



Leading, and Living, with Gratitude

BY JESSICA BROWN



In February, I reprinted the remarks Attorney General Phil Weiser made at our December Board of Governors meeting about “Leading with Empathy.”¹ I put a lot of stock into his message that we should avoid contributing to “today’s rising polarization, demonization, and divisive rhetoric,” which AG

Weiser, quoting author Arthur Brooks,² observed can be “addressed by two teachings from the Dalai Lama”: (1) waiting before reacting—in other words, “withholding our natural and initial judgments”; and (2) “replacing contempt with loving kindness.”³ AG Weiser’s remarks have inspired me to try to lead with empathy and have guided me as I made decisions about potential courses of action on behalf of the Bar.

They also inspired me to write this month about another trait I believe in leading, and living, with—gratitude.

Benefits of Cultivating Gratitude

Gratitude is “the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness.”⁴ As a trait and a state, gratitude has always come to me very naturally. My parents used to tell the story of how, when I was only 2 or 3 years old, I opened a package of underwear for Christmas, each pair embroidered with a different day of the week. My reaction: “Underwear—just what I always wanted!” I was too young for sarcasm. I was sincerely thankful. And that “attitude of gratitude” has persisted throughout my life.

Unfortunately for me—but not, my research would suggest, for most people—the flip side of gratitude is anxiety. I am so grateful for my many blessings that I generally have an undercurrent

of anxiety that occasionally manifests as outright stress. After all, gratitude is about not taking the good things in our lives for granted. I take almost nothing for granted—which means I simultaneously have a pretty constant concern about possibly losing the things I appreciate so much: family, health, work, friends, our professional and school communities, civil liberties, this planet, my sense of taste and smell . . . the list is long.

But my research turned up very little information about the connection between gratitude and anxiety, other than inversely. That said—even for me—those under-the-surface nervous feelings are generally substantially outweighed by on-the-surface feelings of considerable happiness. I particularly notice my feelings when I’m not too distracted, such as when I’m doing dishes or driving. In those quieter moments, I often notice that I feel really happy—and really grateful.

Philosophers have been connecting gratitude and happiness for about 2000 years.⁵ And (much) more recent psychological findings support that gratitude is related inversely to sadness and positively to life satisfaction.⁶ According to Harvard Medical School, “In positive psychology research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships.”⁷

Some research has suggested that, for people with clinical depression and anxiety, the benefits of gratitude are not significant.⁸ Even those studies, however, support that “people who have gratitude as a general trait have a lower incidence of mental health problems and better relationships.”⁹

It makes intuitive sense that people who focus on gratitude show greater optimism in many areas of their lives.¹⁰ Moreover, the more gratitude they experience and express, the more situations and people they may feel grateful for.¹¹ Feelings of appreciation also help us “to have healthier minds, and with that healthier bodies.”¹² Research has shown that patients with heart failure who completed gratitude journals showed reduced inflammation, improved sleep, and better moods, which reduced their medical symptoms after just eight weeks.¹³

Tools for Cultivating Gratitude

There are tools that can be used to enhance feelings of gratitude. One such tool is meditation.¹⁴ I have never managed to give meditation a chance, despite knowing it probably would be great for me. I thought you were supposed to clear your mind of all thoughts when meditating. But evidently it is acceptable to “sit with your eyes closed” and “[f]ocus on all the good things in your life and start thanking your stars.”¹⁵ If that counts as meditation, then I guess I do that,

for example when I’m driving—except that part about “eyes closed”!

Another wonderful tool for cultivating gratitude is giving back.¹⁶ Gratitude can be inspired by “an awareness that you enjoy many basic things that others, unfortunately, lack.”¹⁷ It causes us to “reflect[] on the things that are easy to take for granted.”¹⁸ One way lawyers can give back is by providing pro bono legal services. My October President’s Message is all about pro bono opportunities and our duty, as well as our privilege, as attorneys to help people and small businesses that are struggling.¹⁹ I have also urged lawyers to consider ways they can give back and make a difference regarding racial justice, including in my January President’s Message²⁰ and during comments at symposiums and summits, on local bar visits, and when addressing the Board of Governors.

Making photo collages is another way to inspire gratitude, especially for creative types. I love this idea for my 10-year-old daughter, Tatum, but adults can try it too. Assembling a photo collage of your favorite people is one approach; another is clipping photos from magazines that represent your sources of joy.²¹ The process of making the collage is likely to generate feelings of gratitude, and so will seeing the collage regularly thereafter.²² Making a collage for someone who matters to you might enhance the experience as well—use it as a



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15 WAYS TO SAY THANKS AT WORK

Leading with Gratitude discusses a number of ways to effectively express gratitude in the workplace, including:

1. Assume positive intent when interacting with employees or volunteers—most workers care about their work and are trying to do a good job.
2. Understand the challenges employees or volunteers are facing: “Leaders who develop empathy for others are great enablers of authentic gratitude.”
3. Learn (e.g., through assessments) and remember what motivates your employees (e.g., beyond appreciation, is it autonomy, challenge, creativity, prestige, purpose, recognition, teamwork?)—tailor expressions of gratitude accordingly.
4. Do not wait for performance review time to provide feedback: “That wastes golden opportunities to provide immediate positive reinforcement of the behaviors a leader is looking for.”
5. Solicit and act upon input—or at least discuss with employees or volunteers why their ideas are not feasible and convey authentic appreciation for them.
6. Connect gratitude to your organization’s core values—reinforce leadership’s commitment to them through how you appreciate employees or volunteers.

