to learn from it. (Quality management employee)

Not surprisingly, participants also highlight the need to appreciate individual accomplishments (e.g. completing projects sufficiently, giving a good presentation, receiving external awards, learning new skills). This mainly contributes to employee's daily job motivation. Importantly, employees want their job-related and non-job-related extra efforts to be seen and valued. Our participants discuss the significance of receiving appreciation for tasks that are apparently outside the scope of their job description. These relevant investments often remain invisible to managers and coworkers. Examples are the support of coworkers, organization of team events, initiatives to improve processes, or arranging food and drinks for a team meeting. Some quotes illustrate these expectations:

I want appreciation for this invisible work that is done. (Software developer)

Just these things that everyone takes for granted. Because it's not part of my job description. Things like cleaning the coffee machine or whatever. I think that these things are taken for granted too often. (Specialist social worker)

I've worked a lot, invested a lot, and now I think I've built up so much trust with my department head that he gives me some extras. For example, flexible working hours, because he just knows I'm always there when the hat's on fire. (Architect)

Furthermore, the focus groups highlight that sometimes, employees really go the extra mile for the organization which we termed "situational extraordinary effort": One of the participants told about a coworker who moved to a different place for 9 months as part of a project. To save money for the organization, the coworker lived for this time at his parents' house. Another participant shared that she postponed her planned vacation for the sake of a work project because her knowledge was needed. Both situations required significant effort on the part of the individual leading to positive outcomes for the organization. Appreciating these situational extraordinary efforts is highly important to employees, and a lack of appreciation triggers feelings of dissatisfaction due to being disregarded.

In addition to task-related aspects, work-related behavior also includes how employees communicate internally. The analysis additionally shows that employees want appreciation for their team spirit, as their collaboration skills with coworkers are important to successfully managing job tasks. They want to feel valued by their coworkers and managers for showing competency in connecting and engaging with others. Relatedly, employees wish to be

appreciated for their personal communication behavior at work: they seek recognition for actively engaging in internal dialog, transparently for communicating errors, failures and mistakes, for providing feedback, and for communicating respectfully: *It shows that the company can only succeed when everyone has their eyes and ears open, in order to recognize when things can and should be done a better way* (Data scientist).

Furthermore, employees contribution include their external communication behavior: they shape an organization's image as ambassadors toward friends, family, and other members of the public, both on social media and in personal interactions. This additional communicative role needs to be seen and valued. Finally, the focus group debates further highlight employees' wish to be valued for their contribution to their organization's general development and success. They note the significance of recognizing their feedback, their ideas for improving processes, and their personal engagement in skill development and training:

It is important that you are valued if you bring up necessary criticism and also show critical thinking. Because in this sense, you contribute to a feedback culture that leads to overall improvements. You get feedback yourself and you're allowed to give feedback. I think it's appropriate to be appreciated for that behavior alone, because in all the hustle and bustle of the workplace, especially in hierarchical environments, it's not that easy to communicate feedback. (Consultant)

Ideas. They have been mentioned several times now. I am convinced that ideas should be appreciated. Even if the idea is bad, subjectively bad. Simply for the contribution. (Quality management employee)

And just for ideas or for redesigning the processes, if you always try to think about how you can do something better. (Technical draftsman)

Forms of appreciation

Divided into six categories, employees' perceptions of appreciation can stem from: (1) monetary and material recognition, (2) thanks, praise and esteem, (3) the general work environment, (4) seeing and taking employees seriously, (5) giving employees purpose and perspective, and (6) being human in interactions with employees (see Figure 1). The results reveal that an employee's perceptions of appreciation depend on how they experience the various forms. Importantly, the data made clear that continuous appreciation, not one-time gestures, is essential: *You can't make your employees feel better after a hard month with just a round of pizza.* (Sound technician)

