



PLASTICITY



Gratitude At Work: Its Impact On Job Satisfaction & Sense Of Community

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With the growing field of positive psychology, more and more researchers are exploring the concept of gratitude; expressing appreciation for what one has.

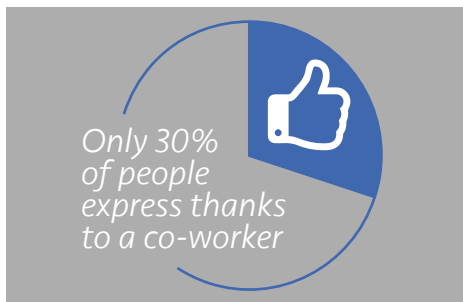
The Benefits of Gratitude

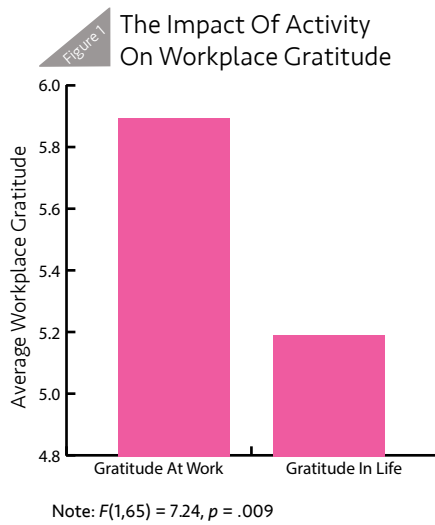
Much research has focused on the benefits of gratitude. Findings indicate that grateful people do seem better off: they are happier, often have better moods¹, they are also more trusting² and feel greater support from others³. Gratitude interventions – activities designed to promote gratitude – have proven to be effective. For example, in one study, some participants were asked to list things they were grateful for in life, while others listed hassles, or events during the past week that had affected them. The results showed that those in the gratitude group reported increased positive emotions, reduce symptoms of physical illness, and were more likely to help or support someone else⁴. While gratitude is becoming a popular research topic, there is very little research focused specifically on gratitude in the workplace.

Gratitude At Work

Is gratitude part of your workplace culture? For many companies, it isn't. Few employees take time to reflect on the things they appreciate at work, and research shows that expressing appreciation in the workplace doesn't occur frequently; a recent study⁵, commissioned by the John Templeton Foundation, found that only 30% of people express thanks to a co-workers several times a week, and only 20% thank their boss several times a week. A full 35% of people never thank their boss and 29% never thank a co-worker. These surprising findings suggest that gratitude is far from a central component of workplace culture.

This is concerning, as research indicates that gratitude is an important component of workplace culture that contributes to positive outcomes. For example, among teachers, gratitude is linked to less burnout⁶. Grateful people are better at perspective-taking, are more agreeable and more open to new ideas⁷, all of which have important implications for the workplace. Gratitude also promotes prosocial behaviour^{7,4}, which can contribute to social support and cohesiveness among team members. It follows then that the extent to which people reflect on and note what they are grateful for at work might be linked to positive outcomes.





A Culture of Gratitude Predicts Higher Job Satisfaction

Recently, researchers have explored the relationship between dispositional gratitude (chronic, stable levels of gratitude), state gratitude (temporary shifts in gratitude levels) and workplace gratitude. The results confirmed the importance of gratitude at work; both state and workplace gratitude predicted job satisfaction⁸. It appears then that a culture of gratitude plays an important role in the workplace. State gratitude also predicted job satisfaction – an encouraging finding given that most gratitude activities are designed to increase state gratitude.

The Benefits of Gratitude

One avenue to promote a positive working environment is to encourage gratitude at work. Certainly, one way to inspire gratitude at work is to promote the expression of gratitude (i.e., thanking co-workers, managers etc.), but perhaps another way is to simply ask employees to reflect on the things they are grateful for at work. By encouraging employees to think about, list and describe the things they are grateful for, employers can promote a positive working environment, including greater job satisfaction and cohesiveness among team members. Designed with this goal in mind, we created and tested a novel short workplace gratitude activity.

