

# Gratitude at Work

**Counting your blessings will benefit yourself and your organization.**

By [Charles D. Kerns, PhD, MBA](#)

Gratitude is not just a “feel good” emotion when it comes to organizational life. It can benefit an organization in many ways. When an employee believes his or her superiors are grateful for his or her work, the employee will benefit by having an improved sense of worth to the organization. This improved sense of worth can lead to performance improvement, thereby benefiting the organization. Further, the person expressing gratitude benefits from that expression, which also may positively impact the organization. For instance, research has shown that persons who are genuinely grateful may be more optimistic, experience improved health, and perhaps even have extended life spans. All of these benefits also potentially benefit the organization for which that person works.

“Gratitude” has been referred to by authors as an attitude, a virtue, or character strength. While the concept of gratitude frequently appears in literature, prayers, and spiritual lessons, its application in the organizational setting has not been extensively documented.

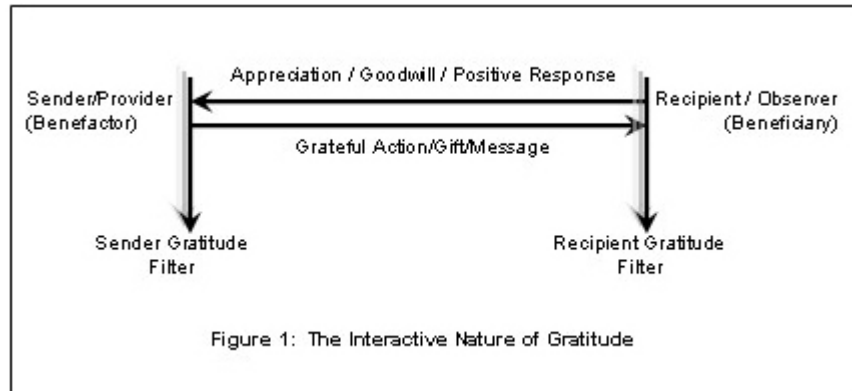
This article examines the meaning of gratitude, suggests how gratefulness may benefit the person expressing gratitude as well as the recipient, and helps the managerial leader consider how he or she might “measure-up” on this character strength. The discussion also features a few proven ways to nurture gratefulness and some potential barriers to expressing gratitude. This brief exploration of gratitude is intended to encourage the managerial leader to consider ways to apply grateful behavior at work, for his or her own benefit, as well as for the benefit of his or her employees and the organization as a whole.

## The Meaning of Gratitude

Gratitude has been defined as a warmly or deeply appreciative attitude for kindnesses or benefits received. Three parts of gratitude have been identified.<sup>[1]</sup> First, a person experiences a warm sense of appreciation toward a person who performs a generous or desired kind act. Second, appreciation and goodwill are expressed toward the person who performed the desired act. Finally, the person to whom gratitude is expressed, sensing the goodwill, is inclined to act positively and/or appreciatively toward the person expressing gratitude. Gratitude is often interactive and also seems to have the capacity to enhance the sense of well-being and goodwill among individuals and groups throughout an organization. It may even stimulate organizational citizenship.

Gratitude has been noted <sup>[2]</sup> to be most impactful when:

- An act or benefit is observed and evaluated positively by an observer.
- The act or benefit is not due to the observer’s own efforts.
- The observer perceives the benefit to have been caused by the intrinsic motivation and/or laudable efforts of the person providing the act or benefit.



As seen in Figure 1, both the person performing the act or benefit and the person expressing gratitude have communication filters relating to gratitude. The high-impact expression of gratitude finds the “sender” of gratitude giving from the heart without having ulterior motives. The “recipient” of the gratitude perceives the act of gratitude as positive, not being due to manipulation by the recipient and offered based on the internal motivation of the sender.

The recent interaction between Warren Buffett and Bill and Melinda Gates around Buffett’s \$37 billion gift to the Gates Foundation helps bring the interaction within this model alive. Founder of Berkshire Hathaway, Buffett has frequently expressed his gratitude for having been born at the time and place he was born and for the wealth that he has been able to create. He has stated that his accumulated wealth should go back to society.

