

Acknowledgement!

“The deepest principal in human nature is the craving to be appreciated.”

—William James

“A soldier will give you his life for a bit of colored ribbon.”

—Napoleon

Tom Peters

Acknowledgement!*

“Society is a vehicle for earthly heroism. Man transcends death by finding meaning for his life. It is the burning desire for the creature to count. What man really fears is not extinction, but extinction with insignificance.” —Ernest Becker, *Denial of Death*

In *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, my choice as best management book, yes, perhaps ever, Dale Carnegie points out that Mr. James chose “‘craving,’ not ‘wish’ or ‘desire’ or ‘longing.’” It is not coincidental that Mr. Carnegie’s riff on the aggressive word choice appears at the start of a chapter titled, “The BIG Secret of Dealing With People.” “BIG” indeed!

So we have the bold “craving” instead of the more timid wish-desire-longing, and Mr. Becker in turn offers “burning desire for the creature to count” and the ultimate fear of “extinction with insignificance.” No pussyfooting by either author!

I believe in the limitless (literally!) power of “Thank you” notes—and have so written time and again. I love Ken Blanchard’s “one-minute praising,” one of the three pillars of *The One-minute Manager*. And I groove on “recognition.” And “appreciation.” And B.F. Skinner’s “positive reinforcement.”

But none of these comes close to matching the intensity and overwhelming power of Mr. Becker’s “burning desire of the creature to count.” (Incidentally, the Becker quote appears early in *In Search of Excellence*.)

Is it that big a deal?

As a Ph.D.–level student of organizational psychology and effectiveness (with individual psych at its core) and a 45-year close observer of literally thousands of enterprises, I am willing to say, unequivocally, “YES—it is indeed that big a deal.” As big as Carnegie’s first chapter title implies: “The BIG Secret of Dealing With People.”

*The most powerful word in the English language?

More fuel for the fire:

“The deepest urge in human nature is the desire to be important.” —John Dewey

**“Appreciative words are the most powerful force for good on earth.”
—George W. Crane, physician**

**“The two most powerful things in existence: a kind word and a thoughtful gesture.”
—Ken Langone, co-founder, Home Depot**

**“Employees who don't feel significant rarely make significant contributions.”
—Mark Sanborn**

“Good leaders make people feel that they're at the very heart of things, not at the periphery.”—Warren Bennis

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” —Maya Angelou

“Leadership is about how you make people feel—about you, about the project or work you're doing together, and especially about themselves.” —Betsy Myers, *Take the Lead: Motivate, Inspire, and Bring Out the Best in Yourself and Everyone Around You*

“Most leaders try to get others to think highly of them, when they should be trying to get people to think more highly of themselves.” —Michael McKinney, *Leadership Now*

“The philosopher Isaiah Berlin remarked that Churchill ‘idealized’ his countrymen ‘with such intensity that in the end they approached his ideal and began to see themselves as he saw them.’”—Robert Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*

**“You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.”
—Dale Carnegie**

“There is a profound difference between having a title and being someone to whom people commit at the deepest level. If we wish to accomplish great things in our organizations, we must come to terms with a basic human need: a universal longing to be known.” —Susan Scott, “Be Here, Be Prepared to Be Nowhere Else,” chapter title, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time*

“Employees who don’t feel significant rarely make significant contributions.”

—Mark Sanborn

Yes, we all want to matter, to register, to be at the heart of things. And, moreover, we want to be seen by others as mattering and as at the heart of things. And yet, in my experience, even the smartest bosses don't "get it" as often or more often than not.

By sheer coincidence, a couple of days before I wrote this I had a long conversation with an old friend who's just become board chairman of a large hospital. She was lamenting that her tenure was starting with the loss of a key executive. To boil an anguished hour on the phone down to a couple of sentences, "You know, Tom, and you won't be in the least surprised, we lost him because our CEO, who's usually pretty good with people, failed to acknowledge—privately or publicly—his [the departing exec's] importance to the hospital. Though there were several real issues, fact is, it was in the end all about acknowledgement." (Scout's honor: I did *not* prompt her in any way! Come to think of it, perhaps she's indirectly responsible for this essay.)

