



Compliment Enclosed: Handle With Care

By Karen Mathieson

It's one of the strangest double-binds in any relationship, personal or professional: We want people to like something about us—our work, our taste, whatever it may be—yet we shoot down any remark that lets us know they do. “No problem,” we say, dismissing the hours spent in careful preparation of the five-course meal or the multi-media presentation, and (if in a service capacity) somehow implying that it would otherwise be a bother to help. “This old thing,” we shrug, inflection rising. “It's getting so ratty.”

Hold it right there, pardner. We ain't at the O.K. Corral. Let's mosey over to the Savoir Faire Saloon and have us a little chat. Bullet pints all right with you?

- **Reread your family script about compliments.** If your first, home culture was designed to keep any member from getting too big a head—or too far ahead—compliments were likely delivered back-handed, if at all. That was great for the sarcasm ratio, not so good for creating bonds of mutual respect. If the pattern relied heavily on comparisons between siblings in white and black hats, then a competitive nudge crept into every positive statement. If that sounds familiar, take a look at whether you might be giving and receiving compliments in the same way today. How does that affect your relationship with your client, friend or partner? Pay special attention if someone reminds you of a sibling, a parent, or other kin. Perhaps they like to josh around with “Great one,” for an air ball, too, but that may not be in their own script. It's never too late to learn that we can be honored for ourselves without comparison, and that we can offer others the same kind of authentic compliment for their individual contributions to the world.
- **Consider whether your own negative self-judgment is blocking your ears.** As a recovering perfectionist, I still remember the moment when I saw the light about this. Some twenty years ago, I was the soloist at an event for a nonprofit with the mission of establishing a local arts center. Now, pedal harpists use their feet to set keys or to insert non-scale elements called accidentals. It was accidental in truth when I reversed a right-foot “up” and a left-foot “down” in a tricky passage, briefly creating an altered tonal reality before straightening things out. Afterward, I was numb to every word of praise as I rehashed my idiocy. Months later, I asked a new board member for the organization why he had decided to serve. He told me my performance that night had shown him the talent in our community, and that he just had to help give it a home. Since then, I have sought to accept compliments with grace, considering the experience of the giver rather than attending to a more severe inner critic.

- **Go easy on the gush.** Compliments are gold links in the chain of “know, like, trust.” They take only a moment to give and a moment to receive, but they can have a lasting positive effect on how we get along with the people with whom we work, play, and sometimes establish families. KISS is the rule if you’re paying a compliment: Keep it simple and specific. That not only makes it more believable but more likely to be pulled out and cherished by the other person some rainy day. If you’re on the receiving end, KISS applies as well: Keep your thanks simple and sincere. I had a family member who when complimented on a casserole would respond by listing every ingredient, right down to the salt. I’ll admit that when sharing a meal with another ardent cook I’m likely to mention a flavoring twist, but in general the sweetest words the giver of any compliment can hear are: “Thank you. I’m glad you like it.” Some things, like campy old Westerns, never go out of style.

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Suggested Bio Text:

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