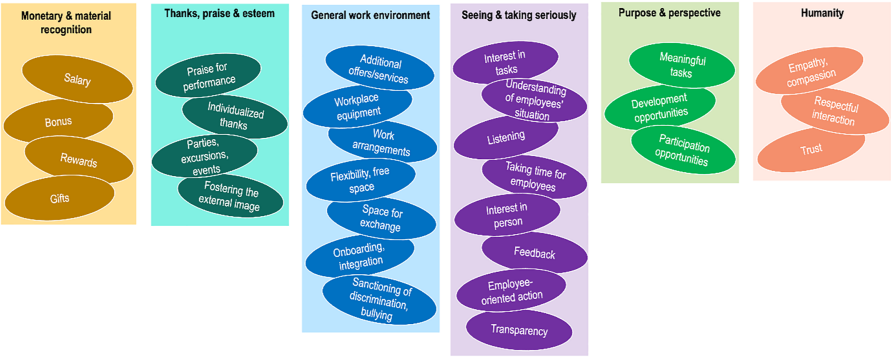


Figure 1.
Forms of appreciation

Source(s): Created by authors

Monetary and material recognition. With regard to monetary and material recognition, the analysis shows that *pay* forms the basis of employees' perceptions of appreciation: "*Salary is indeed a fundamental aspect of appreciation—it's where recognition often begins, and it needs to be in line with the employee's contributions*" (Data scientist). If employees are dissatisfied with their pay, other forms of appreciation (e.g. feedback, thank you, bonus) cannot offset this. However, if a certain satisfactory salary level is reached (i.e. enough for living, food, hobbies, vacation, goods), other forms of appreciation are more relevant to employees' daily work experiences, as articulated in this quote: "*If I am somewhat content with the salary, then the other things count much more for me in terms of appreciation*" (HR employee). Perceptions of appreciation can be fostered by salary increases, performance bonuses, rewards for individual achievements, or gifts on special occasions (e.g. birthday, Christmas). However, the discussions were brought forward that monetary or material recognition alone is less likely to increase employees' perceptions of appreciation than when such recognition is accompanied by appropriate communication. Participants emphasize the importance of understanding why they are receiving a bonus or why a salary raise is not possible; they consider it meaningless if an organization offers or limits monetary or material recognition without providing context.

Thanks, praise and esteem. Apart from monetary and material recognition, appreciation is probably most immediately associated with thanks and individual praise, which was evident in the focus group discussions. This category includes verbal and written thanks and praise of employees for individual accomplishments and individual thank-you notes. The experiences shared by the participants make clear that the way a thank-you is communicated and its frequency play an important role here. It's not about a generic thank-you gesture, but rather personalized recognition that acknowledges an employee's unique contribution:

I find the little details in speeches very important. Not: "Yes, I thank all my managers and their team," but: "I thank all the individuals: that one, that one, that one." I think that's much better. (Urban city planner)

I think it's difficult because usually an award is a one-man show. One person alone is in the center who has done something great. However, this one person worked with three or four other people to achieve the goal. For example, if the salesperson gets an award because he has done a great job in selling, then there are probably two or three people in the technical department who supported him and have worked overtime. (Technical draftsman)

Furthermore, collective celebrations (e.g. Christmas and birthday parties) or trips/excursions are also a form of saying thanks and praising employees. They are more symbolic and can take place at an organizational level or in smaller contexts (e.g. departments, teams). The cancellation of such events during the COVID-19 pandemic and the lacking reestablishment afterward was lamented by participants regarding their own feelings of appreciation, alongside other positive outcomes (e.g. team cohesion) they attributed to such shared events.

A surprising aspect that we thematized was that an organization's efforts to bolster its external image and that of its industry can have an impact on employees' perceptions of appreciation, as such efforts directly deposits to someone's self-esteem. Because different professions have different reputations in society, the participants' perceptions of appreciation increase when their organizations work on boosting the image of their profession and their industry, because this directly relates to how they are appreciated in society. It can also increase political pressure to change working conditions. One participant gives Vienna's municipal waste management as an example: participants rate the campaigns as lively, likable and pride-filled.

General work environment. Perceptions of appreciation are influenced by the design of the general work environment. Our focus groups study reveal that they can be strengthened

through various tangibles that contribute to employees' well-being at work, including: good working equipment, a kitchen, a lounge for breaks, snacks and beverages, a sports corner, an in-house canteen, or health activities. Such tangibles are not common in many professions. Relatedly, one participant reports feeling neglected and let down by her organization when she did not receive safety equipment from her employer to inspect a construction site. Instead, she was asked to put on her private hiking shoes. Not providing tangible assets to the employees is perceived as a strong sign of not caring.

