

## The virtue of gratitude

When was the last time you said thank you to a member of your staff, a service provider, or your partner? I mean truly said 'thank you' in the way you expressed your gratitude, even if the reason for saying 'thank you' was in response to a mundane act? Were your words perfunctory and robotic? Or did they generate a positive emotion in the recipient – and in you?

My first post of 2017 invites you to consider how practising the virtue of gratitude will enrich your professional and personal life.

### Defining gratitude

Gratitude derives from the Latin *gratia* and means gratefulness or graciousness, depending on the context. Gratitude can be viewed from two perspectives: [1] how you feel when you are grateful and [2] what happens when you express gratitude to others.

From your perspective, gratitude is the good feeling you get when you consciously acknowledge something positive. *'We have productive meetings'* *'I am healthy and energetic'* *'There's always a buzz in our office'*. Too often, it's all too easy to take these things for granted and to assume they will always be there. We are grateful for what we have now, not what we would like to have in the future. Being grateful for what you have now helps you be content and appreciate your fortunate circumstances – and the opportunities they offer you.

The second aspect of gratitude is what follows when you express gratitude, i.e. when you say thank you to someone. Thanking a staff member or colleague in an appreciative way validates their actions and the effort they have made. This generates positivity and reflects on you.

### Benefits of gratitude

Studies by **Robert Emmons**, the leading expert on gratitude, and other researchers have shown the many social, physical, and psychological **benefits of gratitude**.



These benefits are available to anyone who practises gratitude, even when faced with adversity. While many of the benefits are intuitive, here are some.

Gratitude is a positive, relationship-strengthening emotion. By expressing gratitude, you support and affirm others, and, in turn they reciprocate and do the same for you. Put another way, gratitude is an example of the saying, *what you give you get*. As a leader in the corporate setting you can create a 'culture of gratitude' where people are appreciated for what they do and how they work. Most importantly, people know they are valued, because you say so at times and in ways that matter to them.

All too often, when I say thank you to an executive assistant for the effort she has made to accommodate a change of appointment I hear *"It's so nice to be thanked like that; thank you!"* In other words, she is inferring "My boss doesn't think when he says thank you to me". There are economic benefits too. **Research** by the American Psychological Association has shown that more than half of all employees intend to find another job because they feel under-valued in their current position. Just imagine the positive effect on staff turnover and morale if all your staff felt more appreciated!

Gratitude **generates happiness**, boosting our feelings of optimism, joy, enthusiasm, and other positive emotions, and on the flip side gratitude **reduces anxiety and depression**. It **enhances health**, strengthening the immune system, lowering blood pressure, encouraging exercise, and helps people **sleep better**. **Resilience** is enhanced.

Having established that feeling and expressing gratitude has many benefits in our roles as leaders and citizens, I now turn to how to learn to be more effective in practising gratitude.

## How to practise gratitude



Robert Emmons: Cultivating Gratitude

This **short video** featuring Robert Emmons and a chapter in his book **Thanks!** reveal how to increase the gratitude we feel and express to others.

Here are some ways of cultivating an attitude of gratitude so that you improve the way you are and the way you are seen by others.

1. Focus on others' intentions. When something good happens because of the actions of another (e.g. the efforts of a colleague at work, an expected gift, a thank you from your child), consider how that person deliberately tried to bring that goodness into your life, sometimes at a cost to themselves.
2. Don't just take the simple joys and pleasures of life for granted. Consciously appreciate the blueness of the sky, feeling safe on the streets, having food on the table and a job to which to go.
3. Keep a **gratitude journal**. This should not be onerous; each week record, say, three to five things for which you're grateful. There's even an online gratitude journal, **Thnx4.org**, to make this easy!
4. Write a 'gratitude letter' to an important person in your life whom you've never properly thanked. And, to maximise the impact, deliver your letter in person. Here are some **ideas** to guide your letter-writing.
5. Look for and recognise the positive. Before going to sleep, ask yourself 'What good happened today?'. And, when sharing the day's events over the evening meal with the important person in your life, celebrate the 'magic moments' of the day.

## Don't take life's gifts for granted

It's all too easy to take the gifts of life for granted. Being grateful requires you to pay constant attention, to be in the present (mindful) and to appreciate the gifts you have in life. When you've lost one of your gifts, it's most unlikely you'll recover or replace it. Treasure things now. Being grateful is virtuous.

For far too many people, saying thank you is now just a sign of good manners, rather than a virtue. Gratitude – *gratia* in its deepest sense – has largely been lost. Don't let this happen to you.

With best wishes for 2017.

## More on related topics

- + Robert Emmons' book, **Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier**
- + **10 Ways to Become More Grateful** an article by Robert Emmons
- + **Videos** of Robert Emmons discussing the power of gratitude
- + Finally from Emmons, a list of **10 Ways to Become More Grateful**
- + Journalist Catherine Price's **entertaining article** about how she tested gratitude practices on herself
- + And Martin Seligman's most important book, **Learned Optimism**