

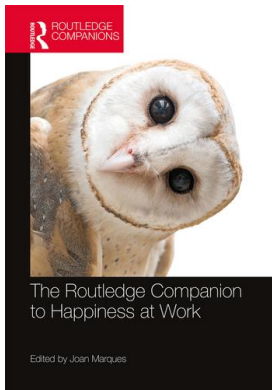
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12

THE ROLE OF GRATITUDE AND MINDFULNESS IN CREATING A HAPPIER AND MORE PRODUCTIVE WORKPLACE

*Rhonda Swickert*¹

The Role of Gratitude and Mindfulness in Creating a Happier and more Productive Workplace

There is a growing literature that examines factors that both promote workplace happiness and satisfaction and those factors that degrade it (Diener & Seligman, 2004). With regard to the later factor, one of the main sources of unhappiness in the workplace is corrupt leadership, where power is coveted regardless of its effect on employees or the business (Lee, Yu, Sirgy, Singhapakdi, & Lucianetti, 2018). Indeed, ethical lapses which have led to scandals in business and government have accumulated at an alarming pace over the past two decades. This corruption can manifest in different ways, but studies have demonstrated that feelings of power can distort judgment (Ebenbach & Keltner, 1998), and lessen one's distress and compassion when viewing the suffering of others (Van Kleef, Oveis, vander Lowe, LuoKogan, Goetz, & Keltner, 2008). It can also cause leaders to take more risks (Brunell & Buelow, 2017), and to become more selfish and self-serving (Piff, 2014). The irony of this is that corrupt leaders weaken the effectiveness of their own leadership (ten Brinke, Liu, Keltner, & Srivastava, 2016); followers become less committed to the cause and employees are more likely to be unhappy and leave the organization or business (Grahek, Thompson, & Toliver, 2010). However, leaders who are more virtuous promote happier workplaces and are viewed by others as worthy of their leadership position. As a result, one important approach that has been proposed to create happier workplaces is to work to enhance the character strengths of leaders (Thompson, Grahek, Phillips, & Fay, 2008).

Character Strengths and the Role of Gratitude

Although there are many characteristics that may strengthen the character of leaders (e.g., humility, forgiveness, honesty, etc.), the concept of gratitude has received consistent support in the literature. Gratitude can be thought of as the tendency to notice and appreciate the positive in the world (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). To experience gratitude, we must first notice that we have benefited in some manner, as well as recognize that this benefit is due to the actions of an external agent (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Gratitude has been shown to positively influence mood (Adler & Fagley, 2005; McCullough et al., 2002), and it significantly contributes to well-being (Wood et al., 2010).

Other correlates of gratitude include self-esteem enhancement (Berstein & Simmons, 1974) and reduced materialistic strivings (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, & Dean, 2009). Gratitude also is an important factor in the influence of relationship satisfaction, trust, and closeness (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010; Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2009). The expression of gratitude seems to allow others to know that we truly value having them in our lives. This benefit of gratitude is particularly important in a work context, as feeling valued as an employee has been shown to be an important indicator of workplace investment and satisfaction (Ellemers, Sleebos, Stam, & de Gilder, 2013; White & Mackenzie-Davey, 2003).

Techniques that have been demonstrated in the literature to enhance gratitude also have been successfully applied by leaders in the workplace. One organizational strategy that has been utilized in different companies such as Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, and Whole Foods is the utilization of servant leadership, whereby leaders see themselves as serving their employees, rather than the other way around. In the context of gratitude, this practice would involve leaders taking specific steps to regularly profess gratitude for their employees (Umlas, 2013). The most formalized program that illustrates this approach is employee appreciation programs. These programs explicitly serve as a catalyst to praise employees for their effort and perseverance (Fehr, Fulmer, Awtrey, & Miller, 2017). Appreciation strategies are also believed to foster an understanding amongst all employees that they are interdependent, and thus, they need their colleagues' support in order for they themselves to succeed. Appreciation efforts might include praise by a manager or receiving a handwritten note of thanks. It might also include financial rewards, although this does not seem to happen as often as employees would like (Beck, 2016). Also, by enhancing the gratitude felt by leaders of an organization, it is expected that leaders would make themselves available to their employees and deliver their gratitude in person. This modeling of gratitude can serve to create a culture in the organization where feeling and expressing gratitude on a regular basis becomes more normative (Peter, 2012).