Here are a few more ways to express gratitude, some of which may not be appropriate for every workplace.

7. Give credit where credit is due: Do not take all or even most of the credit for your team members’ successes.
8. Actively seek opportunities to share and highlight your team members’ achievements and wins.
9. Give team members opportunities to present to others, including senior leaders, in the organization.
10. Acknowledge team members’ roles or assistance when forwarding work product they principally drafted.
11. Send a gift card or gift basket to team members who are working particularly hard.
12. Offer team members a mental health day or break after a busy period.
13. Take personal responsibility when things go poorly.
14. Make sure team members know you have their backs.
15. Mentor team members—take genuine interest in their career goals and help them accomplish their goals.

way to thank someone meaningfully. Thanking people for their contributions to your life is another tool to cultivate gratitude.²³

A further tool I have read about is the “gratitude visit.” A study in 2005 allowed participants one week to write and deliver a thank you letter to someone who had been especially kind to them but who had never been properly thanked.²⁴ Participants were required not only to express their gratitude in the letter, but also to deliver the letter personally and spend time with the recipient discussing the letter’s contents.²⁵ Participants reported greater happiness for an entire month following the “gratitude visit” compared to a control group.²⁶

“Gratitude journals” are another tool.²⁷ I have frequently read that people who are feeling sad or depressed should consider keeping a journal in which they write with specificity—ideally one to three times per week and not more—what they are feeling grateful for.²⁸ I have never kept one because I regularly and naturally think about what I’m grateful for (and feel happy and slightly anxious about it). But I have suggested a gratitude journal to Hadley, my 14-year-old daughter, and she has tried it and reported feeling happier because of it.

There are a lot of ways I fall short as a mom, but I intentionally seek to instill gratitude and appreciation in both girls, and it seems to be working. Feeling grateful has helped them cope with the many disappointments (e.g., closures and cancellations) resulting from COVID-19, which they are weathering better than some of their peers. In fact, Hadley has come to appreciate a lot of things about online school: sleeping a little later, access to better snacks and her dad’s good cooking, less running around, acting programs being offered out of New York and Los Angeles, and a lot more time with her family. We have grown closer as a family during this period of greater togetherness. I am knocking on wood as I write that; I’m extremely grateful for these things, which makes me a bit anxious.

Benefits of Expressing Gratitude

Although I may be among the small minority who connect gratitude with anxiety, I am certainly not the only one to connect gratitude

and leadership. I have long believed in leading with gratitude, but it turns out there is a whole book about it, *Leading with Gratitude: Eight Leadership Practices for Extraordinary Business Results*, by Chester Elton and Adrian Gostick.²⁹ The book's basic premise is that "[b]y learning how to express gratitude in meaningful ways, leaders can improve workplace culture, arrive at better solutions, and make productivity skyrocket."³⁰

While I have only read excerpts from the book, this premise makes sense to me. In my experience, workers want to feel valued and appreciated. I know I do. I have always enjoyed my work most when someone—a client, another partner, another Bar leader—was grateful for it. Feeling appreciated is motivating. I am motivated to work even harder when my work is valued. And I am not unique in this at all. According to a recent study, 81% of working

adults say they would work harder if their boss were more grateful for their work.³¹ By contrast, just 38% report working harder because their boss is demanding, and only 37% work harder because they fear losing their job.³²

Along these lines, a 300,000-person study conducted during the Great Recession found that more grateful managers led teams with higher business metrics, including up to two times greater profitability, 20% higher customer satisfaction, and significantly higher scores in employee engagement, trust, and accountability.³³ In addition, it has been shown that when gratitude is regularly shown to employees, they feel more positive about their contributions, less stress, and a better sense of well-being.³⁴ Research also shows that gratitude leads team members to express more gratitude to one another.³⁵ Importantly, when leaders express gratitude to their teams, it reduces turnover.³⁶

Again, none of that surprises me. I have had conversations with young lawyers who have chosen different career paths and options because the person they worked for was both demanding and ungrateful. I also have heard young lawyers say they would have stayed in their current role if they had felt their above-and-beyond contributions were appreciated rather than simply expected. It seems pretty obvious that workers want to feel valued, and showing gratitude is one way to accomplish that. Yet a recent study found that "people are less likely to express gratitude at work than anywhere else."³⁷

Obstacles to Expressing Gratitude

Why don't more of us express gratitude in the workplace? I suspect many leaders (and all of us are leaders in some capacity) would point to a lack of time. Yet expressing gratitude at a

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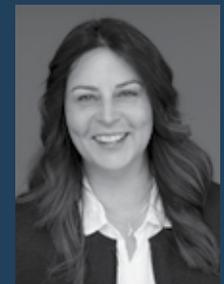
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basic level is quick and easy. It just requires noticing when someone else has contributed to your good results and thanking them for it.

