

## Gratitude, Service and Leadership

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### My Story

In the early 1980's when our company was just beginning, our employees were creating an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) service platform from the ground up. I was a young entrepreneur with very limited resources and minimal supervisory experience. We had very humble beginnings—humble pay, humble office space, humble business equipment, humble operations, humble everything.

Despite the lack of business sophistication, we were awarded our first three accounts within a few months after start up. I was so grateful that those companies had entrusted us with the care of their employees. I thanked them for their partnership often and proactively offered our services to meet the needs of their employees on a regular basis. I was also so very grateful that we had talented counselors who were willing to work for me and for PAS. I spent as much energy marketing PAS to employment candidates as I did to potential new accounts. PAS needed both the accounts to serve and the people to serve them in order to succeed.

In those very early days, there wasn't enough income to support big salaries or generous benefit packages. All I could do at that time for my employees was to pay them a modest salary, offer them a supportive and friendly work environment, demonstrate that I genuinely cared about each of them, listen to their concerns, ask for their suggested solutions when they encountered operational problems, and thank them for working so hard to serve our clients so well. At every turn, we celebrated the excellent reputation we were building together as a team. "Building What Comes to PAS" and "Taking Care of the People Who Take Care of the People" became our internal slogans of hope for continued growth and dedication to earning a reputation of excellence. We had a shared vision and purpose. The contributions made by each and every PAS employee truly made a difference.

It certainly wasn't rocket-science-management-theory but it worked. Over the decades we have grown tremendously in market share and business sophistication. We have been blessed to have the right mix of talent join our company at just the right time, a prestigious group of employers that have placed their trust in us to serve as their business

partners, enough resources to serve the people of PAS and our clients well, a 98% account retention rate and a 98% employee retention rate. What a gift! I am so very grateful.

Back in the early 1980's, I served my employees well and expressed my gratitude to them in order to retain their talent and ensure that they could serve our customers well. It wasn't a choice or an option in my mind—I knew I had to serve my employees well or PAS would not survive. As our business has thrived and grown and our organization has become more sophisticated, I am often reminded that our success continues to proliferate largely because of our simple, genuine and inexpensive efforts to maintain a culture of gratitude and service.

### How Gratitude Works

In his book *The Servant: A Simple Story About the True Essence of Leadership*, James Hunter describes leadership as the skill of influencing people to work enthusiastically towards goals identified as being for the common good. The members of the work group willingly do the leader's will because of the leader's authority of personal influence, not because of his or her power. Unlike power, which can be given and taken away, authority is about who the leader is as a person—the leader's character—and the trusting relationship the leader has built with people. Hunter describes the qualities of an influencer as being:

- Honest
- Trustworthy
- A good role model
- Caring
- Committed
- A good listener
- Able to hold people accountable
- Respectful
- Encouraging
- Positive and enthusiastic
- Appreciative of people.

Gratitude and influential leadership go hand-in-hand. All of life is relational. An influential leader is able to accomplish the tasks at hand while building relationships that honor and nurture the human soul. Research has confirmed the multi-dimensional positive effects of expressing gratitude and of being appreciated at work:



- Employees who feel valued are more likely to report better physical and mental health, as well as higher levels of engagement, satisfaction and motivation, compared to those who do not feel valued by their employers (American Psychological Association survey 2012).
- Gratefulness increases emotional well-being (*Journal of Research in Personality*, 2007).
- Grateful people get along better with others (*Clinical Psychology Review*, 2009), sleep better (*Journal of Health Psychology*, 2012), and are less depressed (*American Psychologist*, 2005).
- A recent study by Bersin & Associates revealed that companies that “excel at employee recognition” are 12 times more likely to enjoy strong business results.
- Grateful people achieve more (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2003).

The positive emotions of grateful leaders not only benefit the leaders themselves, but also the people they lead. The leader’s gratitude is contagious. When one employee feels appreciated, he is more likely to extend his appreciation to his colleagues, to focus optimistically about what is good about work, and to treat internal and external customers with greater care and empathy.

### Tips on demonstrating gratitude

In his book *1001 Ways to Reward Employees*, Bob Nelson points out that “a sincere word of thanks from the right person at the right time can mean more to an employee than a raise, a formal award, or a whole wall of certificates and plaques.”

*In order to feel appreciated, employees don’t require big gestures, just heartfelt ones.* Simple but genuine verbal thank-you’s or handwritten notes can mean the world to people. Let them know how their actions specifically benefitted your customers, work group, department or company as a whole.

*Tailor your method of expressing gratitude to the unique preferences of the individual.* Some people value acknowledgement from leadership in a group setting while others find it embarrassing and uncomfortable. Consider asking your employees about their preferred method of receiving feedback.

*Look for opportunities to influence.* Observe employees at work and catch them doing something right instead of only watching and intervening when there is a problem. When you see an employee handling a customer well, showing proficiency, or coming up with a more efficient way of managing the workload, let him or her know. Be sincere and specific with your praise. You earn trust by giving employees credit for their work and ideas.

*Be open and responsive to feedback.* Part of expressing gratitude also requires listening to what the recipient has to say. An underwhelmed response may be due to second-guessing your intentions, employees feeling that you are not being genuine or not addressing issues that are of concern to them. If employees offer praise to you, accept it with a genuine thank-you.

*Be grateful for the opportunity you have to influence others.* Every single day you have a chance to make a situation just a little bit better, to encourage someone, to motivate others to be the best they can be. What a gift!

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