Through their foundation, the Gates family has provided dramatic benefit to society in their charitable action and giving. Expressing gratitude for the Gates’ generous and charitable actions, Buffett has entrusted a significant portion of his immense wealth to the Gates Foundation because in Buffett’s own words, “I have seen two extraordinarily talented people apply themselves big time to the major problems of the world. They give it away better than I can. So I’m turning it over to them.”[\[3\]](#)

Bill and Melinda Gates have expressed great appreciation to Buffett for his “generous” gift in many venues. They will also be able to express gratitude to others on a scale and scope far greater than would have been possible without Buffett’s gift. The interactive nature of gratitude holds benefits for all concerned.

## Benefits of Being Grateful

Grateful behavior can facilitate positive interpersonal and community relationships that may in turn influence other key outcomes. Effectively applied in the workplace, for instance, gratitude may positively impact such factors as job satisfaction, loyalty, and citizenship behavior, while reducing employee turnover and increasing organizational profitability and productivity. In addition to the external benefits of gratitude accruing to recipients and their organizations, research surrounding gratitude identifies several positive impacts that await individuals who express gratitude to others. In turn, these personal benefits may also work to the advantage of organizations.

Grateful individuals report higher levels of life satisfaction and optimism and greater energy and connections with other people.[4] Grateful people enjoying these types of positive outcomes from their acts of gratitude would seem to make for productive and happy people within an organization.

Growing evidence indicates that the expression of gratitude can also improve one's physical health and functioning. Researchers are finding that behaviors such as gratitude, for example, may be reliably connected to positive changes in an individual's cardiovascular and immune functioning.[5] In one recent study, individuals who focused on being grateful rather than on not being angry were found to positively impact a variety of important physiological functions such as improved heart, pulse, and respiration rates. It would seem that the practice of gratitude may hold promise for reducing stress and consequent related healthcare costs, which in an organizational setting could bring great dividends.

The expression of gratitude may help one adapt to life's challenges. The work of Vaillant [6] underscores this effect. He postulates that effective adaptation to life involves the capacity to substitute bitterness and resentment toward a transgressor with gratitude and acceptance. Within an organizational setting, this type of adaptation to challenges would also seem to lead to positive organizational outcomes.

Finally, people who are generally grateful may tend to live longer lives. In a fascinating longitudinal study, Catholic nuns who expressed gratitude, happiness, and positive emotions in their earlier years were found to live an average of up to ten years longer than their peers who did not express gratitude. In this research, Danner, Snowden, and Friesen [7] discovered a significant inverse relationship between the positive emotional content in handwritten autobiographies of 180 Catholic nuns (at an average age of 22) and the risk of death later in life (ages 75 to 95). Expressions of positive emotions such as gratefulness in early life autobiographies seemed to relate to longevity of life 60 years later.

By increasing optimism and adaptability, improving health, decreasing stress, and perhaps lengthening lives, can gratitude also play a role in sustaining the health and survival of organizations? It would certainly be good news if these personal benefits of gratitude could in turn increase organizational citizenship behavior in particular, since empirical evidence indicates that citizenship actions within organizations positively influence a number of key organizational outcomes.[8] These positive organizational outcomes include improved work group productivity, enhanced sales team performance, profitability, and operational efficiencies.

## **Do You Measure Up?**

Having a grateful attitude is more than just saying "thank you" on occasion. Four dimensions can be examined to indicate a tendency to be grateful.[9] First, grateful people show more *intensity* around some positive event than do less appreciative people. Second, over time, individuals with a higher disposition for gratitude more *frequently* express grateful behavior than do individuals less inclined to be grateful. Third, grateful people have a broader *span* of life events, or a greater number of life circumstances, for which they are thankful, such as family, job, health, and even life itself. Fourth, grateful people tend to be grateful toward a larger number of persons for a

single positive outcome or life circumstance, which is referred to as gratitude *density*. Focusing on these dimensions, ask yourself the following questions to see how you measure up to your expectations when expressing gratitude (Answer on a scale of 0 to 10, 10 being the highest):

1. How intensely do I show my gratitude?
2. How frequently do I express gratitude?
3. For how many circumstances in my life do I feel grateful?
4. Toward how many different people do I feel grateful for a specific positive circumstance in my life?

