

Unknown and Uncontrollable Challenges: Building a Gratitude-Based Culture

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Session Abstract: Gratitude transforms work. It is backed by science; it is neither fluff nor a cure-all. It has huge personal and business value in both the short and long term. It's easy to do once and hard to sustain in a business culture, but the benefits include healthier leaders and teams and greater ROI. Gratitude builds engagement and innovation. It helps you handle difficult situations while learning and changing. Gratitude is a foundational approach for today's unknowns and uncontrollable challenges. This session is packed with practical tools and tips, including a gratitude assessment and sample plan for you and your team. This is a step toward building a gratitude foundation for leaders using practical and immediately applicable approaches for leaders and teams.

Objectives

- Understand the business benefits and challenges that building a culture of gratitude can bring.
- Learn a framework to build a culture of gratitude.
- Learn gratitude techniques and tools that can be used immediately and will lead to more innovative solutions, engaged teams, and improved results.

Gratitude, Business, and Cultures

Gratitude transforms.

Gratitude is easy and low-cost. Gratitude is simple and familiar. Most of us have already had experience with gratitude.

Gratitude gets complicated in work environments. If you believe that gratitude transforms, the next question you might ask is, “How do we get more of this?” or “How do we bring gratitude into business?” Here, we will start to answer these questions.

Gratitude is foundational. It goes underneath culture and religion. It's basic and has many meanings and practices. Gratitude is defined in many ways. It's a value, a skill, and a way of being. It's a character strength in positive psychology. Cicero (106-43bc) said, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of the virtues, but the parent of all of the others.”

Gratitude (or its accepted equivalents) can be part of a corporate vision statement that is included in performance goals at the individual level or for a team. It's measurable, and it's already there. Even some of the most horrifying people are grateful for something. Gratitude exists in all of us. Science has shown that even some animals show gratitude.

Gratitude is given and received and uniquely expressed by each leader, organization, and culture. That's what makes it complicated. The more diverse a team (which is a good thing), the more diverse the gratitude practices and beliefs, and this diversity can lead to misunderstanding. Not thanking someone when a ‘thank you’ is expected can lead to poor performance.

There are many types of diversity when gratitude is involved. Each of the following may give and receive gratitude differently: personality types, national cultures, ages, industries, job types, genders, and religions. A team may have introverts and extroverts on it. As an introvert, you might not want people announcing how grateful they are for you publicly! A simple and private ‘thank you’ might be more appropriate. The extrovert might be disappointed if gratitude is not expressed frequently and loudly.

Cultural diversity on teams means that there will be different ways of giving and receiving gratitude. In the USA, expressions of gratitude are socially acceptable and expected. Thanking someone as an expression of gratitude is cultural. For speakers of Lao (Southeast Asia) or Siwu (western Africa), saying ‘thank you’ is so rare that it may be perceived as bizarre or out of place (Reference Royal).

How do you work through these differences and complexities and build cultures of gratitude? How do you coach gratitude without evangelizing? We know that leaders who have strong gratitude muscles handle both everyday and extreme changes and challenges better. Leaders

who are grateful and use an approach of gratitude are more engaging and innovating, and they create teams and cultures of positive results that are less stressful. This is not said lightly; many respected and credible studies show this.

When things are known and controllable, they are repeatable, reliable, and consistent, and there is comfort and security in that. Businesses can be predictable. For some businesses and leaders, this is important and needed. However, leaders also need the ability to handle change and events that are not controllable—especially unexpected, big changes like the pandemic. This pandemic has rocked the world; even the most stable and predictable businesses have had unexpected and extreme changes. Imagine a stable business that relied on consistent, controlled growth unexpectedly growing 845% in three months! In the USA, that happened to the toilet paper industry.

The opposite is true too; many businesses had a large (or even a 100%) drop. Lots of very fast changes happened, both positive and negative, that were not known or planned for. Leaders who used gratitude as an approach during these massive and uncontrollable changes had more success and were able to change and rebound faster. Many of the teams I worked with were more productive.

Gratitude improves a leader's ability in the moment to handle unexpected changes.

We are going to cover the definition of gratitude, some science, and the benefits of gratitude. Then I'll share a framework to create leaders and cultures of gratitude.

Gratitude Starting Points

Let's start with a simple exercise that you can repeat when you're in meetings or coaching leaders. Right now, what's the one thing in your business, your project, your team, or your company for which you're deeply grateful?

Find that gratitude in your breath—in your mind. Absorb it; embrace it; feel it in every cell in your body. Write it down or say it out loud, if you can.