And that conversation was on the heels of having observed the leader of a smallish non-profit lose an additional \$50,000 grant from a cornerstone donor—for, in effect, his failure, at a public event, to make even an offhand one-line acknowledgement of the grantor's prior generosity. (You can argue that the grantor was being awfully small-minded. Sure, but, which is the whole point of this riff, people will be people and, face facts, the most saintly of us are frequently small-minded. As no less than Van Gogh put it, "Let's not forget that small emotions are the great captains of our lives.")

Herewith a handful of caselets (about people responding to acknowledgement):

I. From the novel, *Christopher's Ghosts*, by Charles McCarry: Capable of Doing the Impossible

"[The CIA Director] never gave orders. He 'floated ideas,' he found gold dust in the opinions of his subordinates; he made what he called 'suggestions.' Sometimes these suggestions baffled, sometimes they took the breath away. In [the Director's] mind, nothing was impossible. He was loved for this. *After all, to be told you were capable of doing the impossible was the rarest kind of flattery [my italics].*"

McCarry knows his stuff—and is a master researcher. I put real stock in this.

II. From the novel *Intuition*, by Allegra Goodman:

“Demanded” vs. “Needed”

“Marion ... glanced at the raised hands and enjoyed the interest in her work. She ... gazed at her former postdoc, her rebellious child with her hand raised. ‘What do you need now?’ she asked herself. Strange, she’d never posed the question that way before. She’d always considered what her postdoc *demanded*, what she did or did not *deserve*. But what did she need? That was the puzzle, but as was so often the case, framing the question properly went a long way. What did she need? In that calm, clear, nearly joyous moment after her talk, the answer began to come to Marion. Ah, yes, of course, she thought with some surprise. And she called on Robin.”

And she called on Robin.

It’s a long story. In brief: A brilliant “troublemaker” causes wonton disruption to a science lab—even ruining the career of a renowned medical researcher and triggering a formal investigation of the use of certain grant monies. After the brunt of the storm had passed, the boss, who had barely survived, and also a renowned scientist with less-than-stellar people skills, is addressing a group that includes the “troublemaker.” With sudden insight, captured by the quote above, the boss realizes that what the “troublemaker” had wanted all along was, in effect, “nothing more than” “simple” recognition/acknowledgement. (You say, “Exaggeration.” I say, “Ha.” I also say, “Rings truer than true!”)

III. Ulysses S. Grant: Hats Off

General U.S. Grant, during his presidency, made giant steps, the last, alas, for a long time, toward healing the Union after the Civil War. Grant’s approach was deeply imbedded in his belief system. A quote from a Confederate soldier’s diary, at the end of a bloody battle that had resulted in a Confederate surrender, is highly illuminating. Grant biographer Jean Edward Smith explains: “The [Union senior] officers rode past the Confederates smugly, without any sign of recognition, except by one. ‘When General Grant reached the line of ragged, filthy, bloody, despairing prisoners strung out on each side of the bridge, he lifted his hat and held it over his head until he passed the last man of that living funeral cortege. He was the only officer in that whole train who recognized us as being on the face of the earth.’”

I’m an old man, and an old soldier (sailor, actually), and whenever I read that aloud in a seminar, I tear up. What can I say? I can say: Oh, the power and the glory of human acknowledgement! And hats way off to General Grant!

IV. Melvin Zais: No Need to Say Anything

U.S. Army General Melvin Zais gave a lecture to senior military officers which he titled, “You Must Care.” One vignette in particular struck me. General Zais offers this scenario: A junior officer (lieutenant or captain) faces an inspection of his troops in their barracks the next day. Zais advises, “*Sometime in the evening, stop by those barracks. Just sit on a soldier’s bunk for a minute or two. You don’t even have to say anything. They’ll know that you know that they’re working their butts off to make you look good.*”

Bottom line: Words not required. Presence *per se* is the big point. (I.e., acknowledgement.)

(NB: Years ago I gave the annual Forrestal lecture at the U.S. Naval Academy. Despite speaking to Navy types, of which I am one, I gave all 4,000 midshipmen a copy (tape recording—ye gads) of General Zais’ “You Must Care” speech.)