Gratitude and appreciation have shown promise with regards to enhancing happiness in the workplace. Stocker et al. (2014) had employees record feelings of appreciation in a daily diary over the course of a work week. Participants were asked to record when an appreciative situation arose, along with associated facts such as who expressed appreciation (e.g., supervisor, customer) and what form it took (e.g., verbal statement, monetary reward). Participants also were asked to respond to items assessing calmness and serenity, as well as daily hassles. Findings of the study showed that when people experience praise from others, it allows them to feel calm and serene, and they also report fewer daily hassles. It should be noted though that although appreciation has been shown to be a viable strategy in influencing positivity, there are some caveats to its expression that are important to consider. That is, research has shown that when leaders mix pride and gratitude, employees respond more negatively compared to when a leader simply expresses gratitude (Ritzenhofer, Brosi, Sporrle, & Welpel, 2017). That is, a leader who takes pride in her or his employees' success, even when thanking them for their hard work, sends a signal to employees that they may be selfish and plan to promote their own leadership in the context of the company's success, over their employees' hard work.

Gratitude is also believed to be exemplified in the workplace when leaders support the growth and development of their workers (Zhou, 2003). This can occur when leadership provides formal programs for workers to enhance their skills, such as providing assistance for completing coursework at the college-level. This might also involve opportunities to stay fit by taking fitness classes at the workplace. Other programs might involve stress management instruction, such as learning how to meditate. Regardless of the specific strategy applied, the sense that one is being supported and nurtured by the leadership of the organization sends an implicit message that employees are valued and appreciated for their efforts. This, in turn, is believed to serve as a strong motivator regarding employee happiness and commitment to the success of the organization (Umlas, 2013).

Employee Generated Gratitude

Although the leaders of an organization have a very important role to play in the experience of gratitude at their workplace, there are strategies that employees can pursue themselves that can enhance their experience of gratitude. One approach that has been shown to be effective involves the employee recording in a gratitude journal what they are grateful for in the workplace. Work by Kaplan et al. (2014) demonstrated that writing about aspects of work that one is grateful for 3 days a week over the course of two weeks improved positive mood states and reduced absence due to illness. Gratitude journaling has been one of the most empirically supported gratitude practices reported in the literature, although enhancing experimental rigor in this area has been suggested (Davis et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it is helpful to see that the benefit of gratitude journaling extends to a business setting. Another approach that has been used in a workplace environment is for employees to be aware of the benefits that others receive due to their efforts. This has been shown to create a sense of social worth and gratitude for the opportunity to serve others (Grant, 2007).

Challenges to the Experience of Gratitude and the Role of Mindfulness Practices

While the benefits of gratitude carried out by individuals and leaders are clear, expressing gratitude on a daily basis can actually be quite challenging. For instance, although the benefit of writing letters of gratitude to others is well documented in the literature (Kumar & Epley, 2018; Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012), very few people do this in the workplace, and this is equally true for both leaders and employees (Fehr et al., 2017). This is believed to be the case because there are significant challenges that all individuals encounter when trying to include gratitude into one's daily experience. These challenges are significant because they operate at both the biological and cultural level. One such challenge is overcoming the sense of vulnerability that individuals might feel when expressing their gratitude in a very formal way to another (i.e., delivering and/or reading out loud a gratitude letter) (Kaczmarek et al., 2015). When contemplating expressing one's feelings in this manner, individuals seem to overestimate how awkward it might be to do so and underestimate the level of positivity that engaging in this activity serves to cultivate (Kumar & Epley, 2018). One might imagine from an evolutionary perspective that revealing that we need others or are indebted to them might create a sense of weakness and vulnerability. Better for survival to project an image of strength and inner fortitude. Additionally, many Western societies are also very individualistic in their orientation. Individuals raised in this type of environment learn early on that I, alone, am responsible for my own success or failure. These tendencies blind us to how interconnected our lives are with others and how lost we would be if we were cut off from the support of others. Indeed, laboratory studies show that when we communicate gratitude towards others it contributes to our own experience of positive affect, enhances relationship ties, and makes it more likely that we, ourselves, receive support from others if we need it (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Polak & McCullough, 2006).

