



## The Power of Thank You

by Laura Schildkraut

When you first started to talk, after “Dada,” “Mama,” “cat,” and “dog,” your parents probably taught you the importance of saying, “please” and “thank you.” For most toddlers, “please” comes fairly easily. When you say “please” you’re more likely to get what you want. The cause and effect is immediate. But “thank you” — as I’ll explain in this *Executive Update* — is another story. “Thank you” is about goodwill — and the future. Those are pretty abstract concepts for a toddler. So “please” tends to stick, while “thank you” falls by the wayside. What a shame.

Saying “thank you” demonstrates good manners. It tells people that you recognize and appreciate their efforts, and that you value their contribution. And a thank you encourages similar action in the future.

### WHY EMPLOYEES LEAVE JOBS

A 2005 article by Stephen Miller, manager of the Society for Human Resource Management’s Compensation & Benefits Forum, discussed how lack of recognition and praise is a top reason why people leave their jobs.<sup>1</sup> Personally, this is why I left two former positions.

More recently, the 2011 *Employee Engagement Report* from Blessing White notes that while “recognizing and rewarding my achievements” is a factor that strongly correlates to employee engagement, 60% or fewer of survey respondents felt their managers did this well.<sup>2</sup>

Whether lack of appreciation is a driving force or a final straw, it remains one of the easiest organizational challenges to solve. While you may not always be able to provide more tangible rewards, don’t underestimate the power of thank you. It doesn’t require consensus, budget, or approval. Each manager has the power to impact this area, and it can start today.

### THE POWER OF THANK YOU

Back in late November 2009, I was conducting a group coaching session and the topic was how to keep staff motivated when, because the economy was so bad, the participants were unable to provide an elaborate party, gifts, or bonuses by end of year. After much brainstorming and discussion, one of the things that everyone agreed to do was to hand-write a thank you note to each of their direct reports.

When we reconvened in late January, we debriefed the results of the holiday initiatives that each participant had undertaken. There was unanimous agreement that the most satisfying and effective task that each person had done was writing those personal thank you notes. A participant mentioned that one of her employees had the now-framed letter hanging in his home. Another was told that the employee’s spouse was so touched by the letter that she cried. All agreed that the culture within their workgroups had changed. There seemed to be more smiling and willingness to help each other. One participant mentioned that he noticed his employees thanking others more. Saying “thank you,” it seems, can be contagious.

In many cases, the thank you that you least expect can mean the most. I’ve been fortunate to have many student thank yous over the years. However, one thank you stands out. A bright, but often “class clown,” student had mentioned that he had a strong goal of attaining a 3.5 in my class. Judging by his work early in the quarter, it seemed like he would get his wish. As the quarter rolled along, however, his commitment to the course waned a bit. By the time I was calculating final grades, he had earned a high 3.4, missing his desired 3.5 by a few hundredths of a point. A more careful review showed that his teammates found him to be disappointing and frustrating. They felt he could have participated more in the team projects and commented that he was more interested in joking around during their meetings than getting any real work done. I let the 3.4 stand.

He emailed to ask about his grade. I detailed his individual and team scores, and relayed the themes of the

feedback I'd received from his teammates. He never commented back.

I often email former students when I get internship and job leads, and this student was on my emailing list. About six months later, he emailed a curt request that I remove him from my list and not email him again. "I guess I've lost that one," I remember thinking.

Three years later, I received an email from him. He wanted to say "thank you" for two reasons. First, he thanked me for what he learned in the class. He said the project planning and communication content was highly valuable and helped to position him as a fast tracker in the Wall Street firm where he was now employed. But then, and this must have been harder, he thanked me for not giving him the 3.5. As angry as he was at first, he said, it made him realize that his often inappropriately placed sense of humor was getting in the way of what he was capable of achieving. This was the first situation where he couldn't charm his way into getting what he wanted. The lesson stuck and had lasting impact on him.

His saying so had an impact on me as well. It reinforced that my real-world content and approach was effective and that I should continue to teach with that mindset. It confirmed that in many cases the unpopular, but defensible decision is worth the pushback and is the right one in the end. It reminded me about the importance of my role and the effect I could have on my students by sometimes being tough and providing feedback they may not want to hear. It rejuvenated my commitment to doing what it takes to be a great faculty member.

Isn't that what you want to do for your employees?

## INFREQUENT THANK YOUS

So, if this level of appreciation is so valued, why is it done so infrequently? Perhaps the pace of our everyday lives has grown so frantic that we don't stop and recognize other people's efforts on behalf of us and our projects. We may plan to say "thanks," but put it off. Then, too much time has passed. Perhaps technology has enabled our communication to become so efficient and clipped that, at best, "thx" is all we feel we have time for. Or maybe technology facilitates communication

that is colder and the warmth of a well-constructed thank you email or note feels too personal. Or perhaps a belief has set in that there's no need to thank someone for the job that he or she is paid to do. The paycheck is the statement of appreciation and who has time to thank people for doing their basic job? How far above and beyond does your staff need to go to deserve a statement of appreciation?

Think about your working relationship with your manager. Do you get all the appreciation you'd like to get? How empowering is the appreciation you receive? Do you find that you express all the appreciation you feel?

## A CULTURE OF THANK YOU

Organizations have cultures. Some are intense and value high productivity, while others are creative and value fresh ideas. Some cultures are warm and others are cold. What is your organization's culture with regard to expressing appreciation? How can you create a culture of thank you that will bring about more employee engagement and retention? How can you use thank you to build stronger working relationships with your colleagues across the organization. This is particularly important for IT organizations, since so many of your efforts are cross-organizational.

