



What Every Team Wants to Hear From Their Leader

By Joel Schwartzberg

If there's one thing every team wants to hear from a leader in every communication, it's gratitude.

In addition to boosting your team's morale and motivation, public recognition reinforces that you're paying attention to—and in full support of—their endeavors. Even minor expressions of gratitude can have a meaningful impact on those who receive them.

In a [study](#) published in the June 2010 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, researchers Francesca Gino and Adam M. Grant revealed that simple expressions of gratitude “increase prosocial behavior by enabling individuals to feel socially valued.”

Now, for those of you who don't read the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* religiously as I do, *prosocial behavior* is behavior connected to positivity, helpfulness, and an intention to advance social acceptance and collegiality—the kind of behavior leaders want to foster.

But while you have more than 170,000 English words to choose from to create a nifty complement, not all word combinations and phrases have the same impact. In fact, just the words “thank you” convey little meaningful impact. It registers as polite but not substantially praising. So here's what you should do instead.

1. Supply the “Why”

To give your appreciation rich meaning and value, it must answer the question, “Why is this person deserving of thanks?” Answering this question credits the achievement and the level of commitment, ingenuity, and hard work.

Also, make sure your appreciation is specific, timely, and unique to the person you're acknowledging. You'll get extra appreciation points for including a true story or example that illustrates the effort's value. The more details you provide, the more meaningful your appreciation will be.

Here's an example. Note the progression of impact as a leader recognizes "Sam" and includes more telling details:

▶ "My thanks to Sam, who delivered a presentation last week."

Translation: *"I understand Sam completed a task."*

▶ "My thanks to Sam, who delivered a great presentation last week."

Translation: *"I noticed Sam did a good job."*

▶ "My thanks to Sam, whose presentation on inventory innovations last week was powerful and had good ideas."

Translation: *"I paid attention to Sam's presentation. He did a good job, and his effort can have value for the team."*

▶ "My thanks to Sam, whose presentation on inventory innovations last week demonstrated how much time and energy we can save if we think as creatively as he did."

Translation: *"Sam got my attention with his presentation. He impressed me with his points about innovation, and I think we can all learn from them."*

Another element that makes the last version especially compelling: the elimination of adjectives. When you banish adjectives, you force yourself to use more meaningful and specific words.

Yes, giving meaningful, contextual thanks takes considerably more time and energy than simply saying or emailing the word "thanks," but when you see it as a valuable opportunity to reward and inspire, the return on your investment is clear.

2. Don't Sit on Your Support

Leadership Coach Darcy Eikenberg, whose clients include The Coca-Cola Company, Microsoft, and Deloitte, discourages leaders from saving their appreciation until a project's completion, and I agree. Appreciation is valuable at any stage and can inspire further commitment.

"Sometimes, we struggle to acknowledge and appreciate others on our team because the goal isn't complete or isn't yet successful," Darcy told me. "But it's the right effort that gets the right results. Recognizing the steps your team takes toward those results can be very powerful and affirming—even if they haven't met their ultimate goal yet."

3. Try “The Wedding Test”

The best evidence of the value of meaningful thanks happens at weddings, not workplaces. Visualize two wedding toasts—one merely saying, “Phil and Alice make a great couple,” the other telling a story about Phil and Alice’s courtship that reveals their quirky personalities and illustrates their compatibility.

Which toast will be remembered and admired? The one that used details to convey a specific point of appreciation. Your “toast” should resonate with your team the same way.

4. Thank Everyone without Excluding Others

If you’re conveying general appreciation to many people at once—during a holiday event or organizational milestone, for example—don’t call out specific teams or people at the risk of neglecting others. The sting of being left out can cause more damage than what the glow of recognition can deliver.

At the same time, avoid very long, all-inclusive lists of appreciated people and departments that will cause many in your audience to tune out. If you can’t call out specific people or teams without omitting others equally deserving of recognition, speak of the qualities and values they share:

“Though many people and teams around the company contributed significantly to our success—too many to mention here—what unites all of you is a love for what we do and a relentless commitment to our goals. I appreciate and thank you all.”

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