Method

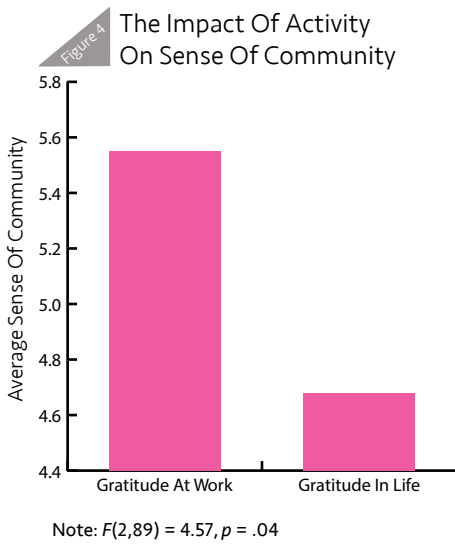
Sixty-five employees, ranging in age from 18-82, engaged in one of two short gratitude activities; half described three things that they were grateful for at work while the other half described three things they are grateful for in life. They also filled out surveys about how satisfied they are with their job, how satisfied they thought they would be in 6 months, and the extent to which they felt a sense of community at work.

The Impact Of Activity On Workplace Gratitude

Employees who focused on and described three things that they were thankful for at work reported more workplace gratitude than those who wrote about things they were grateful for in life (see Figure 1). This indicates that the activity had its desired intentions – to make people more grateful at work. By asking employees to focus on the things they appreciate in the workplace – (co-workers), flexibility, health benefits – they became more grateful.

The Impact Of Activity On Current & Future Job Satisfaction

Compared to those who described things they were grateful for in life, those who wrote about the things they were grateful for at work reported more satisfaction with their job (see Figure 2). Not only were employees currently more satisfied, but they also anticipated that they would be more satisfied with their job in six months' time (see Figure 3).



The Impact Of Activity On Sense of Community

Employees in the gratitude at work group reported a greater sense of community at work (see Figure 4). Many people expressed gratitude for their co-workers. Thus, it may be that by focusing on co-worker support, the gratitude activity induced a greater sense of community.

Gratitude At Work Increases Positivity

Although we may not always be able to control what happens in the workplace, we can control how we choose to perceive it and what we choose to focus on. We can focus on the negative aspects of the workplace - the things that annoy and frustrate us - or we can find the things that we like about our workplace and be grateful for them.

This research shows that our novel activity had the desired outcome - it increased the extent to which employees were grateful at work. Given the benefits of workplace gratitude - less burnout and increased job satisfaction - this finding alone provides enough reason to utilize this activity in the workplace.

This activity also increased job satisfaction, which brings along with it a number of benefits. For example, job satisfaction is linked to job performance⁹ and turnover¹⁰. By increasing gratitude, employers may be able to boost employee performance and decrease job-seeking behaviours among employees. Importantly, after completing the gratitude at work activity, employees believed they would be more satisfied with their job in six months' time as compared to those who did the gratitude in life activity. This has important implications for employee turnover - if employees anticipate that they will be satisfied in 6 months then they may be less likely to think about opportunities at other companies. With the estimated cost of employee turnover running as high as 150% of annual salary, it's important to find ways to promote employee retention.

Gratitude At Work Increases Sense Of Workplace Community

Another benefit of the gratitude at work activity was an increase in perceived sense of community, which has been identified as an important component of workplace culture because of its impact on workplace experience. The belief that there is a strong sense of community among employees may work to increase social support among team members, encourage collaboration and partnerships, and promote interdependency, where team members come to rely and depend on one other. It can also promote trust and encourage employees to work together towards common shared goals.

Past research has demonstrated that creating a sense of community at work is linked to more positive attitudes towards work, drawing more meaning from work, and greater well-being¹¹ and happiness¹². It has also been found to be related to positive perceptions of change, less role ambiguity and less psychological strain¹³. With more and more companies focusing on collaboration and team effort, building a sense of community among coworkers is crucial - and one way to do so is through gratitude.

How Gratitude At Work Can Become A Habit

The activity was simple. All employees were able to list and describe things they were grateful for. Therefore, while it may be that many people tend not to naturally focus on the things they're grateful for at work, when they're encouraged to do so, they can. It may be that, at first, employees need to be explicitly asked to focus on their surroundings, but over time, this should create a habit, or a pattern, where employees begin to more automatically think about what they're grateful for at work.

What's Next?

A follow-up to this activity would be to encourage employees to express to others what they're grateful for, and to thank one another. Expressing gratitude not only makes the receiver feel good, but it makes the "thanker" feel good as well; 88% of employees reported that expressing gratitude to colleagues makes them feel happy and fulfilled, and our research at PlasticityLabs reveals that both giving and receiving support is linked to job satisfaction, engagement and happiness. This simple, short activity has been shown to significantly increase positivity at work - even more so than focusing on the things we're grateful for in life. If we want to maximally increase workplace satisfaction, then we need to strategically target activities towards the workplace. Our gratitude at work activity does just that.



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Have a question? We're happy to answer any questions about our research. Please contact the research team at:
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