

Should We Engage in that “Touchy Feely Stuff”?

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When was the last time you sent a note of appreciation or gratitude to someone with whom you work?

When was the last time you received a note of appreciation or gratitude from someone with whom you work?

If you sent or received a note, what emotions did you experience?

Are you unable to recall any instance in which you sent and/or received a note of appreciation or gratitude?

I have posed these and similar questions for years in my writings and during many of my presentations. I continue to do so since I believe that acts of gratitude and appreciation impact on the kind of climate that is created in one’s workplace. As one example, my January and February, 2016 articles addressed the topic of the *emotional culture* of an organization. I cited an article written by Drs. Sigal Barsade and Olivia O’Neill that appeared in the *Harvard Business Review* in which they emphasized the importance of understanding the emotional culture of an organization noting, “Most leaders focus on how employees think and behave—but feelings matter just as much.”

They observed that emotional culture “influences employee satisfaction, burnout, teamwork, and even hard measures such as financial performance and absenteeism.” Barsade and O’Neill described the significance of “micromoments” or “little acts of kindness or support,” which they assert “can add up to an emotional culture characterized by caring and compassion.”

Indelible Memories of a “Five Second Note”

I have observed on countless occasions at my presentations that as people describe even small acts of kindness, support, or gratitude that they have experienced their faces are filled with joy, whether the event took place recently or more than 50 years ago. These events have become what I have referred to as “indelible memories” that remain with us throughout our lives.

One of my indelible memories of kindness occurred more than 45 years ago when I was a postdoctoral Fellow in clinical psychology at the University of Colorado School

of Medicine. I had only been at that site for a few weeks when I was asked to present at my first clinical Grand Rounds. It was at the very beginning of my career and I was not accustomed to speaking to large audiences. To say I was anxious would be an understatement, and at that point I knew little about relaxation techniques. Adding to my discomfort was an article I read that placed “public speaking” at the top of the list of anxiety-producing situations. I remember thinking that if I did a poor job I would have to face people in the audience on a daily basis for months to come.

Fortunately, my supervisor appreciated my anxiety and spent a number of hours helping me to prepare for the Grand Rounds. The day arrived and to my pleasant surprise within a couple of minutes I was feeling more comfortable. At the end of my presentation there was time for a few questions and then I had to race off to another meeting without having an opportunity to chat with any of the audience.

Later that afternoon when I returned to the Psychology Department office I saw a folded piece of paper in my mailbox. It was from my supervisor and probably took him about five seconds to write, but as I read his brief message it established an incredibly positive tone for me throughout the training year. I actually kept the note in my wallet, perhaps using it as a security blanket. His words were so simple and yet so powerful that even decades later I still think about what he said: “You did a great job today, Bob.” I immediately thanked him and told him how much I appreciated what he had written.

Today we have the phrase “paying it forward.” We may have had that phrase years ago, but if we did I had not heard it. However, I remember thinking as I read the note that someday if I became a supervisor I would make certain that in a genuine way I recreated for my trainees what my supervisor had done for me.

I often reflect upon the “five second note” and the significance of expressing support, gratitude, and appreciation. An increasing body of research confirms the benefits of such expressions both for the person who conveys gratitude as well as for the recipient of such a gesture. While these research findings should not surprise us, I continue to learn about many workplaces in which there is a disconnect between what research demonstrates and the actual practices that transpire in the work environment.

An Absence of Gratitude

I have listened to many accounts from individuals in diverse settings (schools, mental health agencies, hospitals, corporations) who have reported never receiving expressions of gratitude or appreciation (yes, you would think that mental health agencies filled with mental health professionals should be aware of the importance of expressing gratitude and appreciation, but this is not always the case).

Interestingly, when I have heard complaints from individuals about a lack of positive communications in their workplace, I frequently ask them if they have ever expressed gratitude or appreciation to their colleagues. More often than not the answer is no, accompanied by the following reasons:

“It wouldn’t do any good since I’m only one person.”

“I’m not certain anyone I work with deserves appreciation.”

“I’m so busy, who has the time for that kind of stuff.”

“I think if I expressed gratitude, the other people at work would wonder what’s going on.”

Many of us might scratch our heads, questioning the logic dictating these responses, but when emotions are involved, logic is often eclipsed.

One of the more common responses I have heard when suggesting that people consider communicating gratitude and appreciation in their workplace has been, “Oh, that’s that ‘touchy feely’ stuff, isn’t it?” When I inquire what “touchy feely” means to them, I am often met with a response that equates “touchy feely” with something not very professional or not relevant at work.

