



Thanksgiving is More than a Holiday

Why Gratitude is Groundbreaking in Leadership



BY YASMIN L. STUMP, ESQ.

In a scene from the epic movie “The Devil Wears Prada,” Editor in Chief Miranda Priestly, played by iconic actress Meryl Streep, is seated at the head of a conference room table in a meeting with her editorial team for the fictitious, high fashion magazine, Runway. Jocelyn, an editorial team member, explains her idea for the magazine’s April issue. “I was thinking we could do a piece about the new floral prints for spring.” Miranda satirically responds, “Florals... for spring. Groundbreaking.” As I write this article about gratitude for a November/December edition of Right of Way Magazine, I can hear Meryl Streep’s character in the movie commenting with icy sarcasm. “An article about gratitude... in November. Groundbreaking.”

Admittedly, an article about gratitude during the Thanksgiving season seems cliché. The concept of gratitude is historic and well predates this American holiday, harkening back to biblical times. However, gratitude is a principle that is not typically linked to successful leadership. It is a subject that is more often



embraced in New Age self-help literature on living a more joyful life, and we tend to think about gratitude in our personal, not professional, lives.

In a July 2019 online Forbes article, contributor Rodger Dean Duncan quotes Star Dargin, who left the field of engineering for leadership coaching, on the absence of gratitude in the corporate arena. “The study of leadership is as old as humans, but only recently is the business world recognizing the value of gratitude within it.” Sadly, the statistics about gratitude in the workplace are abysmal. The Center for Creative Leadership’s (“CCL”) Leading Effectively staff notes a significant finding in a January 2023 online article “How to Express More Gratitude at Work & Why Gratitude in Leadership Is Important.” The article states, “One study found that while about half of people regularly say thank you to their family members, only about 15% of people regularly say thank you at work. The same study found that 35% of people say that their managers have never thanked them.” For those leaders whose communications regularly include using the words “please” and “thank you,” such revelations are stunning. Ultimately, while the precept of gratitude is not groundbreaking, its pervasive adoption in the organizational world is.

Gratitude Benefits

The benefits of recognizing and expressing gratitude abound. In a Truist Leadership Institute online article, “Improving Your Leadership by Practicing Gratitude,” author Bright Dickson notes generally, “Positive psychology researchers like Robert Emmons have shown people who practice gratitude are less stressed, more satisfied with their lives, physically and psychologically healthier, and even sleep better than people who don’t practice gratitude.” Not surprisingly, in the business world, gratitude is well received by team members. As the Indeed editorial team aptly observes in a February 2023 blog, “Showing gratitude for employee contributions and ensuring teams feel valued can be important for aligning goals and increasing employee satisfaction.” Not only do team members respond positively to gratitude, but it reciprocally impacts leaders.

My own leadership experience corroborates the reciprocal benefits of gratitude for both leaders and team members and that a little bit of gratitude goes a long way. Recently, I sent an email message to the manager of an organization for which I serve as vice president on the board of directors and asked that a task be completed





... gratitude can also be made a core value of the organization to promote a positive professional environment.



for me. (Since the organization's board of directors chooses the operation's supervisors and determines their salaries, effectively, I am one of this manager's bosses.) Due to staffing shortages, this manager's meager team has been stretched to the limits of its capacity and abilities. In response to my request, he agreed to assist but noted the deficits in his staff and politely asked that I be patient with them. My sense is that he had received numerous complaints about his team, some harshly critical. Rather than lament about the situation, I replied to his email message acknowledging the manager's challenges and expressed gratitude for his leadership and his team's valiant efforts. Later that day when I saw him, he made a special point of making his way to the group with whom I was sitting and told me how meaningful my reply email message was to him. Candidly, although it was genuine, I gave little thought to the email message after I sent it and had no idea about how positively it would affect this individual. The effects of our interaction were reciprocal. Not only was this supervisor appreciative of my comments, but his heartfelt recognition positively moved me. The upshot of gratitude reciprocity should not be handily dismissed. In his September 2023 Forbes article "Leading with Gratitude: The Power of Reciprocal Appreciation," author Ben Laker explains, "By embracing reciprocity, leaders can foster team cohesion, encourage collaborative efforts, and cultivate a deep sense of trust within their teams and organizations."

While gratitude is highly significant in the business world, it is imperative in volunteer organizations. As with IRWA, the foundation of professional and benevolent not-for-profits is predicated upon the efforts of dedicated volunteers. The plethora of volunteers involved in our Association devote their expertise, time and resources without any compensation whatsoever. These relationships must be nurtured and appreciated to ensure the organization's survival, particularly in an epoch when volunteerism is declining.

So, if gratitude is beneficial for leaders and team members alike, why is it conspicuously absent from organizations? As addressed in the CCL article, "Wharton Business School professor Adam Grant has suggested it's because people don't like to admit they need help at work, and thanking someone means admitting that you couldn't do it all on your own." The truth is that no one can do it all on his or her own, and any leader who believes otherwise is deluded. A team's well-being must be paramount to a leader's ego to maintain a healthy and successful organization. Otherwise, a leader will ultimately lose his or her team and pursue a solitary existence.

Changes in Gratitude Changes in Attitude

So how can leaders embark on incorporating the practice of gratitude in their organizations? Initially, they can identify that for which they are grateful. Some managers maintain a gratitude journal, in which they regularly write down the things for which they feel grateful as a leader. Although they would like to do so, many leaders are too busy to indulge in keeping a journal or are not "the journaling type." The CCL article suggests making a short list. "Just jot down 3 things you're grateful for on a Post-it note. Stick it somewhere you'll see it often and refresh it weekly. (Some people even collect their lists in a 'gratitude jar.')" For me, I am less formal and merely take time each day to make a mental list of that for which I am grateful.

A gratitude practice for leaders also includes expressing appreciation for their team members and recognizing their contributions to the organization. Contribution recognition can be done verbally individually or at a team conference or in writing, through a thank you note or informally by email. Two crucial points in acknowledging gratitude — be specific and be mindful of how the expression of gratitude may be received. A "thank you for your efforts" will not be as meaningful as "I really appreciate that you stayed late at the office yesterday to address all details of our presentation to ensure that it would be successful." As to understanding how gratitude may be perceived, Dargin advises in Duncan's Forbes article that "not every individual... wants to receive gratitude the same way. For example, calling out an individual accomplishment publicly can be highly motivating for some and painful for others. This makes learning the various way of giving and receiving gratitude important in the workplace."

Aside from a leader's gratitude practice, gratitude can also be made a core value of the organization to promote a positive professional environment. Dickson suggests assimilating gratitude in team meetings. He says, "Use it as a way to share their gratitude, big or small, and watch the rest of the meeting become extra productive!" The CCL article suggests organizations, like Starbucks, can make thank you cards for their team members to use. Small tokens, such as gift cards, can be given as an expression of gratitude to team members. Certainly, innovation can be used to find other ways to cultivate organizational gratitude.

As leaders, we look forward to the impending holiday season and express gratitude for all for which we can be thankful. That gratitude can also be extended to those upon whom we rely in the organizations that we lead. Not only will we enrich our teams by doing so, but we will also ultimately enrich ourselves. 🌟



Yasmin L. Stump, Esq. is an IRWA Chapter 10 past president. She is the president and founder of Yasmin L. Stump Law Group, PC in Indiana and has practiced in real estate transactions and litigation, as well as been a member of the right of way industry, for more than 30 years. Yasmin has 40 years of leadership experience with business and nonprofit organizations and is authoring this column, Leadership.