Furthermore, employees feel valued by the way work is officially regulated, how these regulations are communicated to them and how these regulations are actually carried out. The data highlights how important it is for employees to understand their work contracts, get in touch with the internal code of conduct and develop a sense of their rights and obligations. A very strong sign of appreciation is granting freedom and flexibility during workdays (i.e. structuring daily routines and rest periods):

We have a lot of table tennis tables around, and people don't frown at you when you go to play. The time they give you is honest. Because I know that it costs the employer much more than a 10-euro voucher if I play for an hour. So yes, that's great for me. (Electrical engineer)

Moreover, it is noteworthy that employees feel valued by their organization when they are given the space and opportunities for professional and private exchanges. For example, one participant describes on the option to exchange with colleagues for two hours once a month without pressure. No concrete outcomes are expected; they can use this time to discuss current concerns, critical job aspects, new ideas, or private issues.

Another mentioned form of appreciation is the design of the onboarding process. Since this process is a new employee's first contact with the organization (e.g. with coworkers, rules and habits), employees' perceptions of appreciation start to develop here. Therefore, this process should include personal contact with all relevant departments, information about offerings and opportunities for participation, information about dos and don'ts, and meetings with key communicators.

The last aspect under the category of the general work environment concerns the handling of bullying and discrimination, which the participants view as a significant action of appreciation of employees as human beings: *"Das Mauserl"* [belittling term for a woman in Austrian] and similar sayings. *I have not been studying for 10 years and then get downgraded because of my age or gender* (Urban city planner). In terms of this example of sexism at work and other examples of discrimination and harassment, discussants stated that appropriate sanctioning mechanisms are an important part in their appreciation perceptions.

Purpose and perspective. Employees' perceptions of appreciation are promoted at the individual level when their role in an organization is given purpose and perspective. Employees want to experience their work as meaningful, and they feel substantially appreciated when their managers reflect on which tasks need to be completed by them and how. This requires time investments and careful consideration about the execution of a job role and related tasks. Two quotes illustrate this aspect:

If your boss wants something from you, I think the initial appreciation is that he actually thinks about what you should do. So that tasks are thought through and meaningful. (Data scientist)

With my previous employer, I sometimes analyzed things for a fortnight and then they were thrown away because my boss hadn't thought about the question he wanted to clarify in detail beforehand. And I think that's the worst thing when you invest time, even if I get paid for it – because I want the work I do to be used, because it's my time. (Analyst)

Furthermore, employees' perceptions of appreciation can be increased through personal education and development opportunities:

I feel appreciated when the employer pays for training or something similar. When I started my job, after half a year, my boss approached me and asked me if I would be interested in expanding my knowledge on building physics and wanted to do an advanced training. I think that was a great opportunity, and I gratefully accepted it. (Architect)

In addition, opportunities to participate in organizational processes, i.e. sharing their views, problems, ideas, and having the chance to actively contribute, matters. Responsiveness to employees' concerns, wishes, and positive and negative emotions is perceived as an authentic effort that participants rarely experience.

Seeing and taking seriously. In their narratives, participants devoted particular space to forms of appreciation that we combined through the overarching term *seeing and taking seriously*. Employees' perceptions of appreciation are stimulated when they experience that organizations and managers genuinely strive to approach and treat them as valuable, necessary, and active coworkers. This includes active attention to their job tasks and related (job) needs, challenges and concerns:

The greatest appreciation for me would really be if a director or someone from the head office had to accompany me for a month on a mandatory basis. And it was on me to say: "OK, this is what we're going to do today." Because I think that appreciation comes automatically, because no one is that unempathetic. (Social care worker)

It's crucial to look at what the employees have accomplished. What does every single employee do here and there? Even if it's just mopping the floor. Just really have a look: What do they do? And what do they need to do their work every day? And what would make it easier for them? Not just sitting in the head office thinking about business, but really visiting employees in the shops, the plants and offices from time to time – whatever line of work it is – and looking at what they actually do. (Retail saleswoman)

Importantly, investing in employee appreciation has a strong health benefit. Seeing and taking employees seriously strengthen their self-efficacy and self-esteem in executing their job role:

If you never get appreciation in your job, there are people who then think, "Shoot, I'm not good enough for this job; I have to work even harder," then it potentially leads to burnout and so on. I really think you shouldn't underestimate getting and giving regular appreciation because otherwise it can completely escalate on a psychological level. (Social worker)

Central to this category is the time devoted to employees on the personal and job-related levels, which is explicitly discussed as a form of appreciation in its own right. Time is often a limiting factor for many other forms, such as listening, showing interest, giving feedback, and truly developing an understanding of employees' needs and concerns:

My team leader is really good at it. I talk to him once a year during the annual appraisal interview or if something is up with the team. He is an incredibly empathetic person and can listen really well and you feel, when you have this 1.5 hour conversation with him, as if he is fully interested in what you're saying – although he has to conduct dozens of these conversations in one day. Just this personal touch: That you as a person with what you have to say ... yes, as if your interest is his interest. That's really cool. (Quality management employee)

I asked for a personal talk and then my team leader just called me up while I was on duty. We had a super nice talk for 45 minutes. First about work and then a bit about private things. And that was much more appreciated because you get to know the person a little better. Not on a friendship basis - he simply becomes a person for you and not just a supervisor. And I think that's also true in the other

direction. Not: “This is woman X, ok.” But: “This is Mrs. X and she has a horse and the horse is doing so and so.” (Croupière)

I felt appreciated when my supervisor asked . . . “What can I do to make it better for you?” I thought that was actually quite cool. (Sound technician)

Listening and showing interest enhances employees’ perceptions of appreciation, but they also want to be taken seriously, which means that these behaviors should in some way be followed by employee-oriented actions. At the very least, it is important that organizations are transparent when they will not or cannot implement such actions and explain their decisions, taking employees seriously in their roles as active coworkers. In this sense, transparency at an organizational level (e.g. about decisions, planned initiatives, losses, investments) is discussed in the focus groups as a further factor contributing to employees’ perceptions of appreciation.

Humanity. This category concerns the interactions between organizational members and entities. Participants emphasize that empathy, compassion, respect and trust contribute very directly to their perceptions of appreciation. The significance of fostering an appreciative climate is emphasized through numerous negative examples:

I told my supervisor: “I don’t know how to manage this” and her answer was: “I can’t help you; others can do it, too.” (HR employee)

He always talked very quickly, at a fast pace. He didn’t look you in the eye, but rather over your head. And he never paid attention to your comments or objections. (Consultant)

They have no empathy because they are simply there for the cash. We saw this very clearly with our last CEO. He was hired, he ran his program and then went to the next company where he probably does the same thing all over again. He gets his bonuses; he ruins structures and leaves the deluge behind him. (Croupière)

The role of internal communication in co-creating an appreciative working climate

To start, our material reveals the necessary involvement of various communicators, including: the CEO, managers, coworkers, customers, and the public. Some responsibilities are delineated by the participants themselves, while others emerge from their narratives. Interestingly, for some participants, employee appreciation is disconnected from organizational departments such as HR or internal communication: *What do you mean by appreciation efforts from the HR department? I’ve never heard of mine* (Electrical engineer). To draw a conclusion for the work of communication professionals, some results are important to notice. First, the analysis shows that the actions and specific communication by managers are most visible to employees:

I just experienced that a new coworker was sent from an HR colleague, exactly 5 minutes after everybody left for lunch. And I was coincidentally still at the office and thought “What’s going on with our team leader? - he must know that someone is coming.” And I think that’s appreciation, when you’re new, that you’re welcomed by your leader. (Consultant)

Second, managers are held particularly accountable for engaging in employee appreciation:

I think the higher the level, the more it can be expected—because it’s their job to make everyone happy. Coworkers should do it too, but it’s the managers’ responsibility. (Data scientist)

I expect appreciation from my direct supervisor, who sees what I do. That recognition from the top, I don’t need it. To be completely honest, we’re a big corporation. The board in Hamburg, they don’t need to appreciate me. They have no idea who I am. It would be ridiculous for them to send me an email saying “thank you.” But getting something from my manager, that’s different. That’s much more important to me. (HR employee)

Third, the narratives point to managers' necessary engagement in employee appreciation for both employees' personal characteristics and qualities, as well as their work-related behavior. With regard to the former, managers are the regular contact points for employees. They have the ability to get to know their team members as people and can build meaningful relationships with employees. Simultaneously, it is easier for managers to address employees' work-related behavior than it is for other communicators. Based on their regular interaction and professional competence, they should know about employees' work assignments, tasks and specific needs. For both areas, managers can apply a broad spectrum of practices. One quote underscores the special role of managers in addressing appreciation in employees' day-to-day work:

After the World Cup, all of our team members received a thank you email from our team leader that was full of wit, heart, and everything. There were examples of what happened in the newsroom in the last weeks. Funny things and also things that went wrong. A great emphasis that despite the challenges, we still made it. It was just a really personal email that was well thought out. Our team leader took time and thought about what he wanted to say, and he showed us that he really wanted to send us a personal message that appreciates us. (Journalist)

Fourth, despite managers' accountability to engage in employee appreciation, the results emphasize that participants often perceive their managers as not appreciative (at all). However, they excuse them insofar as they often lack appreciation themselves. This is reflected in the following quotes:

I think your question was also why leaders are often not appreciative. And I think that it is precisely those who are not valued themselves and who pay little attention to themselves. (Analyst)

Your supervisor does not feel appreciated herself and therefore passes this on by not appreciating others herself. (Social care worker)

Given these four findings, we conclude that managers should have a clear idea of their responsibility and communicative impact in strengthening employees' perceptions of appreciation. To this end, they should be equipped with knowledge about the value of appreciation (including knowledge about reasons for appreciation and the potential effects of appreciation), the forms (including resources) to promote employees' perceptions of appreciation, and communication education for their interactions with employees. Managers are the main source of employee appreciation, but at the same time they depend on their personal sense of appreciation; thus they need to be supported in several ways in fulfilling this responsibility.

Through closer examination of the data, this centering delineates the tripartite role of communication professionals that goes far beyond a managerial logic (Simonsson and Heide, 2021). Communication professionals are, *first* and foremost, a *strategic communication partner* for managers, as well as for other entities. Given the "trickle-down" effect (Bakker *et al.*, 2023) communication professionals can and should work closely with key communicators and decision-makers on an overall concept of appreciation. Crucial in accomplishing this task is listening to several voices in an organization (also see Qin and Men, 2021), and translating identified needs into concrete forms of appreciation, designating responsibilities, and supporting key communicators of employee appreciation by providing relevant resources (e.g. discussion rounds, forums, smaller or bigger events). This strategic role further requires professionals to promote the relevance of employee appreciation across the organization. It involves raising awareness of the topic itself, communicating relevant positive outcomes (e.g. Stocker *et al.*, 2010; Pfister *et al.*, 2020a, b), emphasizing and debating critical aspects of appreciation (see Beck, 2016). Based on these conclusions, co-creating an appreciative working climate is not a hierarchical task; it includes multiple voices. However, it involves active engagement

and reflection of those with leadership responsibilities and specific competencies. *Second*, in line with their other tasks (e.g. informing, motivating and engaging employees, see [Men, 2021](#)), we see internal communication professionals therefore as *role models* for all employees by providing valuable examples of appreciation, initiating and participating in initiatives, setting the tone of organizational communication in daily practices, and through an official code of conduct. Employees from all hierarchies need role models for inspiration and an official framework. Professionals can lead by example, promote internal discourses on appreciation at various levels, and enforce together with the CEO and management board that appreciative interactions are incentivized, and misconduct is sanctioned. *Third*, internal communication professionals assume the role of *enablers*, as [Fagley and Adler \(2012\)](#) have already noted. Fostering an appreciative working climate requires an understanding of employees and managers as active communicators who make important contributions through their communication. This broad perspective on responsibilities also relieves pressure from managers ([Stocker et al., 2014](#)). Following, employees from all hierarchies need to be empowered and educated in their appreciative communication. In this context, according to [Zerfass and Franke \(2013\)](#), enabling means consulting organizational members “to master communicative challenges themselves by providing and supporting communicative structures, processes, and competencies ranging from active communication competencies (outbound) and perceptual and interpretative competencies (inbound) to cooperative competencies (integrative)” (p. 130). It is especially important for managers to have support when needed, as they regularly enter new positions without personnel-related leadership skills.