V. The Ritz Carlton: Ladies and Gentlemen All

The legendary Ritz Carlton CEO Horst Schulze did a host of things to raise staff engagement. Oddly, the one that resonated most with me was the company motto: “*We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen.*” The power of that single sentence comes, I believe, less from the service aspect than from the recognition (acknowledgement) of staff as “ladies and gentlemen.” The fact is that the majority of a hotel’s staff perform what might be classified as rather mundane tasks—and in many hotels, housekeepers, for one, are hardly treated consistently as “ladies and gentlemen.” While the Ritz has its faults, on this score it surely lives up to its superior reputation; and it does so by acknowledging the exalted position—a “lady” or a “gentleman”—of each and every employee/service provider.

VI. Mike Abrashoff, former commanding officer, guided-missile destroyer USS Benfold: Dad Gets It ... Finally

In Abrashoff’s book *It’s Your Ship*, he relates a tale associated with his practice of sending letters to the parents of his USS Benfold crew members, many of whom came from underprivileged backgrounds. Putting himself in those parents’ shoes, he imagined how happy they would be to hear from the Commanding Officer that their sons and daughters were doing well. And he figured that those parents would, in turn, probably call their children to tell them how proud they were of them. In their book: *BARACK, INC: What Business Can Learn from the Obama Campaign*, authors Rick Faulk and Barry Libert report: “*Abrashoff debated whether to send a letter to the parents of one young man who wasn’t really star material. Weighing the*

sailor's progress, he decided to go ahead. A couple of weeks later, the sailor appeared at his door, tears streaming down his face. It seems that the kid's father had always considered him a failure and told him so. After reading the captain's letter, he called to congratulate his son and tell him how proud he was of him. 'Captain, I can't thank you enough,' said the young man. For the first time in his life, he felt loved and encouraged by his father. As Abrashoff says, 'Leadership is the art of practicing simple things—commonsense gestures that ensure high morale and vastly increase the odds of winning.'"

Rather difficult to add anything to that story. (Except to say that Abrashoff's ship was unfailingly among the very top rated in the U.S. Navy fleet. I.e., this/his approach to engaging his crew worked!)

VII. General Bill Creech, commanding general, USAF Tactical Air Command: "Flybys" vs. "Drive bys"

You've doubtless seen or heard of "flyovers"—the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds or the Navy's Blue Angels honor some significant event with their spectacular aerobatics. But how about "Drive bys"?

The late General Bill Creech was the 4-star general who commanded the USAF's Tactical Air Command. He was a nut about improving the quality of everything—and wildly successful at doing just that. Sure, there were new systems and procedures. But they were, in fact, the least of it. For example, Creech figured that the key to matchless quality was *not* primarily the high-visibility USAF pilots, but, rather, the supporting cast of thousands that stood behind them such as the brilliantly trained mechanics and technicians and logisticians. Like most supporting casts, these folks were effectively invisible, defining "un-sung" in its literal meaning. Creech moved heaven and earth to change all that. Among other things, at TAC's Langley, VA, headquarters he had regular "Drive bys." The mechanics and others would polish their gear and spit shine their shoes and vehicles and, with families and friends and the brass in attendance, hold a celebratory event in which the supporting staff and equipment would parade "full dress" around the base grounds.

Bottom line: The "supporting cast" typically outnumbers the stars by an enormous margin—and rarely, by definition, sees the spotlight. Yet their basic human needs are the same as those of the superstars. A little acknowledgement/recognition can go a long, long, long way.

“The [Union senior] officers rode past the Confederates smugly, without any sign of recognition, except by one, *‘When General Grant reached the line of ragged, filthy, bloody, despairing prisoners strung out on each side of the bridge, he lifted his hat and held it over his head until he passed the last man of that living funeral cortege. He was the only officer in that whole train who recognized us as being on the face of the earth.’*”

—Jean Edward Smith, *Grant*, internal quote from the diary of a Confederate soldier

VIII. Senior Federal Law Enforcement Agency
Executive: Locals in the Limelight

A senior federal law enforcement executive said that in his field work there was one practice that stood out as having made an enormous difference in longterm effectiveness. Fact is, the feds typically have the unfortunate habit of looking down their noses upon their local counterparts. Yet my respondent had taken precisely the opposite path. After a noteworthy success, for example, rather than pushing himself and his federal colleagues to the front, at, say, a press conference, he and his colleagues effectively evaporated. He put the local force's officers who had done the leg work from the beginning front and center, literally in front of the cameras, on numerous occasions. The results, he said, were nothing short of extraordinary—time and time again. He laughed as he reported that one big city police chief had told him, "You have all my guys working like galley slaves for you without my urging. I've never seen anything like it."

