

Say Thank You More Often

By Amy Lyman, Co-Founder of Great Place to Work®

Saying thank you to colleagues, staff members, associates, and people more distantly connected to us is an annual year-end ritual for many people in leadership positions. Speeches, memos, newsletter articles and blog posts are often filled with lists of people's names and the events or actions for which they are receiving thanks. These gestures of appreciation are mostly nice and thoughtful yet they can be accepted with a bit of cynicism by recipients, especially if this is the only time during the year when 'thanks' have been provided.

Why say thank you? Well, we do it partly because we've been taught from a young age that it is the right thing to do. We learn to say thank you to those who offer us help, who give things to us and who provide guidance or support. Yet doing this at a young age is mostly because we are told to, not because we truly understand the power of saying thank you.

In the workplace there are many reasons why someone might say thank you. Sometimes words of appreciation are seen as political acts – which is what draws the most cynicism towards end-of-the-year missives. Political thank yous are those people perceive as given to cement an alliance, earn brownie points, or position the giver of thanks for some future benefit that he or she anticipates. The appreciation gets lost in the calculated reason behind the words.

Other thank yous can be seen as pro-forma – a thank you that goes back to the childhood lesson of doing it because you are supposed to. When a child does this, it is understood that some of their thank yous may not come off as particularly sincere, yet this is because children are still learning, still trying to understand exactly what it does mean to say to someone 'I appreciate what you have done'. From someone older, a pro-forma thank you does not carry much weight and is soon forgotten – or chalked up as just one of those things.

As adults we have the opportunity to move beyond doing things because we are supposed to and to step away from thank yous that are political. The appreciation we share can be genuine and specific, sincerely conveying the positive emotional impact that someone's actions have had on our own life or on the lives of others. Trustworthy leaders are great providers of genuine and sincere expressions of thanks. When they say thank you, it benefits the recipient of the thanks yet also benefits themselves. It feels good to share a positive emotion with someone and a heartfelt thank you is definitely a positive emotion!

Saying thank you for a specific act or contribution also helps people to know that their leader knows who they are, is aware of the work that they do and knows of the value that a specific act has brought to the organization – whether it was an act of customer service, extra effort to finish a project, service to a colleague needing help, or simply active participation during a brainstorming session.

I recently came across a research article that affirmed the positive benefits that come from expressions of gratitude, and am providing the citation here for any of you who are curious. In *A Little Thanks Goes a Long Way: Explaining Why Gratitude Expressions Motivate Prosocial Behavior* by Adam Grant and Francesca Gino¹ the authors provide interesting evidence to support the article title.

A comment in the article that I found most relevant to one of the benefits of appreciation that I have seen for years is “our research suggests that gratitude expressions may have important theoretical and practical implications for encouraging prosocial behaviors that promote cooperation”. Basically, through a series of creative experiments, the authors confirmed that saying thank you contributes to people sense that they are valuable members of the group and to their willingness to make future contributions that are of benefit to the group. Trustworthy leaders know this, yet it is also nice to have outside confirmation.

During the research for my book, and throughout the years that I’ve worked with leaders who want to become more trustworthy, I have come across wonderful examples of the positive benefits that a leader’s expression of genuine and sincere appreciation can have on others. Two stories from my book come to mind as perfect illustrations.

The first is from Stew Leonard’s, a regional grocery business in New England, and involved a promise made by CEO Stew Jr. to help a customer whose child needed a costume for school the next day.

“Last night a customer called me at 9 p.m.. She has a kid who needed to go to school dressed as a chef the next day. The outfit they had ordered didn’t arrive. I was in New York City at the time, but I told her that I would call the store and arrange for her to pick up an outfit. Well, I forgot to call the store. She came over to the store, though, and asked for the outfit at 10 p.m.. Everybody at the store got it together, got her the outfit, and even put a meat thermometer in her sleeve. I didn’t even know it had happened. I called her this morning to apologize, and she said, ‘No problem! John was fantastic last night.’”

As Stew told this story, he enthused about the performance of his staff, was humbled by their initiative and willingness to pitch in and get things done, and felt very honored to have had a part in creating the workplace culture in which this simple act could happen. Some leaders wouldn't tell this kind of a story—one in which they were asked to help, yet it was others who actually followed through. Some might fear it would show them in a poor light. Yet for Stew, this story exemplified the kind of leadership he wants to see at Stew Leonard's: everyone is able to pitch in, and praise for a good act goes to the people who actually provided the service. (p. 23)

The second story comes from REI (Recreational Equipment Incorporated) and is contained within an employee's explanation of why he loves working at REI.

Some members of my team delivered excellent customer service to a father and his autistic son. Well, the father mentioned his experience on a blog. People at headquarters up to the CEO heard and read the blog. The CEO herself, Sally Jewell, sent me an email and a personal note to my employees thanking them. That level of recognition for the daily efforts of employees is unfounded in the retail environment. It shows the investment and understanding that the executives in the corporation have for the employees. At REI, people really do care. (p. 35)

Both of these stories provide concrete examples of the power of saying thank you. In the case of Stew Leonard's, the employees involved received thanks from the customer and her child who got the chef's outfit and from Stew who showered them with praise when he found out what had occurred. The same thing happened at REI. The customer said thank you, told other people about what happened through a blog post, Sally Jewel heard about it, and added her genuine thanks to the mix.

What lessons can we take from all of this?

- 1) Saying thank you sincerely is powerful.
- 2) Sharing thanks with the people who provided the service is critical to the appreciation being seen as genuine and to its having a positive impact.
- 3) Saying thank you can have absolutely no financial cost associated with it yet it can generate significant financial benefits for the organization in terms of reputation and employee satisfaction.
- 4) Saying thank you generates positive feelings.



If there is one action you wish to take this year to strengthen your role as a trustworthy leader, try saying thank you more often. Do it with genuine care for those you are thanking, identify specifically the action or contribution you want to praise, and let the person you are thanking know about the broader impact of their actions. All of this will help you to understand deeply the power of saying thank you and will let those you thank know that you see them, know about their contributions and appreciate their efforts.

Happy New Year!

¹ Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2010, Vol. 98, No. 6, 946-955