

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

November 15, 2005

Leadership and Gratitude

by Dr. Mike Armour

Among other things, leadership is about building community. It's about forging a community with shared visions, shared goals, and a shared determination.

The communities we lead go by different names from one venue to another. We sometimes call them teams. Or companies. Or crews. Or departments. Or associations. Or battalions.

But the one thing they have in common is this: their effectiveness is directly related to the depth in which they feel a sense of one-ness, a sense of camaraderie. In a word, a sense of community.

Recently, while reflecting on the upcoming Thanksgiving season, I realized that I've never seen a leadership text that talks about the importance of gratitude in creating a strong sense of community. But it seems to me that the greater the gratitude we feel, the more constructively we contribute to community-building. Here's why.

Gratitude Creates Good Will

Strong communities are characterized by good will among all who are part of the group. Ingratitude fosters anything but good will. Where ingratitude prevails, we find resentment, bitterness, upset, suspicion, sarcasm, and efforts to "get even." These are outlooks that never strengthen community. Indeed, left unchecked, they work to destroy it.

People who are truly grateful, people who have gratitude deeply engrained in their being, rarely give in to bitterness and resentment. Gratitude simply leaves no room for these negative feelings to flourish. And by denying these negative feelings soil in which to grow, gratitude maintains an optimistic outlook on life and a positive attitude toward other people.

Gratitude Creates Generosity

Strong, healthy communities are also noted for their generosity – the willingness of those within the community to be helpful and self-sacrificing for each other.

We typically think of generosity in terms of money. But in communities that work together, generosity of time is a more vital measure.

- How eagerly do people take time from their own duties to lend someone else a hand?

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- How much time are they willing to give to mentoring and developing others?
- How much time do they gladly devote just to being a friend to co-workers who need one?

None of these "acts of generosity" is easily documented in the bottom line. But by contributing to a stronger and healthier community, they create an environment most likely to optimize bottom line results.

People who are not grateful, I've found, are also the least likely to be generous. They are more centered on what they deserve or on how they've been short-changed than on how richly they've been blessed. As a result, they tend to have a "horde it" mentality that leads them to cling tightly to whatever they have, be it money, opportunities, or time. And this "hording" approach, of course, is diametrically opposed to generosity.

Instilling Gratitude in the Culture

If leadership entails building community, and if gratitude yields more healthy communities, then how should we go about deepening gratitude within our organizational culture?

First, we start with self. This is one place where leaders must truly walk their talk. A leader who has never cultivated genuine, abiding gratitude in his or her own heart will never cultivate it within the organization. Just as organizations rarely stretch beyond the vision of the leader, they also rarely develop a heart more grateful than the leader's.

Second, we should take steps to "institutionalize" the process of finding reasons to be grateful. Are you conducting a quarterly review of financials or performance? Include this question among those you ask: "If we were listing things to be grateful for this quarter, what should we put on our list?" That might even be a good way to open the meeting, because it puts such a positive frame around everything that follows.

Or perhaps you're visiting with an employee or volunteer. Hopefully it's your practice to let them know regularly how much you appreciate them. But instead of saying, "I really appreciate you for . . ." try the phrasing, "I'm really grateful to you for . . ." Everyone likes being told they are appreciated. But having your leader grateful for what you have done strikes an even deeper motivational chord.

Another scenario is team-building. Strong teams often take time to talk about the strengths they see within the team and to celebrate team achievements. It's only a slight step from that discussion to focus on the question, "As a member of this team, what are you most grateful for?" People tend to answer questions like this by talking about outcomes that mean the most to them. Thus, your discussion will not only yield positive emotional energy within the team, the answers may also provide worthwhile insight into the motivational needs of particular team members.

A Final Note

As I said at the outset, this concept of making gratitude-building a goal of leadership is a new concept to me. I'm still playing with its implications. So I'm eager to learn from my readers. As you set out to build a culture of gratitude within your organization, let me

know what learn. Keep me posted on what you do and how well it works. I'd like to share it with other subscribers.

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