Discussion

The study yields several conclusions concerning the co-creation of an appreciative working climate. Importantly, in light of recent economic, political and social developments that lay high demands on employees, appreciation seems to be a core socioemotional resource. It supports employees in feeling good at work, experiencing positive emotions, staying engaged, and remaining part of an organization (see mentioned positive outcomes). Our focus groups highlight a variety of circumstances to engage in employee appreciation (e.g. when employees are reliable or show situational extraordinary engagement), extending beyond personal achievements. Considering these various reasons, the data stress the necessity for a careful analysis of employees’ situational needs and expectations. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many employees quickly took on the responsibility for new tasks and were confronted with extra job-related efforts. In this case, organizations needed to understand employees’ demands and expectations in order to find appropriate forms to express appreciation of their extra efforts, reliability and situational extraordinary engagement. The most critical aspect here is taking time (also see [Beck, 2016](#)): time to find out what employees want to be appreciated for, time to address employee needs as a form of appreciation (see “*seeing and taking seriously*”), and time to actively appreciate employees. The situation created a moment of attention, as organizations could show internally and externally if they knew their employees and cared about them – if and how they assumed responsibility for their employees. Especially those organizations who had workers on-site (e.g. care or retail sector) had to invest time in employee appreciation. Besides thanking them for their engagement, it was necessary to ask them about their needs, give them the opportunity to participate and try to be transparent about the situation, the potential job- and task-related (negative) effects, the knowledge gaps and the plan to manage the situation (e.g. [Einwiller et al., 2021](#)). As time is such a critical aspect, we conclude that employee appreciation cannot only be spontaneous or a one-time action

(during a crisis); co-creating an appreciative working climate requires continuous attentive listening, careful planning, words backed up by actions, and the involvement of various communicators.

As to how organizations can engage regularly in employee appreciation, our data analysis yields six forms of appreciation that all have a communicative aspect and contribute to employees' perceptions of appreciation. These data support, and more importantly expand previous findings by [Stocker et al. \(2014\)](#). First, our results confirm the importance of *monetary and material recognition*, which is comparable to Stocker et al.'s category of tangible reward and promotion. Importantly, our results stress that these forms (e.g. bonus) need communication to contribute to employees' perceptions of appreciation. Second, *thanks and praise* (e.g. praise for performance, parties) are common and expected forms, which emerged as similarly important in the research by Stocker et al., who termed it praise and gratitude. Surprisingly, our data emphasize the increase of an employee's perceptions of appreciation when an organization improves its external image. It is captured by the form *esteem* and thus complements this category. Third, the form *seeing and taking seriously* (e.g. trying to understand an employee's situation, taking time to listen to needs) considerably enlarges Stocker et al.'s category of support and respect. Our data highlight employees' wish and need to be seen by their managers and organizations. The material indicates this form as one of the strongest drivers of employees' perceptions of appreciation. Fourth, the form *humanity* comprises the interaction between organizational members, like Stocker et al.'s category of trust and responsibility. Two further additional forms emerge from our data that are also communicative in nature. These are, fifth, the *design of the general work environment* (e.g. workspace equipment, safety, contracts, space for exchange, onboarding process, treatment of bullying and discrimination), and sixth, the perceptions of *purpose and perspective* at work (including having meaningful tasks, development opportunities and opportunities to participate). For organizations, this wide range of forms offers several options to express employee appreciation. At the same time, it creates pressure, especially for internal communicators, to take this responsibility seriously. Given this responsibility, this study points out that organizations are strongly dependent on the strategic communication of managers (also see [Yue et al., 2021](#)). The finding underscores prior research showing the effectiveness of an appreciative leadership style (e.g. [Apostel et al., 2018](#); [Davis et al., 2021](#); [Elfering et al., 2017](#); [Kranabetter and Niessen, 2019](#); [Pohrt et al., 2022](#)) and argues for the need of managers' knowledge, skills and involvement (e.g. [Kranabetter and Niessen, 2019](#); [Pohrt et al., 2022](#); [Stocker et al., 2014](#)). Importantly, managers and especially middle managers, "are not always involved in strategic issues, which means that in some cases they are just as much "receiver" of strategic messages as their coworkers are" ([Heide et al., 2018](#), p. 461). Hence, our material leads to four important conclusions for the work of communication professionals.

First, as the negative examples show, managers sometimes fail to fully take on their responsibility around appreciation. This neglect might stem from the idea of employee appreciation as a very implicit and individual task that depends on individual characteristics and the respective leadership style (e.g. [Stocker et al., 2014](#)). Simultaneously, it indicates the necessity of those who have education, knowledge and experiences about internal relationship building to support and educate managers (as claimed by [Fagley and Adler, 2012](#); [Pohrt et al., 2022](#)). In addition, the data show managers' dependency on communication professionals to comprehend their role as an appreciative leader. Consequently, the enabling function ([Zerfass and Franke, 2013](#)) is key to overcoming managers' idea of appreciation as a managerial, implicit, and individualized task. In this way, communication professionals' practices contribute to employees' sensemaking and foster an appreciative working climate. Second, our results strengthen the argument by [Stocker et al. \(2014\)](#) who claim that even though managers are aware of employees' need for appreciation, "knowing its importance is not equivalent to implementing this knowledge in everyday life" (p. 90). There is another

