



Lead with Gratitude...To Increase Employee Engagement, Productivity, and Retention

By: April Baker, TRA, ACRA

When leading Beyond Insurance coaching and training workshops, I often begin with an exercise on gratitude through which each participant works through the following three questions:

- What is an issue that is consuming my energy?
- How do I feel as I think about this problem?
- What is something that I am grateful for surrounding this issue?

Even in the most difficult of situations, there is always a silver lining...something to be grateful for. It may require a bit of searching, but it is there. Once the workshop participants identify some things they are grateful for, I ask them to close their eyes and let their minds focus on those things. As they visualize positive aspects of their lives, I then ask them to imagine that there is a volume knob in their heads that controls these thoughts and feelings. Just like when you hear a song you love. You crank up the volume because it feels good! The same goes for practicing an attitude of gratitude. In this workshop, I want everyone to remember that each one of us can choose the songs we want to hear, and we all can crank up the volume!

When you find yourself feeling the "woe-is-me" syndrome, or consumed by problems, stop for five minutes and ask yourself those three questions. You will instantly feel a shift in mindset -- from negativity to positivity -- that will serve as a catalyst to more energy, productivity, and prosperity.

So, what is gratitude and why is it so important? Gratitude is an internally generated capability that empowers you to create and discover unlimited meaning and value in every situation and

relationship in your life. In simplistic terms, gratitude shifts your focus from what your life lacks to the abundance that is present.

Research on Gratitude in the Workplace

Research reminds business leaders that there is more to creating a great workplace than just healthcare plans, 401k programs, and paid time off. Employee appreciation and recognition leads to engagement and impacts operational performance. The Work Institute (www.workinstitute.com) -- an organization that helps employers better understand how and why employees act and respond -- states that "organizations with high employee engagement have 22% higher profitability, 21% higher productivity, 10% higher customer engagement, 37% lower absenteeism, 28% lower shrinkage (theft), 48% fewer safety related accidents, and 25-65% lower turnover."

David DeSteno, a psychology professor at Northwestern University, examined the impact that praise, pride, and gratitude have on people's lives ... both at home and at work. The study revealed that a feeling of pride or compassion increases perseverance on difficult tasks by over 30%. His work uncovered that people will spend more time helping others who need assistance, show greater loyalty, and work longer and harder to resolve difficult problems when they feel grateful.

Two psychologists, Dr. Robert A. Emmons of the University of California, Davis and Dr. Michael E. McCullough of the University of Miami have been pioneers in the research of gratitude. In one study, they asked all participants to write a few sentences each week, focusing on particular topics. One group wrote about things for which they were grateful and had occurred during the week. A second group wrote about daily irritations or things that had displeased them, and a third group wrote about things that had affected them (with no emphasis on being positive or negative). After 10 weeks, those who wrote about gratitude were more optimistic and felt better about their lives. Additionally, the gratitude group also had exercised more and had fewer visits to physicians than those who focused on aggravation.

Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, tested the impact of positive psychological interventions on 411 people, each compared with a control assignment of writing about early memories. When their week's assignment was to write and personally deliver a letter of gratitude to someone who had never been properly thanked for his or her kindness, participants immediately exhibited a huge increase in their happiness score.

A research study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) uncovered that those firms that work diligently to improve the "employee experience" show twice the innovation, double the customer satisfaction, and 25% higher profits than organizations at the bottom quartile of the employee experience.

Managers at work who remember to say "thank you" to people who work for them often find that their employees feel motivated to work harder. Let's consider a second University of Pennsylvania study in which researchers divided university fund-raisers into two groups. One group made phone calls to solicit alumni donations in the same way they always had. The second group received a pep talk from the Director of Annual Giving, who told the fund-raisers that she was grateful for their efforts. During the following week, the university employees who heard her message of gratitude made 55% more fund-raising calls than those who did not.

As a High Performing Culture Consultant, I guide business leaders through a process of establishing and ritualizing core values (fundamentals) that impact employee behavior and drive results. A strong culture exists when employees respond to stimulus because of their alignment to organizational values. For that reason, I consistently recommend gratitude as a core value. I can personally attest that employees who work in organizations that regularly show authentic appreciation form deeper connections to the firm's culture and brand. They are actively engaged and have a willingness to roll up their sleeves and go the extra mile. It is also interesting to note that research confirms that emotions such as pride, gratitude, and compassion reduce stress, slow heart rate, lower blood pressure, and reduce feelings of anxiety.

The Employee Experience

The concept of the employee experience parallels the customer experience but differs because the needs of employees take on a unique set of characteristics. Unlike a customer who can start or stop purchasing a product or service at any time, the employee's desires go far beyond a transaction. Employees covet an experience built around appreciation, positive culture, enduring relationships, and meaningful work. These four factors create brand loyalty and a willingness to go above and beyond.

If we go back in time, work/life balance was an attempt to create an employee experience in the workplace. First appearing in the 1970s, the expression meant having equilibrium among all priorities in one's life. Organizations responded with a series of solutions such as paid time off, time management, and a focus on nutrition and exercise. The concept of employee engagement then became prominent as employers recognized the psychological needs of their employees. Significant effort was made to better understand what motivates employees to exhibit traits that positively impact operational performance. In simplistic terms, employers were seeking a formula through which employees were invested in their jobs and put in extra effort to perform at the highest level.

The concept of employee experience suggests a bottom-up strategy to confirm that there is meaning to one's work. A leader who is grateful for their teams and appreciative of their hard work and dedication creates long-lasting relationships with employees which leads to higher retention. The key is to not only be grateful and appreciative in your leadership style, but to practice showing it! Make sure your team hears it, sees it, and feels it. With the shift in mindset,

you will be wise to understand the benefits of gratitude to discover what gives your employees meaning to their lives.

5 Strategies to Practice an Attitude of Gratitude

While there are numerous ways to practice an attitude of gratitude personally and professionally, I would like to suggest the following five:

1. **Morning Kick-Off:** Every morning, begin the day with one thought of gratitude. No matter how challenging your day ahead may be, think about one thing for which you are grateful. Then, take a few minutes to visualize and absorb the positivity vibes. This simple exercise will get your day off to a great start.
2. **Gratitude Journal:** Make it a habit to journal your positive experiences each and every day. Your journal will serve as your commitment to appreciate all that you have.
3. **Gratitude Exercise at Work:** As mentioned above, have each business associate pick an issue that is consuming their energy and have them build a "gratitude box" around the issue.
4. **Thank You Notes:** Get in the habit of sending thank you notes regularly to the people for whom you are grateful. This ritual will not only positively impact your life, but it will impact others in a positive way, as well.
5. **Share with Others:** Share your gratitude for your team with your team! Whether in weekly meetings or individually, sharing your feelings of gratitude with the people around you will make the world a happier and more meaningful place.

Lead with gratitude...to increase employee engagement, productivity, and retention!

About the Author

April Baker is the Chief Learning Officer for Beyond Insurance. She provides leadership, strategy, and direction in the design, development, and delivery of the Beyond Insurance coaching, training, and e-learning programs. She is a certified Trusted Risk Advisor (TRA), an Accredited Cyber Risk Advisor (ACRA), and holds her property and casualty Insurance license in New Jersey. April is a recognized leadership expert and certified as a John Maxwell Speaker, Coach and Trainer. She also has expertise in DISC behavioral consulting and High Performing Culture.

Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their organization to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.

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