One man told me, “You know being ‘touchy feely’ can really be misinterpreted.” I asked in what way to which he responded, “You know, having sexual overtones.” I wondered, “Expressing gratitude might be seen as having sexual overtones?” He replied, “You never know in this day and age.” All I could think about is how sad it is if many people hold the same view. Another thought was that I wish they would read books such as Daniel Goleman’s *Emotional Intelligence* or *Working with Emotional Intelligence* to understand that acts of kindness and gratitude are not sexual or superficial but rather very substantial and rooted in an individual’s emotional intelligence (EQ).

The Impact of Gratitude on the Workplace

One of the catalysts for writing this column was an article I recently read in *Greater Good Magazine* published by the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California at Berkeley. It was written by Kira Newman and titled “How Gratitude Can Transform Your Workplace.” Newman began by sharing an experience of Stephanie Pollack, a consultant to a national nonprofit organization burdened by low employee morale. One of her goals during a three-day retreat was to highlight the importance of appreciation and gratitude. She asked “reluctant employees” to identify good things occurring in their lives and to express thanks.

The result? “After one person wrote a genuine note of thanks on an ‘appreciation wall,’ soon everyone was doing it. But what really surprised Pollack was the connection and authenticity that appreciation seemed to inspire.” Pollack observed that the employees “walked in with a lot of tension and frustration. I’m not saying they walked out with none, but there was a willingness on everyone’s part to move forward together in a different way.”

Newman noted, “While expressing thanks to colleagues might feel awkward or even at odds with some workplace cultures, many organizations have been developing innovative ways to overcome these barriers.” Cultures permeated with gratitude and appreciation “can transform our work lives, leading to deeper connections to each other and to the work we’re doing.”

Steve Foran, founder of the program Gratitude at Work, provided an important point in Newman’s article. “Gratitude is going to make your business more profitable, you’re going to be more effective, your employees will be more engaged—but it that’s the only reason you’re doing it, your employees are going to think you’re using them. You have to genuinely want the best for your people.”

Peter Bonanno, director of program development at the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute (SIYLI), highlighted another benefit of gratitude, one that parallels my emphasis on involving ourselves in contributory activities that not only enrich the lives of others but nurture our own resilience as well. Bonanno views gratitude as reinforcing empathy, kindness, and generosity. After attendees at one of his workshops focused on what they were grateful for and people for whom they were grateful, “they left the workshop vowing to find ways to give back to people who weren’t so fortunate.”

Foran cautioned that we also had to be aware of and address factors that might result in gratitude initiatives failing. As examples, he cited, “Initiatives that come off as insincere, a token nod to employee well-being that can be advertised in corporate brochures. Some people may be wary of expressing gratitude and acknowledging their debt to others as a sign of weakness. . . . Some employees could feel left out if they rarely receive gratitude or recognition. And of course, in the busy modern workplace, programs to foster gratitude and appreciation could feel like one more thing that employees don’t have time for.”

Our Personal Responsibility

I believe that these possible obstacles identified by Foran can be managed effectively to allow the benefits of gratitude and appreciation to permeate the workplace. I also believe that while programs to develop gratitude and appreciation will be most successful when supported by leadership, each of us as individuals can do our own part in expressing gratitude even when leadership or colleagues are not as invested in doing so.

I am reminded of insights expressed by Kevin Kruse, a well-known speaker and best-selling author about topics related to leadership and employee engagement. He emphasized a position that resonates with my concept of “personal control,” namely, “You can choose your attitude.” To reinforce an attitude of personal responsibility, Kruse asks us to consider the following questions:

What did I do today to improve communication in my organization?

What actions did I take today to learn and grow?

Whom did I thank today, and who recognized me?

Given the content of this month’s article, I would suggest we focus on the third question raised by Kruse. In light of all of the research that demonstrates the advantages of expressing gratitude and appreciation, I would recommend that you consider (a) two or three things for which you are grateful and (b) one small gesture you can take to express gratitude towards another person at work (and, of course, in your personal life). Create that “five second note” that has the power to enrich the lives of others with whom you work. Who knows what kind of “ripple effect” that might create, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it led to a more caring, empathic, fun, and productive work environment.

One final note. If any of you has an example to share of gratitude and appreciation displayed in your workplace, I would love to hear from you. Many thanks.

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