strong dependency of managers from communication professionals: Managers' need for their daily communication knowledge about the value of appreciation, appropriate forms, as well as concrete resources to translate the forms into practice. Many forms cannot be applied without structural support and executive decisions (e.g. information about rules and organizational development, team events, gifts, rooms for exchange, workshops). This dependency is reflected in the "trickle down" effect (Bakker *et al.*, 2023) and reinforces the role of communication professionals as relevant strategic partners. *Third*, in line with Stocker *et al.* (2014), managers' awareness of appreciation depends on their own stress and "their own desire for appreciation" (p. 90). Managers who never receive appreciation themselves work under difficult conditions to fulfill this role. This reflects Beck's (2016) claim about the necessity that all employees, with and without leadership responsibility, need appreciative communication. The above point relates to a *fourth* conclusion. Internal communication professionals must continually reflect their own role in the co-creation process of an appreciative work climate across various organizational contexts, including daily operations, periods of change and crises.

Given these four important conclusions, the present study stresses the value of a professional communicative logic in internal communications (Simonsson and Heide, 2021). More important than providing information to managers is actively fostering internal sensemaking about appreciation which includes educating and empowering all organizational members in their communication. Co-creating an appreciative working climate necessitates a shift from a static and transmission-oriented communication approach to a more process-oriented one, allowing questions, ideas, dissent and critical debates (e.g. about the health aspect of appreciation). It also entails actively debating and asking employees about their values and expectations, and capturing managers' concerns and challenges. Employee appreciation should not be a side project or singular effort – it requires strategic vision and active decisions in collaboration with several communicators and units (forms that stress this claim: fostering external image, on-boarding process). Internal communication professionals need to acknowledge all three of the roles mentioned here in order to be a valuable player and to overcome the limitations of a managerial logic.

Limitations and future research

The present results are limited to a qualitative approach, capturing the perspective of employees without leadership responsibility from large organizations (>250) based in Central Europe, Austria. Going forward, there is a need to broaden the discussion by including managers and internal communication professionals to discuss employees' expectations in relation to communication responsibilities, practices, dependencies and critical aspects of appreciation (e.g. fairness, insincerity). The regional aspect must be noticed, as initial empirical findings point to potential cultural differences in perceptions of workplace appreciation (White *et al.*, 2020). In addition, the results serve as a starting point for a larger debate on employee appreciation in other institutionalized forms, such as start-ups, small and medium-sized organizations, family businesses and political institutions like municipalities (assumed differences are initially shown by White (2023)).

In this study, only limited attention is paid to the potential circumstances and effects of a lack of appreciation. The critical debate on appreciation is currently led by Beck (2016), who outlines several potential negative aspects. Our material also contains critical aspects that we did not describe in detail in our results and discussion. For example, our focus group data includes descriptions by participants of situations where they felt "dismissed." We posit that feeling dismissed attacks the personal relationship with the organization, as several expectations are violated. It results from active neglect or withholding of appreciation (e.g. for specific work-related behavior) (also see Beck, 2016; examples from the transcripts:

Because somehow I'm afraid of being dismissed somewhere. Or that someone else was more appreciated, Science engineer; What I also often experienced was contempt for younger female colleagues. That's more or less how the older generation talks about female colleagues. I didn't study for 10 years for that. So, something like that, that you are really downgraded for the performance you do, because of your age, gender, or because you have been there for such a short time, City planner), fostering highly negative feelings. As Stocker et al. (2014) claim, "appreciation at work is a 'vehicle' to touch elementary needs of human beings" (p. 90). Dismissiveness, thus, is taken as an injury on a personal level and potentially impacts self-esteem, job engagement and work performance. Accordingly, dismissiveness is potentially a construct in its own right with several implications for employees' job-related perceptions and behaviors. These observations necessitate a call for more in-depth research that focuses on the characteristics of this feeling, the circumstances that trigger it and the potential outcomes (e.g. negative communication behavior and turnover intentions), in order to draw conclusions for the practices and responsibilities of communication professionals.

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