JLA JEWISH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

# Being thankful is not enough. Here are 21 tips to help you do a better job thanking people

Thanksgiving is coming up this week, and all of us in the US will likely be reflecting on things for which we are each thankful. That's great. Gratitude has been scientifically proven to lead to all sorts of benefits, from reducing stress, to improving sleep, to making people around us less likely to poison our hummus.

What we kind of suck at is expressing gratitude to other people. Heck, 33% of workers have not been recognized in the past six months, and 21% have never ever been recognized ever, which is really sad. If I had a nickel for every time I learn that someone feels underappreciated—an ED by their board, staff by the leadership, volunteers by the staff, grantees by their funders, etc.—I would have…approximately 65 cents. That's still a lot in nonprofit.

So, this week, while you reflect on what you are grateful for, let's start talking about stuff we can do year-round to cultivate a culture of gratitude at our organizations. Because simply being thankful is not enough; we need to be better at recognizing and appreciating the people who make this work successful. These tips are in no particular order. Special thanks to my colleagues Alice Ferris, Jim Anderson, and Lisa Ryan for many of these suggestions that I gathered from crashing their keynotes:

1. Start a gratitude journal. It doesn't have to be complicated. Once a week, just write down three specific things for which you are thankful. Here are a few tips based on research (for instance, it seems it's better to do the journal weekly rather than daily, and to focus on people rather than things for which you are grateful). This practice helps us better appreciate the people around us.

2. Catch people doing things well. One time, I wrote a letter to the owner of a restaurant praising his thoughtful team (who remembered my name and that I was vegan). He sent me a handwritten note saying that he read the letter to the entire team and it really brightened their day. We pay far more attention to when people screw up than to when they do something right. Let's be on the lookout for and acknowledge when people are doing things right, not just when they do something wrong. It makes a huge difference.

3. Thank people who are steady and consistent: In addition to catching people doing things wells, also acknowledge people who keep things running. Oftentimes, we pay attention to outliers and ignore consistent high-quality work. Operations staff, for example, are pivotal to everything in the sector, and the better they do their job, the less likely we'll notice them. Like, we forget that someone is running payroll until we don't get paid on time. If you have been paid on time every month, or the programs have been running without a hitch, or the supplies are always available when you need them, or donations keep rolling in, or the office snacks are always replenished, or social media posts are always timely, or the fridge is always clean, find out who is doing their job so well, and thank them.

4. Remember and celebrate special days: Have a calendar of everyone's birthdays and work anniversaries, and find ways to celebrate these milestones. If you have a lot of team members, maybe have a day once a month to celebrate everyone whose birthday is that month. But personal recognition for dates that are meaningful to your team members are usually appreciated. (Update: As a colleague pointed out in the comment section below, please be considerate and ask people before you celebrate certain days, as it may be difficult for people; for instance, due to sometimes painful circumstances, some immigrants/refugees may not know their birthdays)

5. Find out how each of your colleagues likes to be thanked. Some people love public praise; others are mortified by it. Some people love gifts from you; others really appreciate getting to spend time with you, such as getting lunch together, etc. A questionnaire of preferences might be helpful. Here's an example.

6. Provide timely, frequent feedback, both positive and constructive. Research seems to indicate that top-performing teams have a 5.6-to-1 ratio of positive to constructive feedback. That means that in general, on average you should aim to provide five or six pieces of praise for every suggestion for improvement. They don't have to be delivered all at once, of course, but generally throughout your interactions. Most of us don't get or give anywhere near that. In fact, some of us

have a reverse ratio, like 4 pieces of negative feedback for every…uh, zero positive. But I'm trying to do better!

7. Point out specific actions and results when thanking people. Avoid generic things like "Thanks for being so awesome!" It is way more meaningful to mention a specific action and what it means to you, for instance "I really appreciate your time reviewing my draft grant proposal, especially the section on community needs. I know it took a lot of effort to remove all the cussing, especially since some of the swear words were in Olde English. Thank you."

8. Write out your sentiments. It is wonderful to hear words of gratitude in person, but written words can be especially appreciated, since the recipient can read them over and over again. Handwritten notes are great, but don't let that stop you. It is often the heartfelt words that count, so while others may disagree with me, emails or typed letters are fine, sometimes preferred. I label every heartfelt thank-you email I get under the label "For Crappy Days" (and also keep the handwritten notes in a box). Then sometimes on crappy days I go through these messages, and they always make me feel less crappy.

