



When I first started learning to talk, my parents taught me an important lesson about great leadership. They taught me to be gracious. Whenever someone did something nice for me, they would look down at me and ask, “What do you say?”

And I would reply “Thank you.”

I don’t think my experience is much different from that of other leaders when they were children. Somehow, though, many of us discarded this lesson. We quit being gracious along the way, and started expecting people to do for us without saying “thank you” in return.

When we fail to exhibit gratitude, those who work for us take that as thanklessness, and our organizations suffer. When people aren’t happy, they start to give less and less to the

organization. They no longer want to “buy in” to the mission.

And why would they? No one cares.

But, when we take those simple steps to say “thank you,” the benefits are worth far more than the minimal effort it takes to say those words. For instance, graciousness puts people in a good mood. And good moods can help our organizations grow and excel. As Daniel Goleman writes in [*Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*](#), “Good moods, while they last, enhance the ability to think flexibly and with more complexity, thus making it easier to find solutions to problems, whether intellectual or interpersonal.”

Over the years, I’ve noticed that the bosses who say “thank you” on a regular basis have subordinates who are willing to go the extra mile to accomplish the mission. In contrast, those who fail to be gracious must constantly push their organizations to excel. They don’t have commitment, they have compliance.

Saying “thank you” is also good for the person saying it. [Research suggests](#) that being grateful improves our overall well-being. As leaders, our mood determines the quality of the decisions we make. And our organizations will mimic our behavior, so if we’re emotionally or mentally closed off, our organization will be too. By taking the time to say “thank you”, showing gratitude towards our subordinates, we’re setting the tone for how the rest of the organization operates.

So how can we show gratitude?

Say “thank you” and be specific. Tell the person exactly what you are grateful for them doing. When someone works hard on a presentation or runs a training event, thank them for their investment in the project. When I was an S3 and XO, I kept thank-you cards at my desk, and if someone worked their butt off to complete a task or moved on to another

assignment, I took a few minutes to write them a note. It is a practice [I learned as a second lieutenant](#), when I received them from my first squadron and troop commanders.

Be honest, don't fake it. Sincerity counts. Don't say "thank you" if you don't mean it. If you're of the mindset that it's that person's job and you shouldn't thank them, try to put yourself in their shoes. What sacrifices did they make to complete the task? Did they struggle to overcome some knowledge gap because of their lack of experience? Think about how much better you would feel if someone appreciated your work.

When appropriate, go public. In their book [Taking the Guidon](#), Allen and Burgess recommend recognizing individuals in front of the formation. Not only does this instill a sense of pride in the individual, but it also demonstrates what behavior you want from the rest of the organization. This also works for staff meetings or briefs. Thanking a staff officer for a great brief, in front of the staff, will show others what you value as a leader.

As leaders, we constantly look towards the future so that we can provide vision and direction for our organizations. But sometimes we need to take a few minutes each day and recognize the hard work of those who got us to the present. In doing so, we cultivate a culture of gratitude that has positive impacts on our organizations and ourselves. And we can do that by saying the two words that our parents taught us a long time ago, "thank you".

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