So, what can be done to enhance one's experience of gratitude? One approach that holds great promise involves the cultivation of mindfulness. Research has shown that mindfulness can significantly enhance the experience of gratitude, and the positive mood effects that follow (Swickert, Bailey, Hittner, Spector, Benson-Townsend, & Silver, 2019). Mindfulness allows an individual to be consciously present in an open and receptive state. For gratitude to occur one must reside in a state of attention, otherwise the mind's constantly shifting focus makes it almost impossible for us to see how we have benefitted from the actions of others. Fortunately, there are many meditative techniques that we can utilize to enhance our experience of gratitude. As discussed previously, one challenge in the expression of gratitude to others is the sense of vulnerability that accompanies expressing ourselves in this manner. However, there are meditative techniques that serve to promote

a greater sense of comfort when expressing our feelings towards others. Specifically, the technique of Loving-kindness meditation has been shown to promote the expression of kindness and compassion directed outward to others (Rosenzweig, 2013). The practice itself is expected to cultivate a deep sense of interconnectedness toward others and has been shown to even reduce implicit bias toward outgroup members (Kang, Gray, & Dovidio, 2013). This technique also has been shown to contribute to one's experience of positive mood states, as well as the experience of gratitude (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). So how does one engage in a practice of Loving-kindness meditation? All meditations require that we bring the mind's attention to a focus point and then hold that point of focus until the mind naturally drifts away. When we notice that drift we gently, and non-judgmentally, bring our mind back to the focus point. Meditation also typically involves slow and deep breathing to engage the calming center of the mind and body (i.e., parasympathetic nervous system). In the context of Loving-kindness meditation, we can begin with our breath awareness for several minutes and then we focus the mind on bringing different people into our awareness. We start the practice by bringing to mind someone who we love unconditionally, and who loves us as well. Holding this person in our mind we repeat the following phrase, "I wish for you love, joy and peace". If those words don't resonate with you, one can choose other words that feel more genuine (e.g., kindness, happiness). Then we repeat this phrase over and over during the course of several minutes. Eventually we let the image of this person drift away from the mind and we turn our attention back to the breath, breathing in and breathing out. The next individual that we bring into the mind is an image of ourselves. The practice asks us to wish those same loving thoughts of peace, joy, and love to ourselves. Next, we bring an acquaintance to mind and then someone we do not like. The final step in this practice is to wish for all sentient life on this planet to experience love, joy, and peace. In sum, this practice involves spending several minutes wishing these positive qualities to each person on the list while engaging in deep and slow breathing. The entirety of this practice typically spans between 10 to 30 minutes.

Before concluding our discussion of Loving-kindness meditation, it should be noted that there can be challenges in the practice of this technique. The mind itself does not like to dwell in awareness, but when we ask the mind to do something unpleasant, such as wish positivity toward someone we do not like, it is even more common for the mind to move away from the practice. That is ok; when we notice that the mind has moved away from the practice, we just bring the mind back to where we left off and we begin again. Another place in the practice that often is challenging for individuals is expressing love to the self. It is revealing that the mind can find it so difficult to express one's feelings in this manner and one implication of this is the mind doesn't believe the self is deserving of love. This may be due to the nature of the judgmental mind and its constant quest for perfection. Perfection, or as close to it as possible, is what kept our ancient ancestors alive. If an individual living thousands of years ago made a mistake (i.e., didn't hear the predator soon enough, didn't run fast enough), they might not live long enough to even correct the mistake. We descended from those individuals whose minds demanded perfection. As a result, we have created for ourselves a tendency to strive for a state that is impossible to achieve. The practice of Loving-kindness meditation provides a pathway to more positive feelings that can be directed to the self and others, and in doing so, it serves as a powerful tool in the cultivation of gratitude.

