

Grateful Leaders and Attentive Followers: How Gratitude Trickles Down Through Organizations

Does a leader saying "thank you" actually spread gratitude throughout a whole organization, and if so, how?

The study by Meghan Kane and colleagues, published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, asks whether gratitude expressed by upper-level managers "cascades" down to supervisors and then to their subordinates, and what makes that spread happen. Prior research mostly looked at the benefits of gratitude for the person who receives it, but not whether one person's gratitude can inspire gratitude in others further down the chain. The researchers tested this idea across two field studies (with real supervisor-employee pairs) and one controlled experiment.

The key discovery is a new mechanism they call "grateful attention" — the idea that watching your boss express gratitude doesn't just make you feel good or make you want to copy them; it redirects your attention toward things in your own workday worth being grateful for. That shift in attention is what leads people to start expressing gratitude themselves. The researchers tested this against two alternative explanations — simply imitating the boss ("leader emulation") and catching the boss's mood ("emotional contagion") and found that grateful attention was the mechanism that explained the effect, above and beyond emulation and emotional contagion.

The cascade also had a payoff: when gratitude trickled down through this attentional pathway, employees ended up with better-quality, closer relationships with their coworkers.

The study highlights the generative, self-perpetuating role gratitude can play in shaping workplace culture, offering insights for organizations on how leaders' expressions of thanks can be leveraged as a low-cost tool to strengthen coworker relationships and cultivate a more grateful workplace.

MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

- A manager's gratitude can indirectly spread to employees two levels below them, through their supervisor.
- This cascading gratitude also strengthens coworker relationships, fostering greater connections among peers.
- Grateful attention is the driving force, as leaders' gratitude redirects attention toward behaviors and contributions worthy of appreciation.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

- Managers and organizational leaders
- HR and leadership development professionals
- Organizational behavior researchers

CONTACT US:

- Meghan Kane, Assistant Professor, Management

kane.meghan@temple.edu

- Grateful Leaders and Attentive Followers: How Grateful Attention Transmits the Cascade of Gratitude Expressions to Strengthen Coworker Relationships
- Journal: *Journal of Applied Psychology*
- DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001398>