

Gratitude and Appreciation Amidst Chaos and Uncertainty: Awaken Humanity at Work

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Physicians tend to have a very low tolerance for failure. We hold our profession to the highest standard and we're quick to consider any semblance of negative deviation as a failure. The scientist in us quantifies this through metrics and scores. A quick look at how we got here explains why this may be so – we were expected to get A's in college in order to get into medical school, and similarly, pressured ourselves to try to be in the top of our medical school class in order to match at our number one ranked residency program.

It's no surprise that in our clinical practice, we expect nothing but excellence. While grades may no longer exist, substandard practices are negatively highlighted through faculty evaluations, near-miss reports, peer review correspondences, and morbidity and mortality rounds. Furthermore, these metrics are high stakes as they are structurally tied to financial penalties. In fact, some metrics are unachievable, not evidenced-based or tied to patient outcomes and rather simply represent meaningless, and often psychologically-harmful feedback. This name, blame, and shame culture, therefore, leads to self-judgment, shame, isolation, and burnout. It's no surprise that emergency medicine physicians rank one of the highest in burnout across medicine. Worse, this leads to decreased psychological safety where individuals are more likely to hide mistakes, further causing a negative spiral, including patient harm.

How do we reverse this negativity without sacrificing quality and patient safety? While safety II concepts¹ are beyond the scope of this month's wellness column, we can imagine an alternative health care system where a focus on gratitude and appreciation is emphasized. How do we get there?

Let's consider individual physicians, as well as the organization.

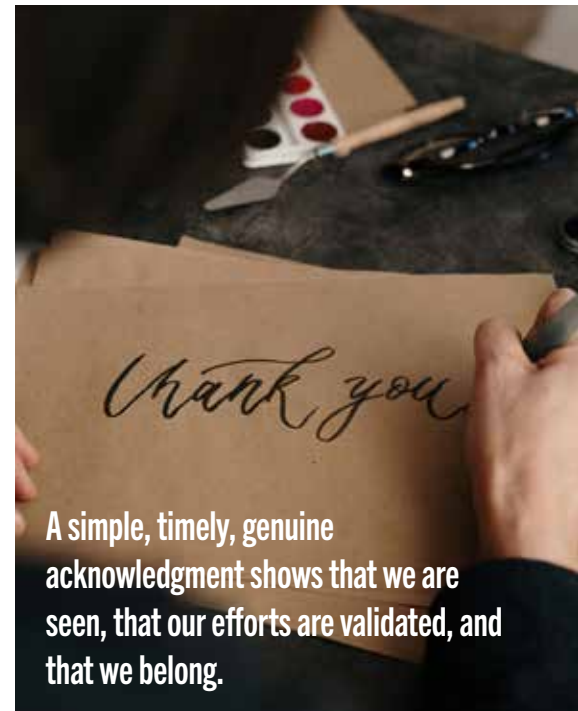
As human beings, we are wired to look for threats (negative emotions) in order to survive. Barbara Fredrickson discovered a positive-to-negative emotions ratio: it takes about three positives to overcome one negative perspective.² It's important to note that the negative experience is crucial to help steer our direction. In practice, we, as individuals, can learn to appreciate three good things everyday day to overcome a negative experience. According to Bryan Sexton, recounting three good things at the end of each day for 15 days has been shown to improve health care worker wellbeing.³ Kelly McGonigal refers to this as being detectives of positive encounters.⁴ The more we take a moment to observe and appreciate positive experiences around us, the more positive we become. Similarly, esteem (appreciation) is

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one of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Therefore, giving and receiving appreciation have positive effects. Bob Emmons talks about gratitude as an affirmation of goodness around us and that when we express thanks, we are reminded that we are not alone.⁵

Knowing these positive psychology concepts, organizations can operationalize recognition and appreciation to create a positive environment. Employee recognition programs have multiple benefits including increased employee engagement and satisfaction. This recognition may be highlighted in three forms: formal recognition, informal recognition, and day-to-day recognition.⁶

Formal recognition includes awards such as "save of the months" or "nurse of the year,"



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promotions, and bonuses for specific service excellence. Chip and Dan Heath, in their book, *The Power of Moments*, refer to defining moments as being both memorable and meaningful. Celebrating recognition creates a sense of elevation and pride, and by personalizing the experience, we offer insight and connection.⁷ **Informal recognition** may be in the form of an email or verbal acknowledgment of nominations and kudos. Lastly, **day-to-day recognition** refers to the daily practice of thanking the efforts of others. This can be done during shift huddles and signouts. Another approach is positive leader rounds where leaders seek out what is going well as opposed to what needs to be fixed which is linked to improved work satisfaction and burnout.⁸ Some call these "Amazing and Awesome," which is a positive spin off the "Morbidity and Mortality" rounds. It is important to note that like any form of feedback, this must be timely and genuine in order to maximize benefits.⁹



There's also a distinction between recognition and appreciation. Recognition is performance-driven, while appreciation is value-based, and not focused on accomplishments: "recognition is about what people do; appreciation is about who they are."¹⁰ Recognition and appreciation do not always have to be linked with monetary compensation. In fact, one study shows that it may even backfire and affect intrinsic motivations.¹¹ Rather, there is evidence that appreciating others has as much of a positive lasting effect on the one giving the appreciation as the recipient.⁸ A simple, timely, genuine acknowledgment shows that we are seen, that our efforts are validated, and that we belong.

The practice of emergency medicine is complex and full of uncertainties; we often don't even know who will be working with us on our next shift, which exacerbates depersonalization, a symptom of burnout. Let us, therefore, re-engage our colleagues by acknowledging their presence and their worth. Let us develop connections by verbalizing our genuine appreciation. Beyond giving orders and closed-loop communication, let us be intentional in sharing with our colleagues how much we care and value them. As an organization, we can create a system that allows for this.¹²

Because of the nature of our practice, bad things happen. We can choose to focus on the negatives, complain or write hurtful, unconstructive evaluations, or worse, be self-critical. Or, we can choose to be compassionate to ourselves, appreciate our shared common humanity, and start celebrating our wins, recognize each other's efforts, acknowledge our value in the frontlines, and commit to a daily practice of gratitude.¹³ Cultivating gratitude and appreciation from an individual and organization perspective requires practice and intentionality, and it can be done. This is how we can awaken humanity at work. ●

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