



Fostering a Culture of Gratitude in Your Medical Practice

Never underestimate the value of a simple thank-you.

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Currently there is quite a bit of scholarly and popular literature that suggests that being grateful is good for us. For instance, *Psychology Today*¹ reports that over time, feeling grateful boosts our happiness and fosters our physical and psychological health. As *Psychology Today*¹ explains, “Studies show that practicing gratitude curbs the use of words expressing negative emotions and shifts inner attention away from negative emotions such as resentment and envy.” Likewise, *Harvard Health Publishing*² cites several research studies that suggest that gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. As *Harvard Health Publishing* concludes, “Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships.” In addition, *Time*³ suggests numerous benefits that come with practicing gratitude, including better impulse control, better decision-making, and more patience.

Finally, Susan Pierce Thompson,⁴ a cognitive scientist who specializes in the psychology of eating, suggests that gratitude can reduce our overeating. In addition, Thompson says, “People who are more grateful get sick less often, they exercise more, they get better sleep for longer on average, they’re 25% happier, they’re 20% more generous with

their time and with their money, they have better relationships, [and] they’re more forgiving.” In short, if there were a drug that offered those benefits, Thompson says, whoever patented that drug would be very, very rich.

Is it any wonder, then, that we have seen a proliferation of gratitude-themed books, articles, journals, calendars, key chains, t-shirts, coffee mugs, magnets, podcasts, memes, and apps? Go into any card or gift shop, or shop online these days, and you’re likely to see a plethora of gratitude-themed products

personal health and wellbeing. Grateful employees experience boosts in dopamine, resulting in fewer sick days, greater optimism, increased self-esteem, and increased energy at work. They also demonstrate better stress management, more resilience, better decision-making, reduced aggression, and better relationships with their co-workers. Grateful employees also self-regulate their behavior and are likely to remain honest and true, even when there is opportunity to stray. They also tend to

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for sale. Do an online search, and you will find coaches and psychologists and authors galore teaching us why and how to practice gratitude. Clearly, as our world becomes increasingly more complex and as our stress level rises, we are attracted to the simple idea that gratitude can make us happier and healthier. But can gratitude promise equally powerful benefits to a medical practice? And, if it can, how can the medical practice manager develop and foster a culture of gratitude in the practice without it feeling contrived, insincere, and maybe more than a little saccharine?

The Benefits of Gratitude in Your Medical Practice

Practicing gratitude has benefits that extend beyond the individual’s

be good team players. As *Economy*⁵ says, “Gratitude encourages social and moral behavior while discouraging disruptive behavior.” Simply put, *Economy* suggests, grateful employees are “better corporate citizens.”

The power of gratitude increases significantly in organizations that demonstrate sincere gratitude for their employees. A grateful manager can increase productivity, employee retention, wellness, and engagement. As Riordan⁶ explains, “When employees feel valued, they have high job satisfaction, are willing to work longer hours, engage in productive relationships with co-workers and supervisors, are motivated to do their best, and work towards achieving the com-

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pany's goals." In fact, employees who feel that their employers are grateful for their contributions are more likely to develop a glass-half-full attitude

about their work more generally, even when faced with adversity. As Siegal⁷ suggests, employees who experience gratitude will focus their attention on what they already have, rather than on what they want.

Fortunately, gratitude is an employee development tool that does not cost a lot of money and does need not to take a great deal of time. And once you establish a culture of gratitude

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Twelve Thank-You Messages to Express Gratitude to Your Staff

A heartfelt thank-you to your employees can do a world of good in your medical practice. But how can you express those thanks without using the same words again and again? Gaille¹² suggests 39 specific thank-you messages for employees that managers can use orally or in writing. Below are 12 of those messages. First, cite specifically what the employee has done to deserve your gratitude. Then, be sure to say thank you:

- 1** Thank you for bringing your positive attitude to work every day. Projects become easier to execute, changes become easier to implement, and problems become easier to solve, thanks to you.
- 2** Employees like you are the epitome of professionalism. Thank you for bringing your best to work every single day.
- 3** Thanks for being that employee who assumes leadership when the boss is not around and ensures compliance when she is.
- 4** Our office would be weakened without your presence. Thank you for helping us to stand strong.
- 5** Thank you for realizing that by taking ownership of every project, you have taken ownership of your own success.
- 6** Thank you for all your efforts and dedication. Your sincere service deserves our encouragement and appreciation.
- 7** I see how hard you worked for this recent task and I appreciate all you are doing for us. Thank you.
- 8** How can I forget your committed service as an employee here? It is something very valuable to us. Thank you.
- 9** I hold you in high regard because you have set the bar high for all of us. Thank you so much.
- 10** My words can never be enough to praise your actions. Your work always meets or exceeds my expectations. Thank you.
- 11** Thank you for shouldering responsibility and putting our patients' interests ahead of your own time and time again.
- 12** Your professionalism embodies our philosophy and your hard work is a prime example of how employees can make a difference. Thank you.

Of course, there are spontaneous moments in every day when you may see opportunities to express your gratitude to your employees. However, while these moments can be very effective, so too can those be that are planned. Murchison¹³ identifies seven opportunities for you to express your gratitude to your employees. By seizing these moments, Murchison says, your employees will feel that they matter to you, and you can create a culture of gratitude. **PM**

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in your medical practice, it can be easy to maintain. As Siegal suggests, “Gratitude is viral, so once people see appreciation catching, they are likely to jump in and keep it going.” Instituting gratitude in your medical practice is something that any employee can do; even a patient can do it. However, gratitude may be most effective when the medical practice manager demonstrates and models gratitude, both personally and on behalf of the practice.

As Smith⁸ suggests, “Employees need to hear ‘thank you’ from the

boss first. That’s because expressing gratitude can make some people feel unsafe, particularly in a workplace with a history of ingratitude.” It’s up to the person or people with power in your medical practice to say “thank you” clearly, authentically, and consistently, Smith says, and in both public and private settings.

How to Establish a Culture of Gratitude: Ten Guidelines

When a medical practice manager takes the time to recognize the modest acts that can so easily go unnoticed, doing so can encourage

others to do the same. However, don’t wait for the big opportunities to present themselves. As Sun⁹ suggests, “People might feel uncomfortable calling out the sometimes seemingly insignificant things people do. But it’s a snowball effect—the more you express gratitude, the more natural and almost subconscious it becomes.”

Of course, a manager who says “thank you” is off to a good start in expressing gratitude. However, a culture of gratitude relies upon much more than that. Following are 10

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When to Express Gratitude to Your Employees: Seven Opportunities

1 One-on-one meetings: Murphison suggests that managers regard their one-on-one employee meetings as opportunities to support employees and help them to thrive, both individually and as a team. “For me,” Murphison says, “there’s an amazing opportunity in one-on-one meetings to be present with our employees, to spend time with them, to see them, and to support their flourishing as human beings.” Murphison suggests that annual performance reviews be reframed as “conversations” and that they include sincere and specific expressions of your gratitude.

2 Rituals: Murphison sees rituals as an opportunity to celebrate and be grateful for your employees. Birthdays, employment milestones, weddings, and other moments can be cause for ritualistic gathering and celebrating. These are perfect moments to express gratitude, Murphison says.

3 Debriefs and lessons-learned reflections: Murphison suggests that the end of projects or the achievement of milestones provides opportunities for you to express gratitude to your employees. Particularly focus on the ways that your team worked together to accomplish its goals, Murphison suggests.

4 Whenever an employee comes to mind: Murphison suggests that managers send notecards to employees whenever they think positively about them. Most people will feel honored that you thought of them, Murphison says, especially if you did so when you were out and about in your community, not at work. Perhaps you’ll see or hear something that reminds you of that employee, Murphison says. If so, let him or her know. Doing so will help your employees to feel “seen” by you, Murphison says, and that they matter to you.

5 Staff meetings: Create opportunities at meetings to talk about the work you’re doing together, Murphison suggests, and to appreciate one another.

