



Our Attitude to Gratitude

“She only wanted to thank us. She was crying when she said, ‘I’ll never forget what everyone did.’”

These were the first words from a colleague in India this week when we connected. When we asked how he was doing, he never spoke about himself—but instead related a phone call he had received unexpectedly from the widow of a partner at our firm who died recently from Covid.

“She kept saying how thankful she was,” Navnit Singh, our firm’s Chairman and Managing Director of India, said. “She was crying—and I was crying.”

As Navnit told the story, he paused several times, took off his glasses, and wiped his eyes. We sat in silence, processing the emotional weight of her words—gratitude in the midst of grief.

“They were so thankful to have the space to share the loads they have been carrying on their own, every day.”

When another colleague spoke these words, the weariness was palpable in his voice—and with good reason. Spiking Covid cases, lockdowns, unrest, and looting in South Africa had resulted in losses, deaths, and mounting worries. His biggest concern was for his team—isolated and emotionally drained.

So when Thabiso Legoete, Managing Director for Korn Ferry Sub-Saharan Africa, convened a virtual team meeting this week, he did not launch into the agenda. Instead, Thabiso started with a simple but sincere question: “How are you feeling?” That triggered an outpouring: loved ones who were ill and some who had died, and emotions from sadness to fear, frustration to loneliness.

As Thabiso told us, “When someone else knows what you are going through, you are not the only one to carry the burden.”

“Even when facing such a devastating cycle, you are grateful for food on your plate, work to be done, and family beside you.”

The colleague in Brazil who said these words gave a philosophical response to this question: “How is everyone holding up?” He pivoted the conversation to gratitude, which as he explained has deep meaning in Latin American culture.

“This is not a year to think about what we are missing. It’s not a time for regrets or dissatisfaction,” Rodrigo Araújo, a Managing Partner in Brazil, told us. “It’s a time for all of us to be grateful for what we have.”

From east to west to south, I’ve had numerous conversations like these with colleagues in areas of the world that are being impacted by Covid and unrest. Amid so many heartbreaking stories, I kept hearing the unexpected. Time and again, they spoke of thankfulness and gratitude.

This is not to minimize the ongoing suffering that takes an unbearable toll in human terms. But as I heard everywhere, an attitude of gratitude lifts our hearts and elevates our spirits.

It starts with two small but extremely powerful words that translate in every language: *thank you*. It was expressed in poetry of gratitude from South Africa, deep traditions in Latin America, and a strong sense of togetherness across India.

When we sincerely give our thanks—telling others, “We appreciate you”—the message delivered is, “You are loved.”

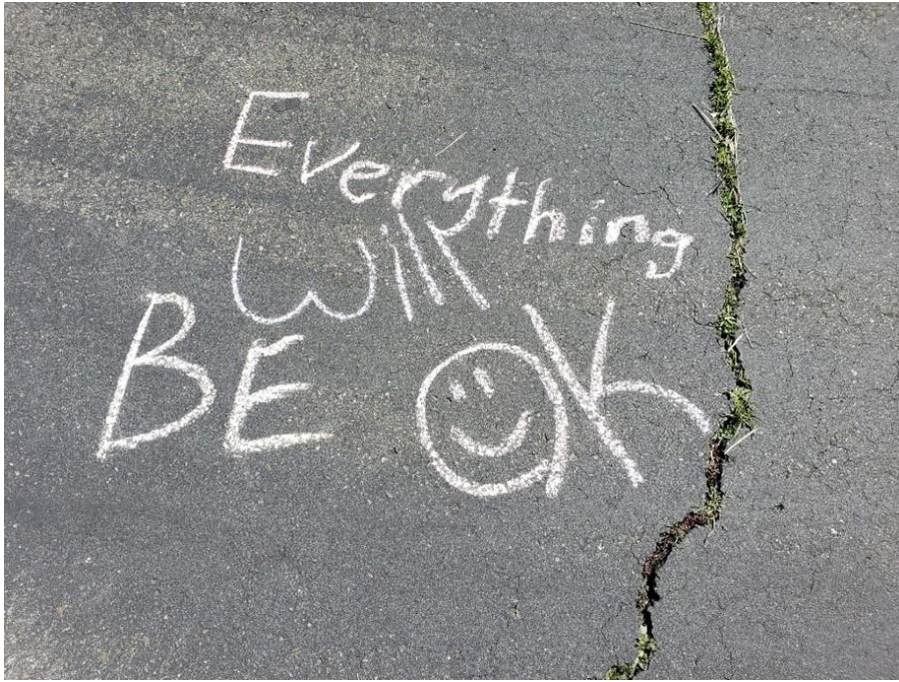
And it’s a gift that goes both ways. As we express our thanks, we are uplifted—often as much as the person being appreciated. Indeed, true gratitude is one of life’s most precious treasures. Here are some thoughts:

- **The gift we never return.** We’ve all had this experience: giving someone a gift and waiting for the wrapping paper to be removed and the box opened. Nervous and a little uncertain, and even to hedge our bets, we whisper when no one’s listening, “There’s a gift receipt at the bottom if you want to take it back.” Not so with the gift of pure, unadulterated appreciation. There are no receipts, no strings attached. This is not layaway for some future obligation. It’s all gratitude. People should not need to read the tea leaves in an email or a text—anxiously interpreting the emoji or discerning the meaning of a period after “thank you” instead of an exclamation point. When we are truly thankful, there should be no doubt about it. Others can feel it, in our words and in our actions. This gift never gets returned.

- **Class is *always* in session.** We never really get out of sixth grade. Think about it—we still want to be liked, to be accepted, to get picked for the team, to be appreciated. And there are other lessons from elementary school that continue to make an impact—as we discussed this week with Jane Stevenson, Global Leader of our CEO Succession practice. In her first professional job, many years ago, Jane was an elementary school teacher. A supervisory teacher told her: “Just because a child sits down when you tell them to, that doesn’t mean they are sitting down in their minds. It’s the teacher’s job to help them make that choice.” As Jane related this story, it occurred to me that it’s the same in the workplace today. And the key to unlocking motivation and discretionary energy is expressing gratitude for what people do. The lesson: leadership truly is a matter of the heart—and we always need to be learning the language of appreciation.
- **Our attitude is always our altitude.** When one person says thank you, it can set off a positive chain reaction. The reason lies in emotional intelligence (EI). Daniel Goleman, who has done extensive research and writing on EI and who works closely with our firm, has explained that when we develop and express our EI, we transmit more positive feelings such as gratitude than negative ones. It’s like a spark that ignites as others respond. Moods shift and positivity elevates everyone. Then our attitudes truly become our altitude.
- **The power of one.** On my computer is a Post-It note—the stickiness long worn off and now fastened with a piece of tape. On it is a quotation from Edward Everett Hale, a 19th century social reformer and minister, that was shared with me by an executive more than a year ago: *I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything; but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.* Over the past year, these words have taken on so much meaning about the importance of one. No matter how powerless we may feel, no matter how big the problems in the world, we can still do that “something” that we all can do. We can show genuine caring and gratitude.

As this week came to a close, I harkened back to March 2020 when everything was uncertain, and fear permeated the air. I remember during that time taking a walk with my dog to clear my thoughts and being literally stopped in my tracks when I came upon a stretch of pavement.

Scrawled in a child’s handwriting were the words that defined the moment: “Everything will be OK.” Now, 16 months later, that message has changed for me. It’s no longer only a hope for things to get better one day. Indeed, now it speaks of gratitude for hope realized every day.



On a personal note, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for all of you—our colleagues, our clients, and those who continue to join the journey along the way. Your stories, your thoughts, and participation are inspiring. And for this I am grateful.