Connect to what you are deeply grateful for in business, right now. Label that feeling of gratitude. Simply label it as gratitude, or as being grateful, calm, present, mindful, or grounded—whatever it is for you. Remember the label and the feeling, so that when you say it you can easily shift back to that place of gratitude.

That place of gratitude is how we want to be when we have to handle the difficult unknowns and uncontrollable events.

Now, imagine from that place of gratitude—What is it possible to achieve?

Here are some of the answers I've received:

- Hope
- Possibilities
- Innovation
- Open mind
- Conviction of resolution

We're not coming from a place of fear. Gratitude and fear don't exist at the same time. Others have answered the same question by saying that with gratitude as an approach, there is: connection, creativity, inclusion, kindness, patience, love, acceptance, calmness, and less stress.

Now, imagine a room full of people feeling grateful before tackling challenges. How about a whole culture of grateful people? This is a simple and quick exercise leaders use today that helps foster a culture of gratitude.

Here are some adaptations of this exercise. The goal is to shift as many people as possible to start with gratitude. Here are some of my favorite shortcuts to getting a meeting starting with people feeling grateful.

- Ask each member to share what they are grateful for right now.
- Ask each member to share what has gone well this week.
- YouTube video of laughing babies
- Breathing exercises
- Physical movement

Gratitude Definitions and Behaviors

There are many definitions of gratitude. How you define gratitude is based on your culture and experiences.

The dictionary definition is that gratitude is appreciation and recognition of good qualities. Yet gratitude is universal, and it goes underneath cultures and is defined differently and expressed differently. Gratitude is incorporated in every major religion.

Because of the many ways of defining and using gratitude, it makes creating cultures of gratitude complex.

Gratitude is a large, all-encompassing concept, with many subcategories. It's an approach. It's a behavior. It's a value. It's a feeling. It's a religion. It's a way of life.

It was rare in the USA business world to talk about gratitude, but it has become more accepted in the past few years. Prior to that time, gratitude was more accepted and expected as part of religious or nonprofit organizations. Here's a list of ways I've discovered that people define gratitude:

12 Ways People Define Gratitude

1. Appreciation - Recognition of good qualities
2. Thankfulness - Awareness and appreciation of a benefit
3. Emotion - Response to external stimulation
4. Feeling - Learned response to an emotion
5. Value - Principle, what is important
6. Character Trait - Personality characteristic or inherent value
7. Verb - Being grateful, appreciating others and things
8. Adjective - Describes someone or something
9. Approach - Used to solve problems
10. Way of Being - Mindful and calming
11. Religion - A practiced belief and faith
12. Way of Life – Holistic habits, customs, and beliefs

A key step in building a culture of gratitude is defining it. The definition is important for consistency in building a culture that supports it. For example, if the definition only includes recognition, key concepts like behaviors and performance measurements may be overlooked. When you define it, you can measure it. We will talk about measuring gratitude later. "If you can't measure it, you can't improve it," said Peter Drucker, one of the world's greatest management consultants. We recommend defining gratitude as appreciation and as an approach for businesses.

Many businesses resist the word 'gratitude.' I've personally had workshops with the word gratitude in the title that were rejected. When the title was changed to not include gratitude, they were accepted.

When building gratitude into the culture, be clear on the definition and associated wording. Sometimes, alternative words like 'recognition,' 'positivity,' and 'appreciation' are acceptable, when 'gratitude' is not. You may have to test what the right wording is that will be accepted in your culture or business.

We know gratitude works to improve businesses. How do we know it works? We know through experience and case studies, and sometimes we must prove it. I especially find I must prove it with the people with whom I work. I work with a lot of engineering and technical managers, which is my background. Being skeptical and having a 'show me and prove it first' attitude is common in risk-averse and logic-based industries and professions.

Gratitude: Prove it

Gratitude is like air; it's foundational. It's intangible and transformational. Universally, everyone gets what gratitude is; however, some people need proof that it's healing, transformational, and foundational. You can't see it, touch it, or taste it, but you can feel it. I give two basic answers as proof of why it works. Both answers have way more depth than it would be possible to cover here, so this is the very short version.

Science and history are the two ways we can prove that gratitude works. All I'm going to say about history is that gratitude has been around since the time of recorded humankind. Research even shows that some animals have gratitude. Gratitude is part of all major religions in the world today. History is full of references to gratitude.

Science has hundreds of studies on gratitude, proving the benefits. I'm going to offer you a handful of studies. I have one coaching client who sarcastically told me, "The CEO only believes something if it's in a *Harvard Business Review* article." If that's the case with your clients, I have nine *Harvard Business Review* articles in my reference section on gratitude you can use to help create cultures of gratitude.

