

Everyday Gratitude in Times of Uncertainty

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This popular article from three years ago is still relevant today. The author has updated it for 2023.

Three years ago, we were emerging from a fiercely battled presidential election and still immersed in a pandemic that was claiming many lives every day and disrupting our homes, relationships and workplaces. We witnessed ongoing racial tensions and economic disruption.

I decided back then that I needed to act to lift my spirits -- and hopefully those of others -- so I read about, reflected on and then wrote an article on "gratitude." The editors titled it "Everyday Gratitude in Times of Uncertainty." The sentiment of that article seems just as poignant in 2023 as in 2020, and in today's tumultuous world it is worth revisiting and updating.

While the pandemic is largely over, worry and bitter divisions are still with us. Hybrid and remote work preferences have resulted in the great resignation and quiet quitting, leaving businesses struggling for ways to keep their culture and talent. Political disagreements have disrupted relationships with family members and neighbors. Wars and famines take our breath away and challenge us to treasure our lives and think about how to be helpful to those less fortunate.

It's no wonder that we might struggle to cultivate a positive outlook—and to help our employees, colleagues, students, and families manage successfully through this time of complex, inter-related crises.

As we head into the holidays, let's take time to recap why gratitude is important, especially to enterprising families. We may not be able to influence all that is happening in our world, yet reflecting on who and what we appreciate is something we can control. And it feels good for everyone involved.

Lasting Lessons From the

Pandemic

While COVID has subsided, the wisdom that emerged from it about dealing with crises still holds true. During the height of the pandemic, Dr. Claudia Binz Astrachan shared insights from her research with several colleagues in her article, [Research Reveals How Business Families Have Coped With COVID-19](https://familybusiness.org/content/research-reveals-how-business-families-have-coped-with-covid-19) (<https://familybusiness.org/content/research-reveals-how-business-families-have-coped-with-covid-19>). We learned that "increased focus on employee safety and well-being, and the need to critically evaluate and adjust existing business models" must guide our approach. Gratitude is a critical part of fostering employee well-being.

Gratitude also is among the six characteristics of family resilience, as cited by Dr. Forma Walsh in "Strengthening Family Resilience" (Third Edition, 2015):

1. Avoid feeling helpless by viewing stress and setbacks in a positive light.
2. Be appreciative and show gratitude.
3. Maintain a staunch acceptance of reality.
4. Possess a deep belief that life is meaningful, buttressed by strongly held values.
5. Cultivate an uncanny ability to improvise.
6. Strengthen the ability to self-govern.

A Powerful Leadership Strategy

From our own experiences through COVID and from Dr. Walsh's observations, it's clear that a deliberate focus on gratitude is a powerful and effective leadership strategy, even if it seems counter-intuitive. Whether you see gratitude as a societal construct or deeply rooted in our biological development, it indisputably nurtures positive relationships and individual satisfaction. Long the purview of religious leaders and philosophers, gratitude is emerging as a key tenet in understanding business success. Indeed, recent research suggests that gratitude is one of the most powerful strategies used by resilient and effective leaders. Our everyday

experience confirms it. Recognition that we could not be where we are in life without the contributions of others feels good to acknowledge and to receive.

Common sense tells us that cultivating a culture of gratitude is a powerful motivator, and science provides evidence of its efficacy as a leadership strategy.

This year, more workers are seeking new jobs than in 2022: More than half (56 percent) of the workforce is likely to look for a new job in the next 12 months, up from 51 percent in 2022, according to Bankrate's 2023 job seeker survey. Relatedly, a Cooleaf study found that almost half of employees say they'd leave a company that didn't praise or thank them for their work. When money is not the primary motivating factor, it's all about how people feel.

My observations suggest this is especially true for family members in the business. In a recent meeting of 125 family business owners, I asked how many owners had some type of regular evaluation/feedback sessions with non-family members working in the business. Every hand went up. Then I asked how many gave feedback to family employees. Few hands went up. That's not surprising. In our busy worlds, we often take family employees' loyalty for granted. As we negotiate the often-tumultuous relationships in family businesses, this time of intense crisis may remind us that we need to look more closely at all employees and ask if we can improve our relationships by being more grateful. Or perhaps we need to be more deliberate and strategic about expressing our gratitude.

