



## The Power of Gratitude

**Money may make the world go around but when it comes to engaging hearts and minds a simple ‘thank you’ can be a great motivator.**

The corporate culture at Sudabank (not its real name) was toxic, some even described it as “Darwinian”. The working environment was survival of the fittest; everyone seemed to be out for themselves and teamwork was nonexistent. Greed, bullying, and illegal behaviour were rampant. Focused on profits and bonuses, the senior leadership team whittled away at their employees’ self-confidence, health and sanity. Productivity was decreasing, morale was low, there was serious absenteeism and a disturbingly high employee turnover. For many, working at the bank, had become an emotionally draining experience.

Senior management perpetuated the cold, calculating and impersonal atmosphere. It never dawned on them that a culture of positive regard, cooperation and genuine caring would foster creativity and new ideas; that gratitude for work well done could be a great motivating force. As a result, most employees felt undervalued and taken for granted. Given the bank’s noxious work conditions, it was no surprise when a number of its traders were implicated in the Libor scandal of fixing interest rates. The legal actions that followed led to serious fines, although none of the top executives seemed to have been affected.

As this example illustrates, a toxic culture can trigger actions that ultimately lead to business

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**  
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

failure. When money is viewed as the singular motivator, leaders will not be able to engage the hearts and minds and to get the best out of their people.

### **The benefits of gratitude**

For most people what really counts (apart from fair compensation) is respect, recognition, a sense of accomplishment, a sense of belonging, and a feeling of purpose.

When people are exposed to everyday acts of kindness, a simple “thank you” for work well done can be a great motivator and contribute to a more positive work environment.

The words grateful and gratitude derive from the archaic adjective “grate” meaning pleasing to the mind, being full of gratitude, or being disposed to repay favours bestowed. “Grate” originates from the Latin “gratus”, meaning the readiness to show appreciation for, and to return, kindness. Grateful people count their blessings, have the ability to appreciate the simple pleasures of life, and are always prepared to acknowledge whenever good things happen to them. They are also the kinds of people willing to give something back.

Philosophers throughout the ages have looked at

gratitude as an important contributor to harmonious relationships. As the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius noted: "Take full account of the excellencies which you possess and, in gratitude, remember how you would hanker after them if you had them not." Psychoanalysts too have shown a considerable interest in the subject. They view gratitude as the more mature antithesis to the early envy that characterises infant behaviour. As gratitude develops, so does our capacity for expressing appreciation in our future relationships. Gratitude is the glue that enables reciprocity.

### **Building optimism and resilience**

Much about gratitude also has to do with our perspective - the framework we use to look at the world and at ourselves. Grateful people are very talented in building optimism into their everyday lives. They see things in perspective. They know how to redraw their unconscious frames of comparison in a positive and valuable light. They are more likely to let go of their past, accept the present, and look forward to the future.

Having the capacity to express gratitude also improves both physical and mental health. It releases serotonin in our brain (the hormone that controls our mood), which makes us feel better. When faced with adversity, taking a grateful stance converts negative stress into the positive energy and provides the optimism needed to overcome life's challenges. We can even say that gratitude is a natural form of an anti-depressant.

### **Changing a toxic work environment**

The question becomes how to practice gratitude? How to create an environment where people are recognised for their work and, in return, strive to give their best? How do we avoid the 'Sudabanks' and their toxicity?

The first and most basic thing is to respect people who work in the organisation. As gratitude evokes cooperative responses, so too it creates mutually supportive relationships, helps neutralise conflict, generates positive energy and fosters a collective "we're in this together" mentality. It gives people due recognition, fair treatment, a sense of belonging, and a voice.

Senior management who recognise these important dynamics can produce astounding results in employee satisfaction and work performance.

Gratitude is a quality that can be developed later in life. Although it might be difficult at times, we need to learn to stop ourselves from whining as complaining yields little but hot, ineffectual air. One concrete course of action is to get into the habit each

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**  
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

morning of making a conscious decision on our day's outlook. Will it be one full of gratitude for what we have, or of negativity. We should keep in mind that it's our outlook to life and subsequent actions that can make a difference.

Another action is to devote some time each day to reflecting on the various things we should be grateful for. This should also include the people we should be grateful to - people who have influenced (and are influencing) our lives in a positive way. The act of expressing gratitude increases a sense of gratefulness both in oneself and in the other.

### **Dealing with negativity**

While it is unrealistic to think we won't have times of doubt or negativity, it is important to remember that even life's greatest challenges can be reframed as opportunities for significant personal growth and development. Ruminating on negative thoughts, however, only drains us of energy and motivation.

Perhaps, it is good to remember that in dealing with life's vicissitudes we are like painters who have to decide how to structure a painting and what colours to choose; whether to choose dull or lively hues? Pictures have more life when the colours are bright. The same can be said about the colours of gratitude. In our life's journey, by painting gratitude we choose to have a more positive, fulfilling and vibrant life.

***Manfred Kets De Vries** is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and The Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus. He is the Founder of INSEAD's **Global Leadership Centre** and the Programme Director of **The Challenge of Leadership**, one of INSEAD's Top Executive Development Programmes.*

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on **Twitter** and **Facebook**

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/blog/insead-blog/the-power-of-gratitude-4154>

Download the Knowledge app for free

