

How reflecting on gratitude received from family can make you a better leader

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The longstanding advice to "check your baggage at the door" may not be the best way for leaders to engage and empower their employees. Instead, acknowledging that leaders are complete individuals with

experiences outside of the office is a key factor in assisting them with the challenging, exhausting, and often thankless work they do daily.

According to new research from the University of Florida, leaders who reflect on [gratitude](#) that they receive from [family members](#) at home feel higher levels of prosocial impact—the perception that one is making a positive difference in the lives of others—which consequently motivates them to engage in more helpful and empowering behavior toward their employees at work.

"Perceiving that you've made a difference in the lives of those you love satisfies [basic psychological needs](#) which then carry over into the office by motivating you to be more helpful and empowering toward your direct reports," noted researcher Klodiana Lanaj, Martin L. Schaffel Professor at the UF Warrington College of Business.

The key to unlocking the power of gratitude from family members is in reflecting on and savoring those events of appreciation because this prolongs and amplifies the experience, Lanaj explained.

"Taking a few minutes in the morning to reflect on and write about a time when a family member said 'thank you' for something you did at home can motivate you as a leader to be more responsive to your employees' work needs and to empower them to have a voice in important decisions at work," she said. "Our research suggests that positive events that happen at home don't need to stay there. Instead, they can follow leaders at work in ways that benefit their employees."

The researchers—Jasmine Hu of the Ohio State University, who led the study; Daniel Kim (Ph.D. '25) of UF Warrington; and Lanaj—surveyed more than 300 leaders and 100 of their employees across various industries. In three [field experiments](#), they assigned leaders to reflect and write about gratitude received at home before they started their workday.

Those same days, the researchers also surveyed leaders and their followers, who all reported on leaders' helping and empowering behaviors toward their employees that day at work. They found consistent results—as reported by both leaders and followers across the three studies—that reflecting on gratitude received at homemade leaders is more helpful and empowering toward their employees at work.

"Our work suggests that gratitude expressions at home may be beneficial not only for the recipient leaders but also for their employees, who then experienced more help and empowerment from these leaders," Kim said. "Therefore, family members showing appreciation for each other may not only benefit their relationship but also improve their loved ones' work experiences."

Lanaj and Kim recommend that leaders follow two simple steps to benefit from this gratitude reflection.

- First thing in the morning, before you start your workday, take a few minutes to recall a time when you did something good for a family member, and your family member showed appreciation to you for this behavior.
- Close your eyes and imagine yourself being back in the event you just recalled (because savoring the event amplifies its effects). In three to five sentences, describe what you did, what your family member said/did in the situation, and your feelings after receiving your family member's appreciation.

"Gratitude has been found to have numerous benefits for recipients, but not much work has examined leaders as recipients of gratitude," Kim said. "Our work shows that by creating opportunities for [leaders](#) to engage in such gratitude reflections, organizations can foster a positive and supportive work environment that encourages [prosocial behavior](#) and enhances overall leadership effectiveness."

The research, "The Benefits of Reflecting on Gratitude Received at Home for Leaders at Work: Insights from Three Field Experiments," is forthcoming in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

More information: Jia (Jasmine) Hu et al, The benefits of reflecting on gratitude received at home for leaders at work: Insights from three field experiments., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2024). DOI: 10.1037/apl0001194 , psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fapl0001194

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