6 Beginnings: Murphison believes that you have a great opportunity to express gratitude every time you bring a new staff member on board. Appreciate the applicants who prepared and submitted their materials to you, and who gave their time and energy to participating in your interviews, Murphison says. Welcome and onboard your new employees in ways that express your gratitude for their taking the job and joining your team. Also express your gratitude to the applicants you did not hire, Murphison says.

7 Endings: Similarly, Murphison suggests that managers can express their gratitude to employees who leave the medical practice. As Murphison says, “Some endings are chosen. Some are not chosen. But I think both are opportunities to appreciate that person as they’re getting ready to transition out of your organization.” **PM**

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guidelines for effectively expressing gratitude to your employees:

Make It Specific

Of course, you can issue blanket statements such as, “Thanks so much for all you do.” However, your expressions of gratitude will be much more effective if you focus your remarks on particular acts. For example, don’t just thank your employees after an especially hard day when you’re understaffed or when your schedule is strained by emergencies. Rather, thank them for working through lunch, for staying late, for working so well as a team, for keeping their thoughts positive, and for keeping all the balls in the air despite the tremendous challenges of the day. Your staff will appreciate those thanks much more because they will see that you cared enough and paid close enough attention to them to know what they had to do to make the day work. As Sun suggests, “Calling out the specifics means so much more.”

Be Creative

Classic ways to express gratitude to employees are retirement parties and employee-of-the-month programs. These efforts can be effective, but dig deeper to find your own ways to express gratitude. As the Academy of Management¹⁰ suggests, “More creative and pervasive efforts can work better.” For example, why not start each staff meeting by expressing your gratitude for some quality about each person in the room? Or ask for volunteers to express gratitude for someone else at the meeting. These can be powerful ways to foster gratitude, the Academy of Management suggests, because they allow employees to participate.

Do It Daily

If you stand up in a staff meeting once a quarter and rattle off a scripted thank you, your employees will see right through that half-hearted attempt. Your thanks won’t mean much. Instead, make gratitude a daily habit. As Sun suggests, “Set a goal to thank someone for something specific each day.” When you take the time to go out of your way to do so, Sun says, people will know you are

genuine, and you’ll see significant improvements in staff morale.

Make Your Gratitude Inclusive, Not Competitive

Of course, some employees will perform better than others, and some will be more likeable than others. You will no doubt have your favorites. However, the Academy of Management warns, employee gratitude works best when it focuses on effort and perseverance rather than on a competitive metric or favoritism. Reward excellent performance with bonuses and raises and with opportunities for promotion. But be grateful for and express that gratitude to everyone on your staff who works hard and who tries. As the Academy of Management succinctly puts it, “Avoid envy among workers by applying your gratitude programs to everyone.”

and the need to give as well as receive gratitude.” Excessive pride can hinder collaboration, the Academy of Management warns.

Teach Your Staff How to Accept Gratitude

Some members of your staff may naturally dismiss the gratitude they receive. They may say that what they did was not that important or point to others who they say did more. It can be difficult for some of us to receive expressions of gratitude. Try this exercise if you find this is the case in your practice: Pair up your employees and ask them take turns saying something complimentary to each other. Instruct the one who is receiving the praise, compliment, or gratitude to say, “thank you,” and nothing else. Ask the pair to maintain eye contact through-

For larger staffs, you may need to enlist others to help you know who has done what behind the scenes.

Be Grateful for the Big and Small

It’s easy to take note of big efforts and big successes. It can be much harder to pick out the employee who quietly took on extra work for a sick co-worker or an employee who spent her weekend hand-cutting Halloween decorations to put up in your office on Monday morning. Be grateful for all of the above. For larger staffs, you may need to enlist others to help you know who has done what behind the scenes. As Sun suggests, “Be aware that gratitude for the smaller actions often needs to be encouraged at the team level.”

Don’t Just Recognize—Thank

Don’t just recognize employees for what they accomplished and ask for a round of applause. As Sun suggests, “Actually express gratitude for all the work they put into it.” Again, be as specific as you can. Use words like thankful and grateful.