Bottom line: Instead of the normal agency clashes and often overt resentment toward the federal officers, my newfound friend had unfailingly—and vividly—acknowledged the centrality of the work done by the local officers. The results were quite extraordinary.

IX. United Airlines Flight Attendant: A Nod Will Suffice

I was observing people debarking from a UAL plane at O'Hare. When I got to the flight attendant myself, I asked her what share of passengers typically said "Thank you" to her as they departed. Her answer surprised me. "The 'Thank you' is not the point," she said, blasting a hole in one of my most deeply held beliefs, "*What registers with me is not the words, but whether or not they bother to make eye contact.*" As I pondered her statement, it made perfect sense. While a "Thank you" is better than the absence thereof, the perfunctory "Thank you" from the distracted passenger, rarely looking up, is surprisingly impersonal. The eye contact, on the other hand, is an act of intimate human engagement—sincere acknowledgement of the particular flight attendant's attentiveness and courtesy.

Makes total sense!

This short paper is not awash in "How tos." Nonetheless, this final case study-vignette, from the United Airlines flight attendant, merits an addendum.

A Note About Body Language and Acknowledgement

It is said (and demonstrated by research) that perhaps two-thirds of our person-to-person communications are byproducts of our body language—God knows that’s true in the world of public speaking! The assertion is nowhere more important than in the case of acknowledgement, of which the wee United Airlines story is illustrative.

In short, we show all important (I hope I’ve convinced you by this point) interest or dis-interest in the person we are addressing by the incredibly complex way in which we attend to him or her. The slightest sign of distractedness, for example, can send a powerful negative signal of inattentiveness which is exceedingly difficult to overcome.

Consider:

“I wasn’t bowled over by [David Boies’] intelligence ... What impressed me was that when he asked a question, he waited for an answer. *He not only listened ... he made me feel like I was the only person in the room.*” —Lawyer Kevin _____, on his first, inadvertent meeting with renowned attorney David Boies

“It was much later that I realized Dad’s secret. He gained respect by giving it. He talked and listened to the fourth-grade kids in Spring Valley who shined shoes the same way he talked and listened to a bishop or a college president. He was seriously interested in who you were and what you had to say.”—Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *Respect*

Most all of us have had at least some contact with the high and mighty. In my experience, when they address you, often as not they are looking through you (you absolutely positively know it!) and figuring out who they next “need” to be talking to in the room. The two examples above are illustrations of the opposite. As are these two:

Father Theodore Hesburgh was president of Notre Dame and a staunch civil rights leader. A friend of mine, who was writing a book on leadership, wangled 15 minutes with the great and busy man. I well remember my friend saying to me, “It was one

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—Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *Respect*

of my most remarkable life experiences. For those few minutes I was clearly the only person in the universe for Father Hesburgh.” I have watched similar focused intensity (acknowledgement) emanate from General Colin Powell. We’ve spoken at the same seminar on several occasions, and he exhibits equal attentiveness to a junior staffer in the “green room” as to a former Secretary of State or even a former

Prime Minister. I have been awestruck. (And one who once received full Powell attentiveness was my late Mom, Evelyn Peters; I have never forgotten that. And “never forgotten” is (a) true and (b) the point of this discussion; such an act of acknowledgement lingers on—forever!)

Body Language, Acknowledgement and ... Listening

Body language that matters is nowhere more evident—positive or negative—than in the act of listening. The topic is brilliantly examined by Susan Scott in *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time*. Here are a few takeaways:

“It’s amazing how this seemingly small thing—simply paying fierce attention to another, really asking, really listening, even during a brief conversation—can evoke such a wholehearted response.”

“Be Here, Prepared To Be Nowhere Else” —chapter title

“Let Silence Do the Heavy Lifting” —chapter title

(FYI: The entire book is a gem!)

I will in effect ask Ralph Waldo Emerson to ice the “listening cake” for us:

“The only true gift is a portion of yourself.”

