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Summary

How Gratitude Benefits Organizations and Employees

We are less likely to feel or express gratitude in the workplace than anywhere else in our lives, research shows.

"We're far too hesitant to express gratitude at work, because we often fear others will see us as soft, weak, or even incompetent for needing help," said [Ryan Fehr](#) of the University of Washington, Seattle. Studies show that a lack of gratitude can:

- increase stress
- cause employees to feel as though they are not supported
- hinder helping behavior
- increase the likelihood of employee turnover

Fehr is lead author of the [Academy of Management Review](#) article, "The Grateful Workplace: A Multilevel Model of Gratitude in Organizations." The article, coauthored by [Ashley Fulmer](#) of Georgia State University, [Eli Awtrey](#) of the University of Cincinnati, and [Jared A. Miller](#) of the University of Washington, Seattle, explores how organizations can bring more gratitude into the workplace and the benefits they can expect.

Social and clinical psychological research has shown those **benefits include:**

- **Reduced stress.** "One study, for example, found that a feeling of gratitude dramatically helped police officers deal with the high stress of their jobs," Fehr said.
- **Reduced depression, isolation, aggression, and conflict.** "When people feel a sense of gratitude, they are better able to focus on the positive," Fehr said.
- **Improved sleep quality.**
- **Stronger relationships.** "Gratitude increases commitment on both sides of a relationship," Fehr said. "For example, an employee expresses gratitude to a manager, and the manager starts thinking, 'Wow, this is a great person. I'm going to be more kind and responsive to them. The employee responds in kind, and the relationship continues to improve.'"
- **Increased humility.** "Being grateful causes a manager to focus on others," Fehr said. "This creates humility. Humble leaders tend to outperform less humble leaders because humble leaders are better at empowering their employees. Also, leaders who are grateful to their



employees are more likely to listen to their suggestions and enact them, creating a more effective work environment.”

- **Increased feeling of embeddedness in the organization, reducing turnover.**
- **More helpful coworkers.** When someone receives gratitude, they are more likely to help someone else. “This is really meaningful for organizations,” Fehr said, “because as more employees express and receive gratitude, more are likely to help others in their work.”
- **Increased well-being overall.** “One of my favorite studies,” Fehr said, “was a long-term study of nuns in a convent. The nuns who showed more gratitude, along with other positive emotions, in autobiographies they wrote upon joining the convent ended up living seven years longer than the least grateful nuns.”

How can organizations foster gratitude in the workplace? The [article](#) identifies three main ways to “ritualize and formalize” expressions of gratitude for maximum benefit:

1. **Employee appreciation programs.** Classic examples are retirement parties, celebrations of product launches, and employee-of-the-month programs. But more creative and pervasive efforts can work better, such as starting a meeting with the leader expressing gratitude for some quality about every person in the room, or having every person express gratitude for someone else at the meeting. “This is more authentic,” Fehr said, “because it allows individual employees to participate in the appreciation.”

Similarly, employers might set up a “gratitude board” in a common area where employees can post thanks for the work of coworkers or an appreciation webpage where employees can document each other’s contributions. Fehr cited an appreciation program conducted by the Seattle Department of Transportation that highlighted the work of various employees in advertisements on buses, praising, for example, a mechanic on the job for 30 years for his dedication and great attitude.

Appreciation programs work best when they focus on praising employees and teams for their effort and perseverance rather than on a competitive metric, such as selling the most cars at a car dealership, which singles out one employee at the expense of others. “You want appreciation programs to be more inclusive and less competitive,” Fehr said.

2. **Contact with beneficiaries.** Perhaps unexpectedly, research shows that employees feel grateful for being able to help others. A study of nurses, for example, showed that the ability to help their patients was a consistent source of daily gratitude. Some jobs, such as nursing and firefighting, inherently involve contact with beneficiaries, but for others, organizations can develop beneficiary contact programs, such as holding events where workers meet people whom their work affects. If opportunities for beneficiary contact are limited, organizations can also organize volunteer work in the community, creating new avenues for positive impact and contact through work roles.

3. **Developmental feedback.** Employees appreciate the opportunity to develop their skills. Managers should meet with them regularly—perhaps monthly or even weekly—to review their progress and point to future challenges to undertake. “A manager,” Fehr said, “might say to a worker, ‘Wow, you’ve progressed a lot in your job. Let’s review what you’ve accomplished and discuss the next opportunities you’ll have to continue developing your skills.’”

Unfortunately, in one survey, 70 percent of employees said they had never had a meaningful discussion about performance with their managers. As a result, many employees often felt anxious, unsure of their progress, and unsatisfied with their relationships with their leaders. Fehr drew a distinction between regular developmental feedback meetings and annual performance evaluations. “These meetings should become fundamental to the relationship between manager and employee. The more frequent you have them, the less of a big deal they are. They become a normal part of the relationship rather than something the employee dreads.”

Sincerity is key

Employees might regard a “gratitude initiative” launched by management with cynicism, seeing it as a way to improve the company’s bottom line and draw more work out of employees. “It’s similar to the

accusation that a company launching environmental initiatives is trying to 'greenwash' their reputation," Fehr said.

The best way to demonstrate sincerity is with consistency. "Make gratitude a habit," Fehr said. "You can't just have a once a year appreciation program and then spend the rest of the year treating employees poorly. You need to consistently create opportunities for employees to feel grateful and draw attention to those opportunities." Fehr's other suggestions:

- Avoid letting disruptive events, such as mergers, layoffs, or new leadership, spoil the initiative. "A new boss might mock the program," for example, Fehr said. "You have to be careful that you're not sending contradictory signals to workers."
- Encourage tailored gratitude, fitting the expression of gratitude to the specific employee. Instead of giving the same plaque to everyone, find out about the employee's interests and give a related gift, such as a framed photo from their family travels. "That's seen as more authentic and sincere," Fehr said.
- Avoid envy among workers by applying your gratitude programs to everyone. "We did a lab experiment in which we had a leader express gratitude to one worker but not to another, and the gratitude inequity led to worse outcomes than no gratitude at all," Fehr said.
- Avoid fostering too much pride or a sense of entitlement by emphasizing appreciation for teamwork and the need to give as well as receive gratitude. Excessive pride can hinder collaboration.
- Learn to accept gratitude. Avoid the natural tendency to awkwardly dismiss compliments. "It can be difficult to gracefully receive expressions of gratitude. In one exercise, we practice this skill by pairing up employees and asking them to express gratitude to another," Fehr said, "and the one who is receiving the gratitude is only allowed to say, 'Thank you.'"

The goal, Fehr said, is for an organization to develop an "aligned" system of gratitude, in which the entire company is aligned around expressing gratitude, feeling humility, and acknowledging the interdependence among workers and management. "We need to develop the sense that we're all in this together."