

gratitude

readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness



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The practice of gratitude—and its close sibling, appreciation—has begun to infiltrate workplaces, from new software companies to older institutions. Though research on gratitude has exploded over the past two decades, studies of gratitude at work are still somewhat limited; results so far link it to more positive emotions, less stress and fewer health complaints, a greater sense that we can achieve our goals, fewer sick days, and higher satisfaction with our jobs and our coworkers.

Researchers define appreciation as the act of acknowledging the goodness in life—in other words, seeing the positives in events, experiences, or other people (like our colleagues). Gratitude goes a step further: It recognizes how the positive things in our lives—*like success at work—are often due to forces outside of ourselves, particularly the efforts of other people.*

“We tend to think of organizations as transactional places where you’re supposed to be ‘professional,’” says Ryan Fehr, an assistant professor of management at the University of Washington, Seattle, who recently published a paper summarizing the landscape of gratitude in business. “We may think that it’s unprofessional to bring things like forgiveness or gratitude or compassion into the workplace.” Yet evidence suggests that gratitude and appreciation contribute to the kind of workplace environments where employees actually want to come to work and don’t feel like cogs in a machine.

Gratitude as a “gateway drug”

Gratitude isn’t the only emotional skill that could be valuable to modern business. We might also hope to build emotionally intelligent and empathic workplaces, where employees practice compassion and forgiveness. Gratitude could be a pathway to these (arguably more difficult) goals.

Being grateful to someone who has helped you means that you recognize the intentions and effort behind their actions, which is good practice for the “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes” involved in empathy.

In fact, gratitude and kindness seem to form a positive loop in the workplace. Just as gratitude leads to altruistic behavior, research suggests that the opportunity to help others and serve a cause is one of the major sources of gratitude at the office.

Acknowledging the thoughts and efforts of people at work with gratitude shows that those people matter. And when it works, it’s life-changing.