When I broke my ankle about five years ago, I had some downtime. At the time, I was working at Boston University, so I scoured the research databases for research on gratitude and here is a quick, high-level summary. What I found is that science proves it through two types of studies: hard science and social science. Hard science is the measurement of reactions in the body—chemicals, nerves, lots of neuroscience, etc. Social Science is the interaction of people, either creating a scenario or analyzing existing data.

One of my favorite social science studies is the Risk (the game) study on appreciation. One group was told, "You are appreciated. We're so happy you're here; thanks for taking the time." Lots of gratitude and appreciation was verbalized to them before they started playing a game. The other team was just told to go play the game. Guess which team won? The team that felt appreciated won more than 80% of the time. Why did they win? The hypothesis is that the appreciated team felt better and was more confident and positive, which allowed them to take more risks and win. Gratitude wins games.

Now for the hard science research side. Dr. Robert Emmons is a professor of psychology at UC Davis; he's one of the leading researchers on gratitude. He asserts that thankfulness is related to 23% lower levels of cortisol, which is the stress hormone, and we know from other studies that gratitude favorably changes dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin (all of which are feel-good chemicals in the body). Bottom line: When we are in that place of gratitude, toxic emotions like resentment and regret are not possible.

Tons of interesting science studies have been done on the positive benefits of gratitude. Many of them are personal and deal with things like depression, suicide, and personal happiness. Now, let's translate gratitude into work settings. Bringing it in is challenging. Because it's

foundational and pervasive, with so many benefits, it's hard to know where to start and to be prescriptive. Which benefit does the culture want most? What will benefit the people and the business best?

Based on science-based benefits and experiences of gratitude-based leaders, the chart below summarizes some key benefits of a gratitude-based culture.

Benefits of Gratitude
<input type="checkbox"/> Better Choices
<input type="checkbox"/> Improved Decisions and Decision-Making
<input type="checkbox"/> Positive Behaviors and Skills
<input type="checkbox"/> Affirming Leadership Style
<input type="checkbox"/> Problem Solving
<input type="checkbox"/> Innovation
<input type="checkbox"/> Engaged Teams
<input type="checkbox"/> Effective Results
<input type="checkbox"/> Happiness
<input type="checkbox"/> Emotional Intelligence
<input type="checkbox"/> Mindfulness
<input type="checkbox"/> Focus
<input type="checkbox"/> More Risk Taking
<input type="checkbox"/> Less Fearful
<input type="checkbox"/> More Resilience
<input type="checkbox"/> Ability to Handle Change
<input type="checkbox"/> More Authenticity

You can use this list as a starting point to coach a leader, teams, or organizations. Present this list as a checklist and ask which of the benefits they want more of. Building a strong gratitude muscle is one strategy to get more of that benefit.

When you see the science, the history, and the benefits, only one question remains, "How can I get more of gratitude at work?" The simple answer is to build strong gratitude muscles one leader, one team, one organization, and one industry at a time.

When you start with one, it expands. Science shows that gratitude is contagious. It's like the mirror neurons. I yawn; you yawn. I'm grateful; you're grateful. It doesn't work all the time, but the more authentic the gratitude, the more contagious it is.

When we practice gratitude daily, it becomes an unconscious approach. You can learn techniques and tools that will help leaders and teams to shift to gratitude. The more you focus on gratitude, the more benefits are realized. I'm going to show you a framework of twelve ideas that will build gratitude in a culture.

Cultures of gratitude are built one person and one team at a time. Many of us right now are already practicing gratitude. How do you know if you are improving? One way is by measuring where you are now. Scientific researchers of gratitude measure it (I'll share a little bit more on that later). All over the world, some very serious and credentialed researchers have studied gratitude, and they have found ways to measure and create a gratitude baseline so they can compare before and after an experiment.

Here's a tip for starting: Have a discussion with the end goal of describing what it would be like if you had a culture of gratitude. Imagine everyone has 100% mastered practicing gratitude and is fully immersed and committed to gratitude. What would that look like? How would people act and behave? How would things be different? Defining the desired outcome is the first step to building a culture of gratitude.

Gratitude is ingrained in almost all national cultures, yet studies show that many people leave gratitude at home when they go to work. Why? Gratitude is not always accepted in business cultures. One way to bridge the gap is to adapt personal practices to be work-acceptable. Start by asking, "What are some appropriate business uses of gratitude that I may have at home that I can bring to work?" For example, a family may have a gratitude practice of sharing what they're grateful for before dinner. One way it can be adapted at work is by starting a meeting and simply asking, "What do you appreciate?"