9. Don't be afraid to be vulnerable or mushy once a while. It's OK to let people know the profound effects they have had on you. We don't do this enough for one another. Probably because we think it may sound "cheesy," or we think the other person might misinterpret our words or intentions, so we hold back. Don't. Life is too short to not let people know how they have bettered your life.

10. Match your gratitude with actions. Sometimes, thanking people is not enough, or might actually be insulting, insensitive, or condescending. For instance, if a team member has been taking on an unfair amount of office chores that no one wants to do, such as cleaning the fridge, thanking them without taking other actions may justifiably only irritate them. Get everyone else to do their part and maybe exempt the person from fridge duty for a while to balance things out.

11. Pay people better, and provide health insurance and paid family leave. Speaking of actions, one of the best ways you can show your gratitude to your team is to make sure they are paid decently, have great insurance, and have sufficient paid family leave, among other things. A million thank-you notes or plaques do not make up for undercompensating people.

12. Appreciate your donors of cash as well as of time. Our donors of money are important. And as mentioned before, time is finite and can never be replenished. So let's appreciate our time donors as much as we appreciate our cash donors.

Whatever you do for money donors—thank-you notes, phone calls, mini-muffins—you should also do for your amazing volunteers.

13. Acknowledge funders who provide Multi–Year General Operating Dollars (MYGOD): A pattern I've noticed is that funders who provide MYGOD are way less finicky and demanding than those who provide restricted funding, which also means we are less likely to thank them. This is a shame and a bad practice, because if anything, they deserve the most thanks for making our lives easier and our work more effective. So thank them! Highlight them in your media. Give shout-outs during your events. Use these opportunities to not only recognize these awesome funders, but also to talk about the importance of general operating dollars.

14. Staff, appreciate your board: Boards are critical to the work, and yet we tend to mainly complain about the stuff they don't do so well at and ignore the positive things they bring. While the board system is far from perfect (and I'll be writing more on that later), remember that board members are volunteers who are contributing time they could be spending with their families, along with money and a host of skills the staff may not have. Let's show our board members we value them.

15. Board members, appreciate your EDs: OK, I'm kind of biased since I am an ED, as indicated by my cashflow-related daily night terrors, but there are quite a few EDs/CEOs who are feeling unloved by their boards. If you are a board member, especially if you are a board officer, think about the last time you acknowledged your ED's work. Mark down their work anniversary and birthday on your calendar; those are naturally good times to show appreciation. But any time is a good time, and it doesn't have to be elaborate. Sure, flowers or a bottle of their favorite hooch–if they drink–is always appreciated, but a simple heartfelt email can also do wonder for morale.

16. Have a Wall O'Gratitude: Put up an easel sheet or white board in the conference room and encourage your team members to put up names of any entity outside the organization who should be thanked. This serves as a great visual reminder.

17. Try to think of people who might rarely get acknowledged. We tend to acknowledge and thank major donors and funders. Let's also remember partner organizations, consultants, outsourced-service professionals, the janitorial staff, AV and service staff at venues when we have galas, the caterer who pulled through on short notice and always gives extra corn bread, etc.

18. Have a stack of thank-you notes at every team meeting: Pick a few people from the Wall O'Gratitude (or whatever you call it, maybe "Bank O'Thanks"? It needs to have "O'" in it), and pass around cards for everyone to write a little message in it. These cards with several small personal handwritten notes mean a lot to people. I keep every single one that I get.

19. Praise people to their bosses. It is important for supervisors to recognize and thank their team members, but even otherwise great ones can totally miss the mark on this. A message from you to someone's supervisor or board of directors can serve as a timely reminder and make a huge difference in terms of morale for everyone.

20. Thank job candidates who apply to your org. As I wrote earlier in "Hey, can we be nicer to job candidates and stop treating them like crap?" we expect job candidates to write us thank-you notes after interviews, and we sometimes punish them for failing to show sufficient gratitude. This needs to be mutual, because job applicants are also spending a lot of time on us. How about we start a practice where organizations send handwritten or email thank-you notes to interviewees too, eh?

21. Appreciate yourself: Don't forget to show gratitude to yourself. You are awesome, and you should acknowledge how amazing you are and all the great things you contribute to your nonprofit and to society.

I'm sure you have other tips. Please write them in the comment section. Happy Thanksgiving, everyone. I am grateful for all of you who work each day to make the world better. And thanks for reading my ramblings. Take some time to relax and recharge this week. You deserve it.

http://nonprofitaf.com/2018/11/being-thankful-is-not-enough-here-are-21-tips-to-help-you-do-a-better-job-thanking-people/#more-5564