I realize there are times when we are so busy as lawyers that adding anything more to our plates seems impossible. But if leaders understood how important and powerful it can be to express gratitude to their teams, they might be more willing to make at least a small additional investment of time to do so. And the benefits run in both directions: when we take the time to notice and appreciate the good things that are happening in our lives, including our work lives, we also feel happier.³⁸

Some workplace leaders might believe (perhaps subconsciously) that if they express gratitude, they unintentionally convey to employees that they are going beyond their job requirements or doing something that isn't

already expected of them. There may be some reticence to do this, especially when work is very busy and employees are needed to go above and beyond in performing their jobs. But research suggests that the leader's goal to have employees work harder is actually undermined by withholding appreciation.³⁹

A related thought is that leaders may believe gratitude is incompatible with high expectations. As expressed by the former CEO of American Express, "I think one of the things people get confused about is they see gratitude as simply being nice. This view of 'I want to be very stingy with gratitude' gets confused to mean I'm not being demanding. In fact, it's quite the opposite. You can be very demanding and bestow gratitude very often and be authentic."⁴⁰

There also may be some generational resistance to expressing gratitude at work. Some Baby Boomer and Gen X leaders think that Millennial

workers are too needy and should not require thanks for doing their jobs—that is why they are paid. But a survey of more than 200,000 employees from around the world that was released in 2014 showed that the most important factor to on-the-job happiness is appreciation, regardless of generation.⁴¹ "Globally, the most important single job element for all people is appreciation for their work."⁴²

Another possibility is that leaders think they are expressing gratitude, but workers don't perceive it that way. In one study, almost 90% of the CEOs surveyed felt it was important to lead with gratitude, and 88% believed their employees would give them high marks for it.⁴³ But only 37% of the employees surveyed indicated they were satisfied with the level of gratitude they experienced.⁴⁴ This information may be frustrating to some supervisors, but in a situation like this, perception is reality.

Those are some theories to explain the "gratitude gap." The *Leading with Gratitude* authors also advance theories to explain why leaders are not always mindful to express gratitude at work. One is "negativity bias"—that is, as humans, we tend to pay more attention to problems and perceived threats than positive things happening around us.⁴⁵ This bias means, unfortunately, that "we feel the sting of a rebuke more powerfully than we feel the joy of praise."⁴⁶

Another theory they put forward is that some leaders withhold positive sentiments to keep pressure on team members, expecting that they will work harder if they are "kept on edge."⁴⁷ Such pressure may increase anxiety, and anxiety evidently undermines productivity.⁴⁸ It may be easy to forget that when, as leaders, we are under pressure ourselves.

Expressing Gratitude Effectively

As shown, it is in our personal and professional interest as leaders to cultivate, experience, and express gratitude. As workplace motivational strategies go, expressing gratitude is relatively quick, easy, and inexpensive. And, as Sam Walton once said, "Nothing else can quite substitute for a few well-chosen, well-timed, sincere words of praise."⁴⁹ There are ways to express gratitude that can be even more meaningful than just saying thank you (the sidebar

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lists a few). But, in my view, just saying thank you—and meaning it—is a great start.

Nevertheless, Elton and Gostick make clear the kind of gratitude their book discusses is not just “showering more ‘thank-yous’ and ‘I think you’re awesome’ statements on employees.”⁵⁰ Gratitude, they posit, is best when it is heartfelt, specific, and genuine.⁵¹ Developing genuine gratitude involves “carefully observing what employees are doing, walking in their shoes, developing greater empathy, and sincerely trying to understand the challenges they face.”⁵²

Other authors likewise have emphasized that leading with gratitude “doesn’t mean that all we have to do is say ‘thank you’ to our employees in order to increase their productivity.”⁵³ But “a genuine recognition of your employees’ efforts will ignite their internal drive and commitment.”⁵⁴ “[I]t’s about appreciating and recognizing the unique qualities, traits, and contributions they’ve made that have helped your organization to evolve and grow.”⁵⁵

Here are 40 more ways to show appreciation at work: <https://inside.6q.io/40-great-ways-to-say-thank-you-to-your-employees>.⁵⁶ Not all will make sense for every workplace. The point, for leaders who wish to lead with gratitude, is to consider how best to show genuine appreciation to the employees and volunteers who make your life easier and make you look good.

In a nutshell, expressing gratitude increases the happiness and well-being of the person expressing it, the motivation of the person receiving it, and the likelihood that team members will express gratitude to one another.

Thank you for reading this Message. 

NOTES

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