Here's a framework for building a culture of gratitude. It's a collection of 12 ideas that collectively integrate to make a whole. Any one of these ideas can be a starting point for proactively building a culture of gratitude. They're not listed in order of priority; they should be applied based on where you are now and what's most important.

Framework for Building a Culture of Gratitude

Make Gratitude a Priority	Include Gratitude in Vision, Mission, Values	Measure & Assess Gratitude	Identify Benefits & Define Gratitude
Create a Plan for a Gratitude Culture	Use Gratitude Practices & Behaviors	Teach Gratitude Approaches, Techniques, & Practices	Incorporate Gratitude into Existing Processes
Hold Accountable to Gratitude	Evolve Gratitude Culture	Listen for & Collect Gratitude Stories	Explore and Ask about Gratitude

Make Gratitude a Priority

Make gratitude a priority. Don't overcomplicate it. Don't overthink it. Don't hide it. Build strong gratitude muscles in each individual and each team. Integrate it into the fabric and foundation of everything that's going on (day-to-day meetings, interactions, processes).

Make gratitude the first thought, statement, or question, regardless of the situation. When you hear reports about disasters, within the first few minutes you'll typically hear a statement about how grateful someone is for someone else who helped them.

Start by asking, "What are we grateful for?" Initially, you may get eye rolls and disgusted looks or sarcasm. You may not be taken seriously, or you might even get yelled at (it's happened). Who knows? However, when I keep asking in a non-judgmental, non-'woo-woo,' non-saccharin, happy way, I start to get amazing answers. After losing a major account and starting a meeting with gratitude, one group said things like: "Now we can incorporate that new technology." "Now we can implement a lesson-learned process." "We had three great years of income from that customer." "They were a great customer." From that point of starting with gratitude, they build and create a going-forward plan.

Many of the industries I work with, like semiconductor and medical device manufacturers, deal in complexity. Things are not simple. In those industries, 'simple' goes against the culture. Making gratitude a priority is a great start. The challenge is to keep it simple and not overcomplicate things. Just start.

Include Gratitude in the Vision, Mission, or Values

Culture starts and is shaped at the top. When the leaders at the top show authentic gratitude and are positive, there's a better chance the whole organization will adapt those behaviors.

Research shows that gratitude is contagious, like a yawn. If one person is grateful, those around them are. The higher up the leaders are who show gratitude, the more likely their behaviors are watched and mimicked. Hence, anyone who behaves gratefully has a chance of spreading gratitude. The higher up you are, the more it spreads. It's free and contagious.

The more gratitude is acted on and reinforced officially by including relevant words in your vision, mission, or values statements, the better chance there is of it sticking. Make it formally part of any culture-shaping statements.

Companies that have Gratitude Visions/Missions

Can you imagine a company acting and living a culture of gratitude? The good news is that more of them are. Here are some examples of companies that have embraced gratitude:

- Life is Good ([Press Releases \(lifeisgood.com\)](https://www.lifeisgood.com)) references the power of optimism in their mission statement.
- Ben and Jerry's ([Values | Ben & Jerry's \(benjerry.com\)](https://www.benjerry.com)) is making the best ice cream in the nicest possible way.

A company I work with, UKG (the Ultimate Kronos Group), has a caring culture. Their website references it, and they practice it and measure it on a regular basis in management engagement surveys.

Aron Ain, the CEO of UKG, has a book called *Work Inspired*. One section of it is called "Creating Mass Gratitude." They're not just words; UKG is a company that is doing just that. We know it works because they have top ratings on *Glass Door* and have won many awards. Talking to people who work there and even wandering around and observing them proves how caring they are. The culture is embraced everywhere, from the receptionist to the CEO.

Measure Gratitude: Baseline Attributes of Gratitude

One way to know if gratitude is working and improving is by measuring it. What I discovered from gratitude researchers around the world is that they have devised many ways to measure gratitude. They needed a way to see if gratitude had changed after performing tests, but there was no consistent way to measure it. However, I was able to summarize and paraphrase what

researchers used and came up with five gratitude attributes. These attributes were used consistently by researchers as before and after and control groups.

The goal is to measure where you are right now and use it as a baseline for comparison at some point in the future after applying a gratitude plan and practices. The assessment is available in the reference section below. What follows is a summary of the five gratitude attributes.

Attribute #1 - Intensity

How capable are you of feeling gratitude on a deeper, more intense level? Expressions such as “my heart is overflowing” and “my heart is about to burst” are deeply intense feelings of gratitude. The other end of the spectrum is not experiencing gratitude at all or being neutral, while the middle of the road is a mildly intense feeling of gratitude.