Let us now turn our attention to another common obstacle that individuals experience in the expression of gratitude: the tendency to contribute to our own suffering and stress. As mentioned previously, the mind itself generates much of our own suffering, as a result of its demand for perfection. Other processes of the mind heighten stress as well. The mind likes to assume that we have greater levels of control over the events of our lives than we actually have, and our individualistic society serves to reinforce this notion. As an example, the philosophy of meritocracy that the United States supposedly illustrates has not been supported in the scholarly literature, nor with our cultural experiences either. The United States is the most inequitable county in the world

in terms of wealth (Sherman, 2015), while wages of most people in the middle class have stagnated over the past three decades (Krause & Sawhill, 2018). The chance for upward mobility of an individual born into a low socioeconomic setting is quite low, but it does depend to some degree upon the area of the country one resides (PEW Charitable Trusts, 2012). Adhering to meritocracy as a guiding principle, while simultaneously working hard but not doing appreciably better, is a recipe for heightened stress at the individual level, and political and societal instability at a macro level. Another biasing factor that also generates stress is the tendency to assume that the world is stable and predictable—but often it isn't. The world recently watched Notre Dame, the beloved cathedral in Paris, be consumed by flames; a structure that has stood for almost 1,000 years. Natural disasters level cities and wipe out communities and with climate change upon us, this trend will only become more pressing. Yet, we continue to be surprised and doggedly unprepared to respond to change. Essentially the nature of the mind serves to increase our experience of stress and unfortunately, in the context of the experience of gratitude, it is very difficult to feel grateful when we are under stress.

To understand why gratitude is difficult to express when one is under stress, let us turn to an analogy. Let's imagine that we are on the African savannah. We immediately spot a zebra running for its life as a desperately hungry lioness pursues it. Let's pretend that we can stop time and ask the zebra the following question: "Zebra, do you notice the beautiful sun in the sky and the warmth radiating on your back? Aren't you grateful for its beauty and warmth?" At this point, even if the zebra could talk it would probably scowl at me first and then respond by saying, "Are you crazy?! I am running for my life here—I have no time to notice the beauty around me." Just as the zebra cannot notice its beautiful surroundings when it is stressed, so is true of our species. However, rather than responding to legitimate threats in one's environment (e.g., pursuing lion, unfolding natural disaster), the stressors that we commonly respond to are generated by the mind and exist only in the mind (i.e., need for control, need for perfection). The mind never stops thinking either, so much of our lives are spent in at least a low-grade level of stress (Wright, 2017), and this stress cuts us off from seeing the beauty in life. Additionally, it is believed that the mind has evolved to notice what it doesn't have in the environment, rather than what we do have, as a survival strategy. This drive is not unique to our species either, suggesting a trait that has a strong evolutionary basis. Sarah Brosnan and Franz deWaal (2014) have demonstrated this behavioral tendency with capuchin monkeys, as well as with other animal models. In their trials they show that monkeys who are deprived of more desirable food, while another individual of the same troop receives the desirable food, will evidence a heightened stress response. This is believed to occur because one's survival hinges upon having the same, if not better, resources as one's peers. This helps to explain the 'keeping up with the Joneses' problem that confronts most people irrespective of one's level of income. So, not only does this tendency create stress that might make invisible all that we have in our lives, but our biology also influences us to pay attention to what we don't have, rather than what we do have. In the work context, this might come in to play anytime there is a differential in (perceived) resources (i.e., prestige of title, income, office location/type, etc.), which is basically all of the time!

