

When expressing gratitude, it's all in the timing, says study

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Thanks so much for reading this article all the way to the end! No, that wasn't an editorial error. It's a savvy managerial motivation strategy lurking somewhere in almost every employee's inbox or Slack channel.

Mandy O'Neill, an associate professor of management at the Donald G. Costello College of Business at George Mason University, has discovered a potential new addition to the annals of managerial motivation techniques: anticipatory gratitude.

We all know that thanking people for a job well-done, or a much-needed favor, is an effective form of positive reinforcement. Psychology researchers classify gratitude as a "socially engaging emotion" that promotes prosocial behavior and strong interpersonal relationships.

In the course of exploring how employees cope with high-stress or frustrating work situations, O'Neill and her co-author Hooria Jazaieri (of Santa Clara University) discovered an interesting wrinkle in what we thought we knew about this popular emotion: gratitude can be used as a form of emotion regulation and, when expressed ahead of time instead of after the fact, can produce that extra "oomph" when it comes to employee resilience and persistence.

Their paper is [published](#) online in the *Academy of Management Discoveries* journal.

The researchers stumbled upon the power of anticipatory gratitude while researching organizational culture and change within the intensive care units of a leading U.S. hospital. It's difficult to imagine a more gut-wrenching, high-stakes work environment: the ICU units in question receive what one employee called "the sickest of the sickest" from throughout the region.

To decompress and process their emotions after especially difficult shifts, employees routinely emailed the group using an internal listserv. O'Neill and Jazaieri were forwarded four years' worth of messages, which they analyzed with the help of direct experience gained from extensive site visits to the hospital.

In addition to writing heartfelt outpourings of post facto gratitude, ICU colleagues thanked one another for rising to occasions that had not yet occurred. Some of these emails were pre-emptively apologetic ("I may have to take a day or two off from time to time...Thank you for your patience and understanding"). Others seemed to function as pep talks, inspiring teams to keep up the good work ("Thank you...for bringing your a-game to work every day").

As O'Neill describes it, "The 'thanks in advance' phenomenon involves an awareness that you're going to be annoyed or upset by what I'm asking you to do, so I infuse you with the positivity of that feeling you get when someone expresses gratitude to you. Think about it as an emotional buffer. It helps with the inevitable distress of the task that's going to happen later. It makes those [negative emotions](#) less salient, less powerful, and less insidious."

The researchers launched several follow-up studies to learn more about the effects of anticipatory gratitude. They chose a context—Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) gig-work platform—that was in many ways the polar opposite of the ICU. "You go from the ultimate interdependent work environment to the ultimate transactional work environment," O'Neill explains.

The MTurk workers were assigned to solve extremely difficult puzzles. After completing the paid task, they received negative feedback about their performance and were offered the opportunity to do additional puzzles without being paid. MTurkers who had seen a message of gratitude before the main task voluntarily took on significantly more unpaid work than those who received a similar message after the paid exercise.

"What's so compelling and surprising for us is that anyone who does work with experienced online gig worker populations knows it's nearly

impossible to induce workers to go beyond their assignment, even by 30 extra seconds, which is about what we were asking for," O'Neill says.

Questionnaires administered during the study revealed that anticipatory gratitude enhanced feelings of communal self-worth, which contributed to the participant's resilience, that is, their ability to "bounce back" after the initial failure. In a third study, the researchers found anticipatory gratitude was better than a related positive affect—anticipatory hope—at motivating MTurkers to persevere at (i.e. spend more time on) a different set of challenging puzzles.

At this point, the potential for managerial manipulation should be crystal clear. Indeed, it was evident even to some of the gig workers, who wrote private messages such as, "It may be partial trickery for academic purposes but it was still nice to hear."

For O'Neill, these findings show that gratitude is more complicated than we previously thought. "This paper is one of the very few to show that gratitude isn't always authentic and prosocial. It can be used strategically, especially for managers," she says.

Sincerity and strategy are not mutually exclusive. Empathic managers whose feelings of gratitude are so strong that they have to be expressed beforehand could still be taking advantage of the "thanks in advance" phenomenon.

"In all organizations, you need people to stick with difficult or thankless or boring tasks. The challenge, of course, is how to do so ethically. Gratitude can't be a substitute for fair pay and decent work conditions, for example. But our findings are clear: anticipatory [gratitude](#) works; it is effective," O'Neill says.

More information: Hooria Jazaieri et al, Thanks in Advance: The

Social Function of Gratitude Expressions to Employees in Distress,
Academy of Management Discoveries (2024). [DOI:
10.5465/amd.2021.0077](https://doi.org/10.5465/amd.2021.0077)

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