Of all your managerial initiatives, creating a culture of thank you may be the simplest to implement. Begin at your next staff meeting and follow these steps:

- **Step 1.** Don't tell the staff what you're up to, just start the meeting by going around the table and briefly thank each person for something specific that he or she has done recently. (See next section on what makes an effective thank you.) Then move on to the first agenda item.
- **Step 2.** At the next staff meeting, ask two questions:
  1. How did it feel when I thanked you for your efforts?
  2. Did any of you say "thank you" to one of your colleagues or someone on your staff?

Some of your staff will pick up on the power of thank you and will implement it organically. Others may need a push. Require that, in the next week, they

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provide at least one thank you to a colleague and at least one thank you to a staff member.

- **Step 3.** Debrief at the next staff meeting. Start collecting stories. At this point you can decide whether the first few minutes of each staff meeting should be spent sharing thank you stories, or whether the thank you initiative has been sufficiently ingrained.

Keep in mind that leadership sets the tone in any organization. You need to actively sustain the culture of thank you. Because it feels as good to say it as to receive it, recall that saying “thank you” has a way of becoming contagious.

### WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE THANK YOU?

An effective thank you is one that makes the recipient not only feel good about what he or she has done, but also provides enough detail so that the action or behavior can be reinforced (duplicated/sustained). An effective thank you contains three key elements:

1. **Timeliness.** The most effective thank you will come within 24 hours of the action for which you are expressing appreciation. A thank you that begins with “Belated thanks for...” will dramatically reduce the impact of your message.
2. **Specificity.** “Thanks so much for all you do,” doesn’t really say much. It doesn’t show much thought, interest, or effort on the part of the writer or speaker. Be specific about what the person did that you appreciate and why or how that has made a difference to you.
3. **Sincerity.** A “phoned in” thank you is insulting and worse than no statement of appreciation at all. It reduces trust. You have to really mean what you say or write.

### MIX IT UP!

Sending along a handwritten thank you note every time someone does something nice for you or does a noteworthy job on a project will become excessive for both you and the recipient. So, in many cases, a verbal or emailed (yet still timely, specific, and sincere) thank you will suffice. On some occasions, you may also want to provide a small token of appreciation, such as a \$5 or \$10 gift card, picking up the tab at lunch, or getting a cup of coffee for a colleague when you get one for yourself. A brief thank you along with the token will add impact and demonstrate appreciation. You have many thank you tools in your toolbox. Be creative and mix it up!

### THANK YOU’S VALUE TO IT

“When I’m right, no one remembers. When I’m wrong, no one forgets.” This could be the IT lament. IT is probably one of most underappreciated departments within an organization. It’s like working for a utility company where people only seem to notice when things go wrong. When I walk into a room and turn on the lights, I don’t announce, “Puget Sound Energy, wow — you did it again.” I barely notice. But when the power goes off, I surely have choice words for my beloved power company.

Like a utility company, IT is rarely appreciated and recognized for all the things that go well. Those successes are expected and often overlooked. While it would be wonderful to be appreciated for those efforts, you may need to be the catalyst to a culture of thank you. The best way to begin getting appreciation is to show appreciation. Think about all the colleagues with whom you interact:

- Of course, you’ll start by being highly appreciative of your staff.
- Thank your colleagues and peers for doing a great job providing requirements and support of the most recent project you did on their behalf. Even if the relationship was contentious at times, your finding the positive will have a strong impact on your working relationship going forward. It sets a great tone.
- Go beyond that and thank the whole user community for their efforts and, perhaps, flexibility.
- Overtly thank your vendors when they deliver hardware, software, or services you need to meet your requirements. Remind them how much you value their partnership.
- And don’t forget to thank your manager for his or her support and for going to bat for you when you needed more time, budget, or resources.

Perhaps your thank you will remind colleagues not only about the positive aspects of your working relationship, but also how great it feels when someone appreciates their efforts and takes the time to let them know.

### THANK YOU’S HIDDEN POWER

Finally, if there’s someone with whom you’ve never gotten along, but with whom you need to develop a positive, or at least effective, working relationship, start thanking that person for something he or she did. Even if you don’t get a “thanks” in return, you will be the

bigger person by showing appreciation. Sooner or later, you'll find the mutual respect to work together more effectively.

And you'll know that it all started with a "thank you."

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Miller, Stephen. "More than Money Motivates Employees." Society for Human Resource Management, 2005.

<sup>2</sup>*Employee Engagement Report 2011*. Blessing White, December 2010/January 2011 ([www.blessingwhite.com/EEE\\_report.asp](http://www.blessingwhite.com/EEE_report.asp)).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Schildkraut is the founder of Onboarding Gen Y whose mission is to help organizations attract, retain, and see excellence from their Gen Y employees. This is accomplished through consulting and workshops and establishing internal, reciprocal mentorship programs. Ms. Schildkraut is a faculty member at the University of Washington, teaching classes focused on innovation, entrepreneurship, professionalism, and communication. Her course entitled "Management Lessons from The Apprentice" earned her national recognition from CNN and *Dateline*. Ms. Schildkraut was the host and co-executive producer of *Information Technology Leaders, On the Career Path*, and *Information Matters*, television shows that aired on ResearchChannel and UWTV. Prior to Onboarding Gen Y and the University of Washington, she worked for Microsoft, Ogilvy & Mather, and the US National Association of Securities Dealers (NASD). Ms. Schildkraut holds an MBA from NYU's Stern Business School with concentrations in IS and marketing. She can be reached at [laura@OnboardingGenY.com](mailto:laura@OnboardingGenY.com).