Fortunately, there are many meditation practices that serve to reduce stress and thus increase our opportunity to experience gratitude. One of the most well researched programs is the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1982). This program has been implemented in both applied and research settings since the early 1980s. MBSR training primarily utilizes pranayama breath work, the body scan method, and holding bodily postures (i.e., yoga asanas) to cultivate mindfulness. As mentioned previously, meditation practices ask us to focus the mind, and pranayama practices at their most basic ask the individual to focus their attention on the breath coming in and out of the body. This sounds simple, but in reality it can be quite a challenging practice. Regarding the Body Scan method, individuals are asked to direct their attention to different parts of the body and notice the sensations that are felt. For instance, one might be asked to direct their attention to the toes on the left foot. Does the individual feel the texture of the material of the socks as it comes into contact

with the toes? After focusing on the toes, attention moves up from there to the heel, ankle and so forth. Finally, students within the MBSR training program are guided through simple yoga postures such as mountain pose, bridge pose, and low lunges. The individual is asked to focus their attention on their body and/or breath in each pose. The MBSR training program requires individuals to meet for approximately two and a half hours once a week for eight weeks, with a one day meditation retreat typically occurring between weeks six and seven. Students are also expected to have a rigorous home practice, meditating 45 to 50 minutes a day, six days a week. They are provided with mp3 files and/or web resources to help guide them through their practice. This practice is intense and there certainly is attrition. Learning to sit with the self can be very challenging but the weekly class meetings provide an opportunity to share and discuss the challenges of meditation in a supportive environment.

Research on MBSR has shown that it enhances mindfulness (Robins, Keng, Ekblad, & Brantley, 2012), reduces stress (Creswell & Lindsay, 2016), reduces the experience of mood related symptoms (Chiesa, 2009; Khoury, Sharma, Rush, & Fournier, 2015), and enhances sleep quality (Carlson & Garland, 2005; Janssen, Heerkens, Kuijer, van der Heijden, & Engels, 2018), among many other positive benefits. These findings show that after regular meditation practice, individuals' stress reactivity decreases and they are able to remain more calm and focused, even during stressful circumstances. Furthermore, if we can remain calm, even during times of stress, we have a greater opportunity to experience gratitude. Indeed, gratitude could serve as a coping strategy when confronting difficult situations. We can think of it as a space that opens up that allows us the ability to orient toward the more positive in our environment. In the context of a work environment, that promotion that went to someone else could be perceived with gratitude because this might be the thing that motivates the individual to go back to school for advanced training. However, if one is experiencing stress, then practicing this will seem artificial and next to impossible. But if one is calm, the opportunity for gratitude will always be present because we live in a quite wonderful world.

Summary and Conclusion

Gratitude as a practice has been shown to enhance well-being, and in the context of the workplace it also contributes to greater workplace satisfaction and commitment. Leaders of an organization have a role to play in modeling gratitude, but employees themselves can engage in strategies that heighten their own sense of gratitude. Having said this, it should be noted that there are a number of challenges to the experience of gratitude that the individual might expect to encounter, not the least of which is the mind's tendency to create stress by demanding perfection of the self and complete control over our environment. Additionally, the nature of the mind is to not dwell in the present, which means the individual often overlooks opportunities for gratitude to be fostered. The mind also tends to focus on what the individual doesn't have, rather than what the person does have. This might have served as a valuable strategy in the distant past, by orienting us towards resources needed for survival. However, in our modern times this tendency creates tension within us and promotes materialist strivings that are often unnecessary and are unhealthy for the individual, as well as our planet. Finally, individuals are often embarrassed to express gratitude toward others, fearing that it might make them vulnerable or appear weak. Fortunately, there are a variety of mindfulness practices that can assist us with increasing our experience of gratitude. These practices allow for us to be more calm and present in our lives. As such, mindfulness can allow us to see how much we really do have to be grateful for.

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