Practicing Effective Gratitude

While you may think gratitude involves merely a simple thank you, to make it effective Dr. Mark Goulston suggests that there are three parts to what he calls a "Power Thank You."

Be specific. Describe the specific behaviors for which you are grateful. For example, "Sara, thank you for going out of your way to deliver Ms. Smith's special order yesterday and making sure the fit was right. Because of your thoughtfulness, she called to say how pleased she was and that she recommends our business to everyone in her apartment building. Your attention to people and to detail is what differentiates us from the big chains."

Be personal. Tell them what their actions meant to you.

"When you went to extra lengths to help assure that a customer was satisfied, it said to me that you care passionately about our family business. Sara, I want you to know how much it means to me that I get to come to work knowing you are doing everything you can to keep our family dream alive and serve our customers to the best of our abilities. Excellent service is at the top of our values and I'm grateful to you for embodying that in all that you do."

Acknowledge the impact. Recap their personal efforts and sacrifices. "I know that when you dropped what you were doing to turn your attention to Ms. Smith's delivery, that required you to work late and that you had to rearrange your family dinner plans. And you did not complain. That kind of gesture is symbolic, Sara, and helps us all to stay motivated."

Building a Culture of Gratitude

Expressing gratitude generates its own momentum. Once you start using effective expressions of gratitude as a genuine and strategic leadership tool, others will begin to do the same. Leadership expert Dr. Christine Riordan suggests that effective leaders who incorporate gratitude into their leadership build more effective teams. Employees (and, as mentioned above, family members) are recognized for the behaviors that help them be better contributors. In turn, as they incorporate expressing gratitude toward others, they become better colleagues to those around them.

In harnessing the power of gratitude, a few simple techniques can build gratitude aptitude as both a practice and a leadership strategy:

1. **Gratitude Journal.** Keep a journal in your nightstand or on the corner of your desk. Whether you jot down 2-3 things for which you're grateful before nodding off or start the day with a reminder of how others have contributed to your journey, developing a sense of gratitude becomes a daily habit.
2. **Gratitude Letter/Meeting.** Think about who made a significant contribution that you might not have fully acknowledged at the time. My thoughts turned to my doctoral advisor. After losing one daughter to a rare disease, his second daughter was killed in a tragic car accident. I thought about what this must have felt like to him and what I could do for him. While I couldn't truly appreciate the magnitude of his

loss, I wanted him to know he had made a profound difference in my life for which I was deeply grateful. I reflected on all of the wonderful opportunities (great jobs, wonderful colleagues and exciting travel) made possible because of earning a doctorate. And I knew earning that degree would not have happened without him, so I collected my thoughts and shared my gratitude in a letter to him. Weeks later, he wrote back and said that the letter was one of the most significant acknowledgements he had received and that it came at a particularly important time in his life. In reading his note there was a palpable sense of reciprocal gratitude. I could feel his tears with each word, and it was truly one of the best moments in my life.

- 3. Gratitude Session.** My favorite session with a family business client was an event we organized for the first family meeting after the death of Ted, a second-generation former CEO, dad to the third generation and granddad to the fourth. Following a multimedia tribute to Ted, the younger generations got together and talked about all the ways they were grateful for Ted. Next, each generation worked together to identify their gratitude for the other generation. Finally, in one of the most powerful sessions I have experienced, the third and fourth generations each selected a spokesperson and told the other generation why they are grateful for them, using specific examples.

difference in our lives.

A Chance to Strengthen Alignment

In her article, Dr. Binz Astrachan notes that a crisis often “acts like a proving ground ... exacerbat(ing) any tears in the fabric of the family or the business. Investing in family alignment and cohesion has never been more important.” Indeed, not only is “listening with the intent to understand” a key to fostering meaningful relationships, I want to add that the same applies in delivering messages. Our expression of gratitude must be authentic, and shared with the intent of building greater understanding, empathy and commitment.

The losses and challenges over the last few years have helped us think about the value of our relationships. Whether together in person or connecting on Zoom, as the holidays near we tend naturally to gravitate toward feelings of gratitude. I encourage each of you, and all of us, to consider the power, the joy, and, yes, the love in expressing our gratitude to those who have made a