The deepest, most intense feeling of joy, happiness, and gratitude I’ve ever experienced was when my sons were born. For days after, the world was perfect and joyous. Since practicing and building my gratitude muscle, I now experience that same level of intensity a few times a month. Some people experience it daily. Sadly, others have never experienced it at all.

Attribute #2—Frequency

During an average day, how often do you feel grateful? I interviewed people for my book whom I had identified as being grateful. When given the assessment, they are self-reported that they were grateful 75% to 95% of the day.

Attribute #3—Breadth

How many different things are you grateful for? Your brain? Your body? Your personality? Your health? In your environment, are you grateful for your chair? The desk? The room? The items in the room? Your office? What about the people closest to you, whether currently alive or not? Are you grateful for your neighborhood, your community, your town, your state, or your country?

Be as concrete and as abstract as you like as you consider the breadth of your gratitude. How many things are you grateful for, and how many are you not?

If you can find something to be grateful for even in the people, ideas, or things that you dislike, you have a high level of gratitude breadth.

Attribute #4—Environment

When considering the people and places you interact with daily, are they filled with gratitude or are you the lone person being grateful?

If you’ve practiced gratitude a good portion of your life and have primarily worked in environments that support it, you will naturally attract people and places that share a similar

view. On the other hand, if the environment and people around you don't support gratitude, it's difficult to stay grateful.

You don't choose your biological family, and you may not be able to choose your neighbors either, but you *can* limit how much you interact with these individuals.

Watching a TV channel that constantly streams bad news makes it difficult to stay grateful as well, as does having a disorganized or dirty office.

During the course of any given day, how much do your environment and the people you interact with support and reinforce your ability to live a life of gratitude? Your environment includes all the places you frequent, like your office, your car, your home, and your community.

Attribute #5—Social Behaviors and Habits

How many behaviors and daily habits do you have that promote, support, and reinforce gratitude? Are you someone who is always throwing gratitude and appreciation out during almost all your conversations (even difficult ones), so others feel welcome and appreciated? Maybe you're like Susan, a friend of mine, who writes handwritten thank-you letters daily to people she appreciates. Or like Mike, who wrote over 230 letters of appreciation to work colleagues in less than a year.

These are extreme examples, but even something as simple as saying "thank you" when you appreciate something, using positive words, setting boundaries in a positive way, or not complaining, gossiping, or judging can help you get (and stay) in gratitude.

When interacting with others, how often does gratitude appear in your behaviors?

Your initial responses to this assessment are called your baseline or starting point.

One word of caution: The numbers are only as good as you define and align them to your desired outcomes. In other words, they are only accurate if you are honest and set clear goals.

Since they're only numbers, you can make them say anything you want. It is your interpretation that determines what the attribute of intensity with a 3-rating means.

Identify Benefits of Gratitude

The more you (and everyone else) believe in the benefits of gratitude and how important they are, the more you will work to build a sustainable culture of gratitude. Knowing why you want to build a culture of gratitude keeps everyone engaged. There are so many reasons to do it, and they will vary by organization and culture. We discussed some of the reasons in the definitions section above, and more reasons are listed in the benefits table 2.0. As Simon Sinek, a British-American author and inspirational speaker says, 'why' is "the compelling higher

purpose that inspires us and acts as the source of all we do.” By identifying our ‘why,’ we have a purpose to create and sustain a culture of gratitude.

One exercise to help you identify **why** is to assume you have a 100% culture of gratitude. Now brainstorm and explore what that is like. What is different? How do people behave? What processes are in place? How do people feel? What initiatives are in place? How does it work? Try to be as specific as possible. Identify your acceptable and desired cultural outcome when there is 100% gratitude.

If the word ‘gratitude’ is not an acceptable term in the culture—if it's too squishy, too ‘woo-woo,’ or too anti-business, there are a few things you can do. Pick a benefit or use one of ours from table 2.0 and use that as a starting point around which to build a vision or goal. Then, use gratitude to achieve that goal—as a tactic rather than the vision.

Create a Plan for Gratitude

My background is project management and engineering. Someone asked me last week, “How is gratitude related to project management?” The answer is: If you want a result that proactively moves towards a desired goal, you need a strategy with a plan to achieve the goal.

