

CAREERS

Gratitude, Happiness and Saying Thank You

BY WENDY LUKE AND GREG STEVENS

At the beginning of this new year, consider a gift that keeps on giving: an authentic “thank you.” Positive psychology studies reveal that grateful thinking (and the expression of it) is associated with increased levels of energy, optimism and empathy. When we are grateful or happy, the brain emits the neurotransmitter dopamine, which increases our capacity to learn, be creative and be productive. Rick Hanson, in *Hardwiring Happiness*, reports that organizations where bosses and peers genuinely say thank you far outperform organizations where thank you is not part of the culture. When people sincerely thank each other, trust, engagement, morale and quality go up. Here are a few thank you “gift” ideas for you to try. If you start small, the return on your gratitude will be far greater than the effort it takes.

FOR THE BOSS

Say thank you for a job well done. A genuine thank you—delivered in close proximity to the accomplishment, with specifics about why the accomplishment

is important—helps your employee feel valued and build understanding about the type of work that supports the organization. Some managers think a thank you should be given only for heroic performance. If you only acknowledge mega efforts, you miss opportunities to build high performance. While the amount of feedback that each generation prefers—from boomers who require relatively little feedback, to Gen Xers who want regular and frequent feedback, to Millennials who can’t get enough feedback and want it at the push of a button—meaningful and frequent expressions of thanks will serve you, the recipient and your institution.

At performance review time, accentuate the positive.

Focus on your employee’s strengths by thanking her or him for great work and consistent growth throughout the year. Even in difficult conversations, your employee will appreciate your positive approach. Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, tells us that empathy and social

skill (the ability to manage relationships and build rapport) are key factors in being a self-aware leader. But don’t wait for the formal review to acknowledge performance. That worked well for boomers but isn’t effective with Xers and Millennials.

their expertise. In turn, say a specific thank you. Anne Baber and Lynne Waymon, co-authors of *Make Your Contacts Count*, remind us to give something in return whenever we get something. Share an interesting article, an invitation to an event or



FOR THE EMPLOYEE OR COLLEAGUE

Ask for or offer help.

Management expert Ichak Adizes suggests that a healthy organization thrives on a balance of individuals with different strengths. Asking a co-worker, supervisor or direct report for assistance can help you build your skills as you demonstrate how much you value

your focused attention in a meeting or over coffee. If you have resources at your disposal, share them. If you don’t have what the other person needs, perhaps you know someone who does.

Say thank you for including me. As Dale Carnegie points out in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, John Dewey said our deepest

urge is our “desire to be important.” It feels good to be asked to join a special work group, included in decisions that impact the institution or invited to an event. Say thank you and relish the good feeling.

FOR THE JOB-SEEKER

Send a handwritten thank you note. If you want to stand out from the other candidates, write a note after job interviews. The art of writing a thank you note is nearly lost, which makes a well-crafted one even more special. Write a note of appreciation for someone’s

time, attention, information or inspiration. Remember to write a thank you note even if the museum does not offer you a position; let them know how much you appreciate the interview and that you are still interested in the organization. Sometimes the person hired doesn’t work out; your note might bring you to the top of the list for further consideration.

Reach out to your “career posse.” Our colleague Anne Ackerson suggests that having a group of trusted colleagues is a valuable way to share ideas, inspiration and

focus. Not only will you learn something valuable about yourself from those who know you most, you offer the same in kind. By participating in and supporting your “career posse,” you help build a community of practice that in turn contributes to the field.

FOR EVERYONE

Remember those who have helped you. Do you have a former teacher, coach, co-worker or mentor who has made a difference in your life? Take a moment to say “thanks for all you did.” Our colleague Caitlin Badowski

at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum regularly writes thank you notes to people who have guided her along her career path, starting with people who helped her get her first museum job. This is a meaningful way to maintain your network while making someone’s day.

Wendy Luke and Greg Stevens are co-editors of A Life in Museums: Managing your Museum Career (The AAM Press, 2012). Luke is an executive coach and principal of The HR Sage. Stevens is assistant director for professional development at AAM.



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