

Benefits of a Year-Round Attitude of Gratitude in the Workplace

*By Naz Beheshti, Forbes,
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Gratitude is the gift that keeps on giving. Giving thanks throughout your organization is not only noble—it is smart. Mindful business leaders who are wise and generous enough to make it a year-round practice will be rewarded with healthier and more robust organizations.

The benefits of expressing gratitude are well-documented. A study found that making a regular and deliberate effort to record one's blessings improves a range of outcomes related to mental health and overall well-being. Keeping a gratitude journal is an increasingly popular personal practice.

Yet for a variety of reasons, we are hesitant to show gratitude in our professional lives. A survey (conducted by the John Templeton Foundation, which also funds an Expanding Gratitude project at UC Berkeley), shows that people are least likely to express gratitude in the workplace—despite feeling a desire to be thanked more often at work themselves.

We have to get over whatever is holding us back from giving thanks in the workplace. Gratitude should be a central feature of company culture.

The neglected art of constructive praise

Two workplace surveys turn up some revealing numbers about praise in the workplace. In general, managers confess that giving feedback—especially negative feedback—to their direct reports is stressful, and 21% avoid doing so at all. Yet, surprisingly, 37% admit they also avoid giving positive reinforcement.

This reluctance to give praise in the workplace stands in the face of a great deal of research on the benefits of positive feedback.

According to Gallup, engagement rates for employees whose managers focus on their strengths are more than double that of employees whose managers focus on their weaknesses. IBM's Smarter Workforce Institute, in a survey of over 19,000 workers in 26 countries, found an even higher disparity and also concluded that recognition could dramatically improve employee retention.

Gratitude builds relationships

Perhaps executives and managers might be more likely to dish out praise if they framed it not as feedback, but as part of a larger process of building relationships. Gratitude is a powerful concept. It goes beyond praise, beyond positive reinforcement. Gratitude is a recognition of our interdependence, of the fact that success is the result of team effort.

Showing gratitude, therefore, involves showing vulnerability. It is not easy to acknowledge that we need someone, but doing so is a sign of strength, not weakness.

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In his research on gratitude, Adam Grant addresses the related concept of social worth. In a fundraising call center, he and a colleague found that a simple personal visit from the manager—explaining the value of the work the callers were doing, and thanking them for it—resulted in a 50% jump in the number of calls made. They concluded the difference was not due to increased feelings of self-efficacy (feeling competent and capable) but to a sense of being socially valued.

Gratitude is not just about building relationships between you and your employees, but also between employees and the organization as a whole. Four in five (81%) employees report they are motivated to work harder when their boss shows appreciation for their work. When gratitude becomes a regular organizational practice, employees will feel both appreciated and valued, and their productivity and engagement will increase by leaps and bounds.

Show appreciation for the whole person

It can be tempting to limit praise and appreciation to the task at hand. After all, every organization has its strategic objectives, and leaders have to ensure that employees are contributing toward meeting those objectives. However, in an economy where change and disruption are the norm, employees feel a growing need for other kinds of support.

The Gallup study cited earlier found that employees are looking for more than just good communication about their roles and responsibilities at work. They want to feel comfortable approaching a manager about a range of subjects, whether work-related or not. “A productive workplace,” the authors conclude, “is one in which people feel safe—safe enough to experiment, to challenge, to share information and to support one another.”

Concrete ways of showing appreciation for an employee as a whole person include offering flexible work arrangements when appropriate, and a willingness to support employees in their overall life and career goals. Business leaders who present themselves as more of a partner than a boss positively impact their team’s happiness and outcomes.

Gratitude costs nothing... or does it?

Articles about gratitude often stress that it involves an investment of time and effort, but not necessarily of money. That is true up to a point. Yet it is essential to keep in mind that financial rewards can make expressions of gratitude more compelling.

A Glassdoor Employee Appreciation survey reinforces many of the findings summarized above. Appreciation is the most powerful driver of employee motivation, loyalty, and job satisfaction. The survey also finds that a pay raise is the most effective show of such appreciation. Respondents rated a pay raise and other unexpected rewards like bonuses well ahead of other expressions of gratitude.

Today’s employees expect more than a transactional relationship with the organizations they work for. They want to feel their work has meaning and that their contributions are valued. Financial compensation is an important piece of that puzzle. Conscious business leaders are generous with both financial rewards as well as with non-financial rewards.