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The Benefits of Gratitude in Business and in Life

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Peter Cummings, a multi-millionaire real estate developer, first assumed his position as chairman of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 1998, and as chairman he took upon himself to write personal thank you notes to any donor who contributed \$500 or more to the orchestra. As a child he had learned the importance of writing thank you notes, and so he couldn't bear the thought of a patron receiving a form letter with a stamped signature. Among the many notes he wrote one was addressed to Mary Webber Parker, daughter of one of Detroit's leading and wealthiest families from a bygone era. She had moved away from Detroit fifty-seven years earlier only visiting every decade or so. At the time Cummings took over the symphony, Parker was widowed and resided in a nursing home outside of Hartford, Connecticut. But for some reason, she had decided to send a one-time check of \$50,000 to her hometown symphony. So Cummings quickly penned a thank you note. Apparently the thank you note meant a great deal, because Ms. Parker wrote again pledging another \$50,000. Of course, Cummings did not waste any time in sending another thank you note and asked Parker if he could come and visit her. He would be nearby when he took his daughter to register for college in Hartford the coming fall. Sometime later she wrote back accepting his request for a visit, but then she added something else to her note. She said that she had decided to give \$500,000 to the symphony. And not just for one year, but for the next five years. That's 2.5 million dollars! Talk about the benefits of gratefulness! And what did Cummings do in response, that same year just before Christmas he sent a number of Detroit's best symphony musicians to Hartford, Connecticut, to put on a concert in Parker's nursing home. Ask Peter Cummings whether he thinks gratefulness matters to business, and I think you would get a resounding "yes."

But gratefulness is not just beneficial in terms of building customer or donor bases, it is important in retaining the kind of patience and focus that undergirds success. There is a certain sense in which the entrepreneurial spirit which is so touted in the United States is driven by a sense of dissatisfaction. People see some service or product as not providing as it could, and they seek to better it, or to come up with something new altogether. And I wouldn't say that is all bad, but

sometimes ingratitude for the present can propel actions that don't lend towards success. Start-ups are often said to fail because they are undercapitalized. That is, cash flow does not meet operating expenses and soon the initial capital is burned through. But I think a good case can be made that many small businesses are undercapitalized, not because there aren't funds available in one form or another, but because of a person's unwillingness to wait and work and save in a current job until the necessary capital is in place.¹ In other words, when people are motivated by ungratefulness they often launch prematurely and in doing so set their venture up for failure.

This phenomenon is borne out by a recent study in which participants were randomly selected to write something about a past event that made them feel grateful, happy, or neutral. Each of the three groups of participants were then given the opportunity to receive \$54 on the spot or \$80 in a month. The results indicated that those who wrote about something for which they were grateful were far more likely to wait for the \$80, or shall we say wait for the 48% percent return that would accrue in one month.² Their gratefulness, in some way or another, allowed them to be patient and make the decision that brought about the best return. And in many cases start-ups born out of ingratitude don't exhibit this kind of patience.

The problem of ingratitude is not just a problem for start-ups; established businesses can suffer from ingratitude as well. An owner or management team in search of more profits can cease to be grateful for current customers, hoping to lure a crowd with deeper pockets.³ An ungrateful company can also blow up what may be a positive company culture in order to get to the next level of sales, or they may forget to appreciate their employees and see a high level of costly turnover. In fact, a 2012 study conducted by the American Psychological Association, indicated that 50% of workers who felt undervalued at work would be looking for a new workplace in the next year. It also indicated that workers who felt underappreciated were nearly three times less likely to report that they are motivated to do their very best for their employer, and more than four times less likely to recommend their workplace to others.⁴ You see, gratitude just makes good business sense.

But it doesn't just make good business sense, it makes good sense in a wide variety of life factors. In one study, Robert Evans, perhaps the leader in research regarding gratitude, had people keep weekly journals. One group of participants was asked to record things they were grateful for, the other group of participants was asked to keep a journal of things that were a hassle. The results were quite remarkable. Those who were asked to write about things for which they were grateful reported being significantly happier with life. They reported fewer health problems, and exercised 1.5 hours more per week, even though the study said nothing about exercising more. Other similar studies showed that those who were asked to practice gratitude were more joyful, enthusiastic, determined, and energetic than those who wrote of their hassles. They also slept more and felt more refreshed upon waking. There have even been studies that suggest that gratefulness is one of the telltale signs of whether a marriage will make it or not and that gratefulness is associated with coronary heart disease.⁵ When you take all the benefits of gratefulness into consideration, it seems that Thanksgiving ought to be more than a once a year celebration centered on turkey and mashed potatoes. Some think that the Bible's admonition to "give thanks in all circumstance"⁶ is a bit Pollyannic, but apparently there's a lot of wisdom in those words.

You may not have heard of G.K. Chesterton. He died in 1936, but he was so prolific in his writing that you may have seen a quote or two from him. He wrote nearly 100 books on topics as varied as philosophy, mystery, poetry, and politics, and he contributed to more than 200 others. He wrote 4,000 newspaper essays, including thirty years of weekly columns for the *Illustrated London Times* and 13 years of weekly columns at the *Daily News*, all while editing his own newspaper. Both friend and foe alike could not help but recognize his incredible way with words. I can tell you that if I wrote a tenth of what he did, I would be an exhausted crank, and yet his contemporaries continually point to his exuberance for life. What was his secret? It was his constant appreciation and gratitude for all that he was confronted with in life. Here are a couple of quotes from Chesterton:

You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace before the play and pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching,

painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the pen in the ink.

When we were children we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmas time. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs?

I love this particular quote from a letter Chesterton wrote to his fiancée earlier in his life. He had put ink stain on the letter and apologizes for it, but then goes on to write:

I love the . . . ink, it is so inky. I do not think there is anyone who takes such quite fierce pleasure in things being themselves as I do. The startling wetness of water excites me and intoxicates me: the fieriness of fire, the steeliness of steel, the unutterable muddiness of mud. It is just the same with people.⁷

What great wonder and appreciation for life! He was thankful for all that life brought.

You might say that there is no way you will get to that place. And that's probably true. I doubt I will too. But at the very least, we should express our appreciation for those closest to us, to those of who have stood alongside us, to those who have worked for us when they could have worked elsewhere, to those who have been our friend even when we haven't been too likable.

When we are children we recognize our dependence on others. We know that without their protection and provision we would be in trouble. But as we grow older we are taught to be more and more self-sufficient. We begin life recognizing our dependence and in many cases we recognize it again when we are older and need the care of family members. But in the in between years—the years in which you and I now live—self-sufficiency can reign and gratitude can easily be forgotten.⁸ And the extent to which we succumb to this trend and do not express our gratefulness to those around us, we miss out on all the benefits that it affords—benefits that accrue to both business and life.

¹ ----, "[2.5 million Proves It: Good Manners Matter](#)," Baltimore Sun, November 18, 1999.

Jerry Bower, "[To Grow in Business and in Life, Show Gratitude and Appreciation](#)," *Forbes*, November 27, 2013.

² David DeSteno, "[Gratitude is the New Willpower](#)," *Harvard Business Review*, April 9, 2014.

³ Bower *op. cit.*

⁴ American Psychological Association, "[Workplace Study](#)," 2012.

⁵ Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, 2007, 19-89.

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:18

⁷ Emmons, 19-21.

⁸ Emmons, 53-54.

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