Incidentally, or not so incidentally, I have argued elsewhere that “strategic listening” can be the #1 differentiating value for an enterprise. In fact, I suggested this addition, at the top, to the organization’s values statement: “*We are Effective Listeners—we treat Listening EXCELLENCE as the Centerpiece of our Commitment to Respect and Engagement and Community and Growth.*” Yes, I do think it’s that central to individual and institutional effectiveness—and to the topic of acknowledgement; see the **APPENDIX for more on this.**

I could go on—and have in many instances in the past. But the point here is not the details of recognition programs or employee engagement practices. It is to say, simply, that in any context, personal or professional, there is no greater gift to the person or persons with whom you are engaged than heartfelt (as well as headfelt) acknowledgement of their contributions and fundamental human worth; moreover,

said acknowledgement almost invariably leads to greater commitment and better-served clientele and a happier bottom line. The irrepressible and wildly successful Richard Branson put it this way, “Business has to give people enriching, rewarding lives ... or it's simply not worth doing.” And at the epicenter of that “enriching and rewarding life” is unadulterated acknowledgement of contribution and, more important by far, human value. Remember Ernest Becker’s profound words with which we began:

“It is the burning desire for the creature to count. What man really fears is not extinction, but extinction with insignificance.”

Amen.

(Now operationalize this!)

APPENDIX: Strategic Listening!

Listening Is ...

Listening is ...

(And when you read “listening,” please substitute “*OBSESSION* with listening.”)

Listening is ... the ultimate mark of *Respect*.

Listening is ... the heart and soul of *Engagement*.

Listening is ... the heart and soul of *Kindness*.

Listening is ... the heart and soul of *Thoughtfulness*.

Listening is ... the basis for true *Collaboration*.

Listening is ... the basis for true *Partnership*.

Listening is ... a *Team Sport*.

Listening is ... a *Developable Individual “Professional” Skill*.*

(*Though women are instinctively *far* better at it than men.)

Listening is ... the basis for *Community*.

Listening is ... the bedrock of *Joint Ventures that work*.

Listening is ... the bedrock of *Joint Ventures that last*.

Listening is ... the core of *effective Cross-functional Communication*.*

(*Which is in turn Attribute #1 of organizational effectiveness.**)

(**I know, I keep repeating this—only because “Attribute #1” is no exaggeration.)

Listening is ... the engine of *superior EXECUTION*.

Listening is ... the key to *making the Sale*.

Listening is ... the key to *Keeping the Customer’s Business*.

Listening is ... the engine of *Network development*.

Listening is ... the engine of *Network maintenance*.

Listening is ... the engine of *Network expansion*.

Listening is ... *Learning*.

Listening is ... the *sine qua non of Renewal*.

Listening is ... the *sine qua non of Creativity*.

Listening is ... the *sine qua non of Innovation*.

Listening is ... the core of *taking Diverse opinions aboard*.

Listening is ... *Strategy*.

Listening is ... *Source #1 of “Value-added.”*

Listening is ... *Differentiator #1*.

Listening is ... *Profitable*.*

(*The “R.O.I.” from listening is higher than from any other single activity.)

Listening underpins ... *Commitment to EXCELLENCE*.

Do you agree with the above?

(Frankly, that’s a set-up question. How could you *not* agree?)

(I hope.)

If you agree, shouldn’t listening be ... a *Core Value*?

*If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... perhaps Core Value #1?**
(* "We are Effective Listeners—we treat Listening EXCELLENCE as the Centerpiece of our Commitment to Respect and Engagement and Community and Growth"—or some such.)

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... a Core Competence?
If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... Core Competence #1?

Shouldn't listening be ... Core Competence #1?

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... an explicit "agenda item" at every Meeting?

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... our Strategy—per se? (Listening = Strategy.)

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... the #1 skill we look for in Hiring (for every job)?

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... the #1 attribute we examine in our Evaluations?

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... the #1 skill we look for in Promotion decisions?

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... the #1 Training priority at every stage of everyone's career—from Day #1 to Day LAST?

If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... in the next 30 MINUTES?

If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... at your NEXT meeting?

If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... by the end of the DAY?

If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... in the next 30 DAYS?

If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... in the next 12 MONTHS?