Be Grateful for Individual Effort, But Also for Teamwork

As the Academy of Management suggests, “Avoid fostering too much pride or a sense of entitlement. Emphasize appreciation for teamwork

out the exchange. With practice, your employees will learn how to accept compliments and gratitude more comfortably. More importantly, they will learn to believe in and absorb the gratitude being given to them.

Make It Easy to Express Gratitude

Perhaps you can reserve a few minutes at your staff meetings for expressing gratitude. Or why not establish a way for your employees to recognize and appreciate the contributions of a co-worker in writing? Sun reports that office managers in his organization keep thank-you cards available at the front desk for anyone to use. As Sun suggests, “A handwritten note means worlds more than an email.” Whatever you do, make it easy for your employees to express their gratitude to one another, especially if they are shy about doing so face-to-face.

Don’t Assume

Our gratitude may be so obvious to us that we assume that it must be obvious to the other person as well. Ludden¹¹ refers to this as the “curse of knowledge.” As Ludden explains, “If

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you know something, it's hard to imagine that other people don't know it as well." "It's obvious," we say. However, nothing is ever obvious. Your employees can't read your mind or know what is in your heart. As a corollary to this, Ludden warns, people often do think that they can read your mind and make inferences about what you're thinking and feeling, but they are mistaken. Therefore, don't assume that your employees know that you are grateful for their contributions. Express your gratitude and you will clarify a lot of misunderstanding, Ludden says.

Making Your Gratitude Feel Genuine, Not Contrived or Saccharine

If you haven't been generous with your gratitude in the past, your staff may be surprised and suspicious when you suddenly change. Therefore, be careful when you begin to dole out the compliments and thanks. Otherwise, your gratitude may sound false, overly sweet, and forced.

First, tread lightly with new, formal gratitude initiatives. As the Academy of Management warns, "Employees might regard a 'gratitude initiative' launched by management with cynicism, seeing it as a way to improve the bottom line and draw more work out of employees." There's no need to announce an effort to begin practicing more gratitude in your medical practice. Instead, try expressing your gratitude slowly at first, and naturally. Once your staff becomes accustomed to that, you may be able to talk with them more broadly about gratitude in your medical practice. For now, just begin.

Also be mindful that forcing gratitude may not lead to genuine gratitude. Therefore, avoid gratitude strategies that force public expressions of gratitude, or that require employees to fabricate gratitude on demand. Begin your efforts by simply being more mindful to express your own gratitude in natural situations. Then, as Smith suggests, "Create times and spaces that foster the voluntary, spontaneous expression of gratitude."

Likewise, be careful not to overdo it. Too frequent expressions of gratitude will come across as contrived and insincere, even if you truly mean what

you say. As Smith suggests, "Studies consistently show that there is such a thing as too much gratitude." In fact, trying to be grateful too much induces "gratitude fatigue," Smith warns. Your staff will probably discount a profusion of gratitude and compliments, and your efforts may end up doing more harm than good, Smith says.

Moreover, Smith suggests that you go out of your way to thank the people in and around your medical practice who never get thanked. For instance, every organization has someone who empties the trash, mops the floors, and does other thankless tasks to keep the office functioning. Your practice is no exception.

As Smith says, "Thanking those who do thankless work is crucial because it sets the bar and establishes the tone [of gratitude]." Seize opportunities to express personal and public appreciation for the unsung contributors to your medical practice. That will bolster their morale and shine a light on their contributions. It also can broaden everyone's understanding of how your medical practice functions and who the behind-the-scenes players are. Thanking those who never get thanks ultimately will improve morale and increase trust for everyone, Smith says.

Finally, don't inflate or exaggerate the importance of an employee's contributions. Your staff is too savvy for that. Describe each person's contributions realistically, and don't gush. Simply look into your employees' eyes, focus your attention, and thank them sincerely but not profusely for what they have done. In other words, when it comes to expressing gratitude to your staff, don't overdo it. Just keep your gratitude real so your employees can accept and absorb what you have to say to them. **PM**

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