It's not enough to just say, “Oh, that's a wonderful idea, or great intention.” Ideas are thoughts and don't cost much or take much time. Having a goal won't get you there unless you have a plan, a roadmap, a GPS, and some steps and processes to get there (and of course, do the action). It's like saying, “I need to get to Boston” without knowing what roads to take. A plan is needed to achieve goals, especially in businesses and when it involves many people

Sample Plans for Gratitude

A goal without a plan is just a wish. Or, as Abraham Lincoln said, “A goal properly set is halfway reached.” Planning is an art and science. I'm offering two sample plans based on project management tools. One plan is for a leader and one for a team. I've used these myself and on a couple of teams. As with any plan, adjust and adapt it to whatever works for your culture or team. A good plan starts with having a ‘why’—identifying the reasons for creating the plan and clear definitions of what your goal is. Because gratitude is intangible, I would recommend starting with a measurable base level. You can use my assessment or create your own. Assign a number(s), percentage, or classification (low, medium, high) to where you are now and where you want to get.

After doing my gratitude assessment and noting that I rated low on behaviors, I created a gratitude plan to improve my gratitude behaviors. I was a three, and I'm hoping to get to a four. I had a very specific goal and plan with very specific actions. If you're just starting out, a general goal of just being more grateful works.

Sometimes small actions make a huge difference. Coaching an already grateful person by getting her to shift her focus on being grateful for the lesson (rather than the unfortunate event) was a game changer for her.

Use Gratitude Practices and Behaviors

Be a role model. Practice appreciating others and being grateful out loud. Celebrate and acknowledge when it's authentic and appropriate to do so. Acknowledging others' practices that promote gratitude reinforces them in building and creating more gratitude. Start by making a list of gratitude practices and behaviors. Some examples are:

- Start meetings with saying what everyone is grateful for.
- In every conversation, note one thing you are grateful for.
- Celebrate small wins with simple acknowledgements.
- Create an online gratitude whiteboard.
- With every challenge, counter with why you are grateful for the challenge.

Teach Gratitude

Gratitude behaviors don't always come naturally, even for those who believe they are already grateful. After all, why do I need to learn about gratitude if I'm already grateful? What I've learned is there are many people like me—I'm very grateful, but others don't know how grateful I am.

Just because we're grateful inside our heads doesn't mean we know how to express it. We may think we've expressed gratitude, but it doesn't land on the other person. I've seen countless people who give and give till it hurts and feel so grateful, but nobody knows. Many people don't know how to express gratitude to others because it's uncomfortable and awkward or not an accepted behavior. Teaching gratitude gives people (in a non-judgmental way) many tools, techniques, and examples to authentically express gratitude.

The more I am immersed in gratitude, the more my list of tools and techniques and ways to create cultures of gratitude grows. Here's a sampling of tools you can easily use right away:

- Gratitude Sandwich
- SMART Gratitude
- GLAD

With all these tools, the gratitude must be authentic, or it may backfire.

Teach: Gratitude Sandwich

This idea came from watching a successful engineering leader start and end every conversation with appreciation. She's known as approachable and nice, and she gets stuff done. She'd start a conversation with something like, "Thank you for taking the time to come share with me and talk with me." Then she'd have the conversation and end it with, "Thank you for letting me know and for your time." In other words, she sandwiched her conversation between gratitude.

Teach: SMART Gratitude

If you keep saying, 'good job,' it will lose its impact. 'Good job' is generic. What is good? What does it mean? Does it mean the person completed a task? That they did it better than before? That they did it better than someone else? That they went above and beyond? SMART gratitude is a simple tool to get clear on what you appreciate. Instead of a generic statement like 'good job,' using SMART gratitude makes it clear what you appreciate. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Appreciated, Realistic, and Timely. Here are two examples of SMART gratitude:

- "You did an amazing job at checking in with the client before the final delivery yesterday."
- "I am so appreciative that you spent ten minutes into your lunch time today because when you finished that task, it helped us be able to complete our jobs."

Teach: GLAD Tool for Innovation

The GLAD technique, which is borrowed from *Pollyanna*, helps individuals and teams make decisions and take actions from a place of gratitude, not fear. Working from a place of gratitude ensures more innovation. GLAD is an acronym that stands for: Grateful, Lessons, Analysis, and Doing. It's a facilitation structure. The trick is to not go to D for "doing" until the shift to gratitude has happened and the person or team is operating from a place of gratitude.

Grateful - What are you grateful for in this situation?

Lessons - What lessons have you learned? What lessons still need to be learned?

Analysis - What happened and how? What are your choices? What is the impact of the event?

Doing - Take the lessons learned and the analysis and turn them into actionable steps going forward. (Sometimes the action taken is nothing more than consciously choosing to just be grateful.)

When you operate from fear, anger, or indifference, nothing gets better. In some cases, the situation gets worse. A team that is behind schedule and blames its members creates a negative and unmotivated environment where it can take twice as long (if not more) to deliver when compared to an engaged, positive team that is working together and motivated.

