



Gratitude

“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us...Train yourself never to put off the word or action for the expression of gratitude.”
Albert Schweitzer

The past year of difficulty and the approach of Thanksgiving have prompted our curiosity about the nature of gratitude. Sure it feels good to express gratitude but we wanted to see if there was any research that shows that it makes a difference in an individual's or organization's situation.

We'll offer you a few of the insights we've gained to date and add more as we gain them. Please send us your feedback and questions: Carol at CGausz@BlueHeronAssociates.com .

Much of what we have found to date is based on the work of Robert A. Emmons Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at University of California Davis and the positive psychology movement, most notably work by Martin Seligman, Ph.D. of the University of Pennsylvania.

What is Gratitude?

Emmons conceives of gratitude in 2 stages:

- Acknowledgement of goodness in one's life
- Recognizing that the source(s) of goodness is at least partially outside of ourselves

He refers to gratitude as:

- motivating - when we feel it we are moved to share it with others
- transformational - the recognition aspect helps us see the world in new ways
- foundational – it helps our interactions and strengthening relationships with others

Major Findings to Date:

Those who kept a gratitude journal on a weekly basis i.e. wrote down 5 things for which they were grateful for 10 weeks, reported the following compared to those who simply listed 5 events from the week and those who listed hassles¹:

- IMPROVED POSITIVE OUTLOOK:
 - better physical health,
 - more positive perspective on their life overall, and
 - more optimistic about the upcoming week than those who recorded hassles or neutral events in their life.
- IMPROVED GOAL ATTAINMENT: In addition, those who kept a gratitude journal were more likely to have made progress on an important personal goal over a 2 month period than those in the other categories.
- INCREASED HAPPINESS: At the end of the study this group was 25% happier than those who simply listed 5 events from the week.

Young adults who adopted a daily gratitude exercise reportedⁱⁱ:

- INCREASED ALERTNESS & ENERGY: higher levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness and energy and
- GREATER LIKELIHOOD TO LEND SUPPORT: that they had helped someone with a personal problem or offered emotional support

compared to participants who focused on hassles or ways in which they were better off than others.

- MORE EMPATHY AND 'OTHER' PERSPECTIVE

People with a strong disposition toward gratitude have the capacity to be empathic and to take the perspective of others. They are rated as more generous and more helpful by people in their social networksⁱⁱⁱ.

- INCREASED RESILIENCE

People who practice gratitude have greater ability to cope effectively with everyday stress and with more serious illness or trauma.

- STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS

Research results have led Emmons to conclude that experiencing gratitude leads to increased feelings of connectedness, improved relationships and even altruism^{iv}.

- INCREASED HAPPINESS

Emmons suggests that gratitude is a critical aspect of happiness. He cites that happiness can add as much as nine years to one's life expectancy and, in a longitudinal study of college students; the most cheerful students earned \$25,000 more per year than their less cheerful counterparts 16 years later^v.

NOTE: Emmons notes that people who are grateful do not deny or ignore the negative parts of their life. Rather, gratitude tends to enhance pleasant feeling states more than diminish unpleasant ones.

Martin Seligman Ph.D., Professor at the University of Pennsylvania has tested similar interventions in controlled trials at Penn and in huge experiments conducted over the Internet.

- The single most effective way to turbocharge your joy, he says, is to make a "gratitude visit." That means writing a testimonial thanking a teacher, pastor or grandparent - anyone to whom you owe a debt of gratitude and then visiting that person to read him or her the letter of appreciation. "The remarkable thing," says Seligman, "is that people who do this just once are measurably happier and less depressed a month later. But it's gone by three months."

- Less powerful but more lasting, he says, is an exercise he calls three blessings; taking time each day to write down a trio of things that went well and why. "People are less depressed and happier three months later and six months later."^{vi}

Sonja Lyubomirsky Ph.D., Psychology Professor at the University of California at Riverside, in a study funded by the National Institutes of Health, identified benefits of consistent gratitude practices.

- Similar to Emmons, she found that participants who kept a gratitude journal weekly had a significant increase in overall satisfaction with life over a period of six weeks, while the control group that did not keep journals did not show an increase.
- Performing acts of kindness (e.g. writing a note to a loved one, visiting someone ill, helping a friend, etc.)- five acts in a week, especially if all completed in a single day significantly- improved the subjects happiness^{vii}.

Other perspectives on Gratitude:

Noted coach and author, Marshall Goldsmith, suggests that

“...expressing gratitude is a talent – a talent that goes hand in hand with wisdom and self-knowledge and maturity.”

He suggests we write a thank you note to the top 25 people who have helped us in our careers, not only because it’s a nice thing to do that many of us have not done, but also because it helps us “...confront the humbling fact that you have not achieved your success along. You had help along the way.”^{viii}

Next Steps

Okay – so maybe this all still sounds too ‘woo woo’ or ‘Pollyanna-ish’ to you.

But I encourage you to think about the following:

- How much time would it take for you to try it? Begin with a weekly discipline of doing what our mothers often told us “count your blessings”. Try writing down 3-5 things for which you are grateful once a week for at least 10 weeks. See what it does for you.
- Think of what an increase in gratitude could do for you individually in all aspects of your life and most notably as a leader - with your team, your colleagues and your overall organization.

A few other practices to consider:

- *Customers:* Meet to express your gratitude for their business and gain insight into their world and how their needs have changed recently. Ask business customers how you can help them help their customers.
- *Employees:* Each day take notice of the employees who help you lead. Find time to express your gratitude to them verbally or in writing.
- *Board/Boss:* How have they helped you become a better leader? Write a note to each of the top people who have helped you succeed.

Again, we’re interested in your feedback and questions. Contact us at:

cgausz@blueheronassociates.com . Check back again as we will add to this information. Thanks for your interest!

ⁱ Emmons & McCullough, 2003; “Counting blessings versus burdens: Experimental studies of gratitude and subjective well-being”. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 84, 377-389.

ⁱⁱ Froh, J., Sefick, W.J., & Emmons, R.A. (2008). “Counting blessings in early adolescents: An experimental study of gratitude and subjective well-being”. *Journal of School Psychology*.46, 213-233.

ⁱⁱⁱ McCullough, M.E., Emmons, R.A., & Tsang, J. (2002). "The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 112-127.

^{iv} Emmons, R. Thanks! The New Science of Gratitude. 2007, Houghton Mifflin Company.

^v King, L. & Lyubomirsky, S. (2005) "The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?" *Psychological Bulletin* 131: 803-55.

^{vi} Wallace, C. "The New Science of Happiness", *Time Magazine*, January 17, 2005.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Goldsmith, M. *What Got You Here, Won't Get You There*, 2007, Hyperion, pp. 158-160.