Review and reflect on your responses to these questions. Would you like to enhance your gratitude behavior? If so, consider the suggestions in the next section. (More sophisticated approaches to assessing gratitude are offered by Shane Lopez and C.R. Snyder in their book, *Positive Psychological Assessment: A Handbook of Models and Measures*.[\[10\]](#))

## **Nurturing Gratefulness**

Gratitude research offers three proven tools to help enhance gratitude.[\[11\]](#) If your expectations regarding gratefulness do not seem to be realized, experiment with these strategies in an effort to increase gratefulness. These strategies are useful both personally and professionally. Managerial leaders in particular are encouraged to bring gratitude to the organizational environment.

### **Strategy #1: *Reflect on Three Good Things***

Take a couple of minutes at the end of each day to reflect on the day. Identify three things that happened during the day for which you are grateful (e.g. a coworker's extra effort, a manager's feedback, and a customer's honesty). Jot these three good things in a journal, or just make a mental note. It is also effective to review why each circumstance was good. This daily exercise of counting your blessings has been found to increase and sustain happiness.[\[12\]](#)

### **Strategy #2: *Want What You Have***

Use this four-step approach to help you appreciate more of what you already have, [\[13\]](#) rather than longing for things you don't possess:

- **Step 1:** Identify your non-grateful thought(s). (For example, "Mary got assigned a better sales territory than I did." or "I'm being treated unfairly because Michael got the promotion over me.")
- **Step 2:** Formulate grateful, supportive thoughts to counter your ungrateful thoughts. (For example, "I am thankful for the talents I have to be a successful sales person regardless of the territory that I may be assigned. My skills give me a competitive advantage in any sales arena." or "I am grateful to have a stimulating job with tremendous opportunity to learn and grow.")
- **Step 3:** Substitute the grateful, supportive thought in Step 2 for the non-grateful thought in Step 1.

- **Step 4:** Translate your inner feeling of appreciation into outward action. (For example, identify one to three of your strongest selling skills and reflect on how you use them in your current territory to create positive outcomes for yourself, your customers, and your organization. Or, in contemplating your current position, consider how you can best achieve success to further your own personal growth and development.)

This approach helps reduce the tendency to engage in non-productive comparisons between what you and others possess. It can help change your focus from coveting another's blessings or belongings to counting your blessings. Simply put, it helps you appreciate what you have now.

### **Strategy #3: *Communicate Gratitude***

Reflecting on your circumstances, select someone (e.g. a mentor at work) for whom you are especially grateful and write a specific letter to that person detailing the things for which you are thankful. Be specific about what he or she has done for you and how his or her actions have positively impacted your life. If possible, arrange a time to meet with that person to read the letter in person. If a one-on-one meeting is not possible, make a telephone call to speak with or to read the letter to him or her. After you read the letter, initiate conversation about why you are grateful to amplify your good memories, and then talk about the future. This activity usually leaves both the recipient and sender gratified.

The above three strategies have been found to effectively enhance gratitude behavior. These approaches not only increase the expression of gratitude, but also seem to increase the general happiness, optimism and feelings of goodwill among the individuals involved. Use these strategies and experiment with them, especially in your place of work, to increase gratitude levels both personally and within your organization.

### **Barriers to Being Grateful**

As you contemplate enhancing your gratitude behavior, be mindful that certain behavior patterns can limit one's capacity to be grateful. At least five areas of functioning can become barriers to expressing gratefulness.

First, a *passive victim attitude* coupled with a *sense of entitlement* can diminish gratitude. Quite simply, if you believe you are entitled to most things, then you will be thankful for very little.

Second, a *preoccupation with materialism* can sidetrack the expression of gratitude. An overemphasis on "things" tends to result in comparisons to others who may have more than you do. These comparisons can lead to resentments that diminish gratefulness.

Third, a *lack of self-reflection* on how truly blessed you may be, or simply taking things for granted, can present a barrier to expressing gratitude. The "three good things" and the "want what you have" strategies help you not take things for granted.