The GLAD tool is part facilitator and part coach. If you're in a face-to-face meeting, you can sometimes see the physical shift in body language and facial expression when others use it to transition from survival mode to being open and positive. When in gratitude, the face is softer, with less tension around the eyes. Hands unclench, and the body is in a more relaxed posture. On a conference call, you may detect a voice-tone shift as the other person begins to speak more calmly and slowly.

Pay attention to the questions asked and statements made, as they are key to knowing when to ask others what they are grateful for. If someone is blaming, defensive, hurt, or fearful, it is *not* the time to move to 'doing.' Each person varies in when they shift.

I have a coaching example story about Scott, who is complaining about his relationship with his manager. It takes Scott about ten minutes to shift, and when he does, the action changes from him being ready to leave the company to actively searching for ways to improve his relationship with his manager.

The 'gratitude,' 'lessons,' and 'analysis' steps of GLAD, can be done in any order. The GLAD tool simply ensures that the situation at hand is being handled with an underlying belief in gratitude, so results are more holistic, reality-based, creative, and innovative. Fear, blaming, anger, and indifference fade away as team members become more engaged, collaborative, and successful.

Incorporate Gratitude into Existing Processes

Business missions and visions are just words until action is taken on them and behaviors align. Employees become cynical if they are just words. Having a clear vision that includes gratitude is not enough—it's just the start of paving the way to behaviors that are aligned with the vision. Only when the vision is incorporated into real and required business processes will the culture shift. An example is to add a gratitude question or gratitude rating in your employee performance reviews. By doing this, you have aligned a vision with a process. At a minimum, it requires people to think about gratitude.

If you truly want to embed gratitude in the culture, identify the processes and how you can adapt them to include gratitude. A senior leader of a billion-dollar company said that unless it's in the process, it's not real.

Accountable to Gratitude

As a coach, one of the valuable services I provide is accountability. At the end of each coaching session, we agree what the participants will do to advance their goals before we meet next. More importantly, when we meet next, one of the first questions I ask (in a nonjudgmental way) is, "Did you do what you said you were going to do?" This simple process ensures advancement. If they didn't do it, we figure out how to adjust the action or the goal and what lesson was learned.

Learn how to be accountable to gratitude behaviors. This goes beyond just telling people to be grateful. Keep asking in non-judgmental, specific ways, "How are we grateful? How can we show our gratitude?"

Evolve Gratitude Culture

Muscles are not static. The muscles that I have as a 60-year-old are very different than those I had as a teenager. Muscles need constant workouts and variation to remain strong and

flexible. Gratitude muscles need the same constant adjustments; they're dynamic. The stronger they are, the more we reap the benefits personally and as an organization. What we have and how we are grateful in the future may be different. Hybrid meetings, Zooming, and working from home are all examples of evolving things for which we may or may not be grateful.

Build gratitude muscles by being grateful. Be on the lookout for new things you are grateful for and find others gratitude stories. Regularly review and update processes for gratitude. Regularly review your gratitude score and assessment. I use the New Year as a planning time to update and review my personal gratitude muscle and approaches.

Listen and Collect Gratitude Stories

Stories tell us who we are, give us clues on how to adapt our gratitude workouts, and remind us daily of the importance of gratitude.

Two organizations in the same company created two very different stories about the same situation. An executive was publicly caught stealing from the company; the story was covered by the local press and even made a few national bylines. One organization was run by a very grateful and positive senior leader, and the other organization was run by a more manipulative leader who was not transparent. As a consultant, I worked with both organizations. I was intrigued by how each organization interpreted the same story differently.

The grateful leader's organizational response to the stealing story was that they were so glad the story was out in the open. They called it a cautionary tale. They took actions to examine and plug security holes. However, they talked about that same story very differently in the other organization. Their response was trying to figure out how he got caught. Could they do the same thing? He was their hero (except for the getting caught part). One situation—two different stories and different actions.

A company I work with that has a culture of gratitude actively encourages people to share stories of appreciation. The stories are scrolled on gigantic public monitors on every floor. They are also shared on the monitors for their agile scrum stand-up. The monitors are in such public places that they can be read by everyone. It does take work to edit and set up the weekly stories, but once it started, it got easier, and it evolved and engaged more people.

Start with Now

It doesn't matter how far along you are with building a culture of gratitude. What's important is to recognize where you are and to start now. These twelve ideas will help you build a sustainable culture that oozes gratitude, which in turn will result in you reaping the many business and personal benefits of gratitude. Be a connector. Bridge what exists now to what is possible.

