CHAPTER 32.

How could the SMALL act of showing your appreciation make a BIG difference when influencing others?

In the previous chapter we discussed how proactively seeking to help others and then characterizing that help in a way that heightens the likelihood of future exchanges can be a highly effective way to increase your influence—not just in that moment of obligation, but in the future, too. Because the principle of reciprocation encourages people to give back after they have received, the act of giving first is an especially good tool when seeking to develop new relationships, create engagement across teams, and develop long-term partnerships and opportunities with others.

But the rule for reciprocation is not a one-way street. While there are considerable advantages for influence afforded to favor-givers, what sometimes gets overlooked is the considerable opportunity for influence that exists for favor recipients.

Behavioral scientists Adam Grant and Francesca Gino thought that one way that the receiver of a good deed could increase his or her influence would be to explicitly convey gratitude toward the person or group who performed that initial favor. In one experiment in which the scientists tested this idea, participants were contacted via email and asked to spend time reviewing and then giving feedback to someone about a cover letter they had written for a job application. After sending in their feedback and com-
ments, the participants received a second request from the cover letter author to read another cover letter.

However, this email took one of two different forms. In the control condition, the person who received the feedback simply sent back a note of acknowledgment as well as the new request. In the gratitude condition, however, the cover letter author sent back the exact same email, except in this one expressed a great deal of appreciation. ("Thank you so much! I am really grateful.")

So what was the effect of the small addition of these eight words? The researchers found that this explicit display of appreciation more than doubled the compliance rates for the new request.

But Grant and Gino weren't done yet. They also were interested in seeing whether expressing gratitude to a favor-doer had more wide-reaching effects. In particular, the researchers asked whether expressing gratitude toward a favor-doer could increase the favor-doer's motivation to help others in general. To do this, they ran a second experiment that was similar to the first in many aspects: The participants helped one particular student by giving him feedback on a cover letter, and that student either simply acknowledged the feedback or clearly conveyed gratitude for the feedback. However, in this experiment, instead of the original favor recipient asking for another favor, a complete stranger asked for the (second) favor.

Again, the researchers found that the compliance rate more than doubled in the gratitude condition.

Consider the significance of this finding. Simply expressing sincere gratitude toward a favor-doer actually doubled the chances that the favor-doer would subsequently help out a complete stranger. Additional data that Grant and Gino gathered suggests strongly that this occurs because expressing gratitude increases the favor-doer's overall sense of social worth—in other words, after receiving a signal of appreciation, favor-doers are more likely to feel that others value them.

But it is worth asking whether these impressive findings could be replicated outside of the laboratory in a fast-paced, real-life
working environment. Grant and Gino thought that they could, so they set about testing these same ideas to measure how a genuine expression of gratitude might positively influence employee motivation. They chose to do so at a fundraising call center because they knew that fundraising can be a particularly thankless job, often characterized by frequent negativity and rejection.

In the experiment, half of the employees went about their day normally without any novel intervention; this was the control condition. However, for the other half, the director of annual giving visited the call center and thanked the fundraisers for the work they were doing. Specifically, she said, “I am very grateful for your hard work. We sincerely appreciate your contributions to the university.” That’s it. No handshakes, no hugs, no thank-you gifts—just sixteen straightforward words.

The researchers were able to monitor the number of calls the fundraisers made before and after this intervention took place. Whereas the employees in the control condition continued to make phone calls at the same rate, those in the gratitude condition made 50 percent more phone calls in the week following the director’s visit. Imagine the impact of this small but important change. Even if the extra calls made remained largely similar in terms of their effectiveness, the fact that their number substantially increased likely swelled donations.

This research highlights how much positive impact can come from the seemingly small act of communicating your appreciation for the favors done and the efforts made on your behalf. Although it might seem obvious, think how often you may have responded with a mechanical “thanks” without truly showing how really grateful you are or without providing any additional information for why exactly you’ve been appreciative for help. Or how many times you intended to send a thank-you note to someone but somehow never got around to it. Not only are these missed opportunities for communicating your genuine appreciation, they are also missed opportunities for future influence.

This research suggests that managers and organizations stand
to benefit by actively seeking out opportunities to provide explicit thanks. Doing so could serve to engender a culture of appreciation across their workplaces, inspiring additional organizational good citizenship behaviors throughout their companies.

There is a potential for policy makers and civil servants to prosper from the small act of showing appreciation, too. Recognizing and thanking citizens for the role they play in keeping streets clean, neighborhoods safe, and recycling rates high could prove to be a lot cheaper than the costs associated with incentivizing those types of behaviors or the remedial work required when less appreciation is shown.

Whether that means you’ll be receiving a “Thank you for paying your taxes” card from the Internal Revenue Service or your city council anytime soon remains to be seen.

We bet you’d appreciate it though.