Fourth, a *lack of prior deprivation* may make it difficult to recognize blessings. Many have been blessed to the extent that they do not know what it is like to do without something. It seems that some people are “standing on third base” in life, thinking that they actually hit a triple, but in reality they did not do it alone others have helped them to get there.

Fifth, *self-centeredness* can prevent one from expressing gratitude. The self-absorbed have little energy for recognizing and appreciating others in ways that communicates gratitude.

## Conclusion

Leaders oriented toward practicing value-centered leadership [14] will find that gratitude results in many benefits to themselves and to their organizations, including the opportunity to increase goodwill and citizenship behavior. As one strategy above has suggested, benefits from gratitude enhancing interventions will likely assist in developing value-centered leaders. This should hold true both for leaders who possess and express gratitude as a character strength as well as for those who may not be as strong in this area, but who desire to improve in expressing gratitude.

It is clear from gratitude research (conducted mainly from outside organizational settings) that many benefits come to those who express gratefulness. Applied researchers offer us some proven ways that we can help ourselves to become more grateful. However some clear behavioral patterns can block us from fully expressing gratitude. You are encouraged to put gratitude to work in your organization. Remember to count your blessings!

---

[1] Fitzgerald, P. “*Gratitude and Justice.*” *Ethics*, 109, (1998): 119-153.

[2] Peterson, C., and M. E. P. Seligman. *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification.* American Psychological Assn.: New York and Washington, DC: Oxford University Press, 2004.

[3] J. DeVoll. (2006, July 7). “Buffett’s Message: Give Back and Give Wisely,” *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, July 7, 2006.

[4] Emmons, R.A., and M. E. McCullough. “Counting Blessings versus Burdens: Experimental Studies of Gratitude and Subjective Well-being in Daily Life.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, (2003): 377-389.

[5] McCraty R., M. Atkinson, W. Tiller, G. Rein, and A.D. Watkins. “The Effects of Emotions on Short-term Power Spectrum Analysis of Heart Rate Variability.” *American Journal of Cardiology*, 76, (1995): 1089-1093.

[6] Vaillant, G.E. *The Wisdom of the Ego.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[7] Danner, D.D., D. Snowden, and W. V. Friesen. "Positive Emotions in Early Life and Longevity: Findings from the Nun Study." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, (2001): 804-813.

[8] Padsakoff, P.M., S. B. Mackenzie, J. B. Paine, and D. G. Bachrach. "Organization Citizenship Behaviors: A Critical Review of the Theoretical and Empirical Literature and Suggestions for Future Research." *Journal of Management*, 26 (3) (2000): 513-563.

[9] Peterson and Seligman, 2004.

[10] Lopez, S.J., and C. R. Snyder. *Positive Psychological Assessment: A Handbook of Models and Measures*. (American Psychological Association: Washington, D.C., 2003).

[11] Peterson, C. *A Primer in Positive Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Bono, G., R.A. Emmons, and M.E. McCullough. "Gratitude in Practice and Practice of Gratitude." In P.A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *Positive Psychology in Practice*. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2004), 165-180.

[12] Seligman, M.E.P., T. A. Steen, N. Park, and C. Peterson. "Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions". *American Psychologist*, 60, (2005): 410-421. Lyubomirsky, S., K. M. Sheldon, and D. Schkade. "Pursuing Happiness: The Architecture of Sustainable Change." *Review of General Psychology*, 0, (2005): 111-131.

[13] Miller, T. *How to Want What You Have: Discovering the Grandeur of Ordinary Existence*. (New York: Avon Books, 1995).

[14] Kerns, C.D. *Value-Centered Ethics: A Proactive System to Shape Ethical Behavior*. (Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 2005).

### **Additional References**

Emmons, R.A., and C.A. Crumpler. "Gratitude as a Human Strength: Appraising the Evidence." *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 19, (2000): 56-69.

Hamilton, T.F. *The Right Stuff*. Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Press, 2001.

McCullough, M., S. Kilpatrick, R. Emmons, and D. Larson. "Gratitude as Moral Affect." *Psychological Bulletin*, 127, (2001): 249-266.

McCullough, M.E., R. A. Emmons, and J. Tsang. "The Grateful Disposition: A Conceptual and Empirical Topography." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, (2002): 112-124.