Summary

Gratitude is a universal and large topic with many definitions and benefits for individuals, teams, and corporations. Gratitude is easy, low cost, has a huge ROI, and pays large dividends. It's complex because it's given and received differently by various cultures and individuals.

The more you practice and experience gratitude, the more you will see it unconsciously appear in the culture. The benefits will reach far beyond you, the leader, or the organization. Leaders report benefits in their personal lives. Customers notice too. It's intangible, like air. It's contagious, like yawning. It's healthy, like fruits and vegetables. The results go way beyond amazing business outcomes.

Gratitude bridges the gap and makes the difficult and unknown easier, or at a minimum less intolerable. Gratitude transforms.

The only question should be where to start! There are tons of ideas here, and I have many resources and references I'll share at the end of this paper.

Gratitude Survey

If you have 10 minutes to do a survey on gratitude and business leaders, I would so appreciate it. We are trying to quantify the link between gratitude and positive cultures. Here's the link: [Grateful Leaders Survey \(surveymonkey.com\)](https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/grateful-leaders)



References and Resources:

Amazon Gratitude Idea List:

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Gratitude as a corporate value for Tech: [Gratitude as a Company Value. The story behind a surprising company... | by Anil Dash | Glitch | Medium](#)

Star's Books/Material: <https://leadingwithgratitude.net/>

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Harvard Business Review Articles on Gratitude Links: [Gratitude Credibility: Harvard Business Review | Star Leadership](#)

Positive Psychology Article: <https://positivepsychology.com/benefits-of-gratitude/>

SMART Gratitude Tool: <https://starleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Star-Leadership-Smart-Tool.pdf>

Teams Practice: <https://www.atlassian.com/blog/teamwork/practice-gratitude-team>

[How Toilet-Paper Companies Kept up with an 845% Spike in Demand \(businessinsider.com\)](#)

Can you help us with our research? 10-minute survey on Gratitude: [Grateful Leaders Survey \(surveymonkey.com\)](#)

Gratitude Assessment Worksheet			
Attribute	Rating (1 to 5)	Today	6 Mo.
Intensity What's the most intense level of gratitude you feel?	1 = Neutral 2 = Slight Appreciation 3 = Grateful 4 = Very Grateful 5 = Deep and Intense		
Frequency What percentage of your day do you feel grateful?	1 = 0–20% 2 = 21–40% 3 = 41–60% 4 = 61–80% 5 = 81–100%		
Breadth How many things are you grateful for? Include things, people, ideas, technology, process, everything!	1 = None 2 = 1–20 3 = 21–50 4 = 51 to hundreds 5 = Everything		
Environment How well does your daily environment support gratitude? (Office, home, work, vehicle, colleagues, family, friends, technology)	1 = Not at all 2 = Some 3 = About half 4 = Almost all are supportive 5 = All are supportive		
Behaviors When interacting with others daily, how grateful are your behaviors? Do you say “thank you” and speak in positive terms?	1 = No appreciation of others 2 = Minimal appreciation 3 = Regularly appreciate 4 = Go out of my way to show appreciation 5 = Go above and beyond daily		

Gratitude Plan: Leader

<p>Goal of my gratitude practice and my motivation:</p>	<p>Areas I want to focus on:</p>
<p>Challenges:</p>	<p>Strengths:</p>
<p>I learn best:</p>	<p>Ideas I'll try:</p>
<p>Action/practice Daily I will: Weekly I will: Monthly I will: Trainings:</p>	<p>I'll review this next and update it in: (30 days, 6 months, 1 year): In addition to measurement, this is how I will know I've improved (anecdotally):</p>

Gratitude Plan: Team

Team gratitude goal and outcomes:	Areas to focus on:
What supports/strengthens the goal? (Processes, technology, ground rules):	What are the challenges that get in the way of the goal? (Outside the team's control):
Actions to take Trainings: Communications (text, email, presentations): Processes (ground rules, reporting): Meetings:	This is when we will next review and update:

About Star Dargin

Star Dargin, PCC, CPCC has been the CEO of Star Leadership for 20+ years. Her mission is to inspire people to implement gratitude processes, behaviors, and skills into their leadership style, teams, and business cultures.

As a leadership coach, she's logged over 10,000 hours with smart managers. She helps them find practical solutions and build critical skills that deliver sustainable results.

She's the author of many articles and a book called *Leading with Gratitude: 21st Century Solutions to Boost Engagement and Innovation*.

She started her career as a software engineer and dropped out of the corporate world after burning out and being promoted too much. She lives in New England with her husband and is grateful to be able to spend one day a week babysitting her grandchild.