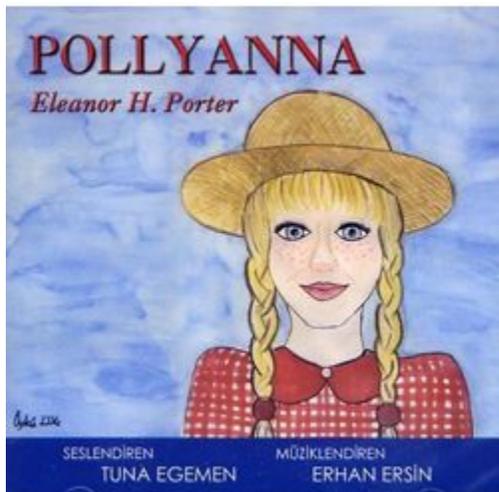


# Leadership and the Art of Managing Gratitude.



In our work with leaders we notice two cognitive frameworks that tend to guide decision making: binary and negative.

Much of our work with leaders is helping them to think ordinal and balanced.

## Binary Thinking:

Binary thinking is so common we may not even notice you are doing it.

We organize the world into two mutually exclusive camps: win/lose; free market/socialist; Pro Second Amendment/Gun Control; Pro Life/Pro Choice; Blue State/Red State; friend/foe; success/failure; life/death; success/failure.

There are two problems with binary thinking.

Beyond amateur and professional sports, there is little in life that fits into a binary world.

Much of the real world is ordinal in nature. And ordinal example is best described by the concept of pain.

When a health care professional asks a patient “Are you in pain?” that question is a binary question that calls for a binary answer.

The consequence is that the response “yes” might result in an over prescription of pain medication while a “no” might result in an under prescription.

Health care systems in the United States use an ordinal approach to examine the concept of pain. It is best symbolized by this chart:



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Much of our work with leaders is helping them identify their unhelpful use of binary cognitive frameworks and to substitute a more realistic ordinal framework to examining information.

### **Negative Thinking:**

The real world contains both positive and negative information. But only negative information can cause harm. It is natural to tilt one's cognitive framework in the direction of negative information at the expense of positive information.

Doctors conduct examinations searching for what is wrong, teachers grade papers looking for wrong answers, bosses have meetings with subordinates to tell them what they did wrong, etc.

You probably have experience in working with colleagues or bosses with an unbalanced, negative tilt.

In our coaching with leaders, we use the Basic Accounting Equation as a cognitive framework to force them into examining issues from a balanced perspective: "on the asset (positive) side, I see X. On the liability (negative) side I see Y. On balance, I see Z."

While the Basic Accounting Equation is well known, the way we use it as a communications tool of often seen as artificial and arbitrary.

Initially, leaders may be faking their positive expressions.

They are simply following a structure we have imposed on them.

Over time and with positive this imposed pattern of verbalizations becomes a behavioral habit.

And when it becomes a habit, we can say that we helped them fake it until it became true.

### **Leadership vs Finding and Correcting Errors.**

Psychologists Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough were interested in this question: does being grateful “cause” happiness or is gratitude a consequence of being happy? (2003)

This is not a philosophical question.

Can we “fake” it until we “become” it?

To test this question, 192 adults were randomly distributed into three groups. In the experimental group, participants were asked to write down five things in their life that they were grateful for during the past seven days. A second group was asked to write down five negative things that had bothered them during the past week. And a third group was simply instructed to write something in a weekly journal.

These gratitude or hassle reports were completed once a week for nine weeks. The groups were monitored for physical symptoms and overall satisfaction with life. At the conclusion of the nine weeks, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups. The group induced to express gratitude had an overall more positive outlook on life and reported fewer physical symptoms. They also spent significantly more time exercising than those in the hassle conditions.

The authors’ conclusions were, “Manipulated expressions of gratitude per se may help to boost positive affect.”

In other words, you can fake gratitude until you become grateful.

A second study was conducted with a different group. This time the outcome measure was observer reports submitted by spouses or significant others. Those in the gratitude group were rated as showing significantly higher levels of positive attitude towards life.

In other words, the artificial exercise of forcing someone to write expressions of gratitude on a piece of paper had an impact on how the person was perceived by others.

**Implications for Leaders.**

Before you can manage others, you first need to manage yourself. One implication of this research is that you can "act" grateful. It does not have to be genuine.

The more you act grateful, the more your expressions of gratitude infect you. And you end up being more grateful.

### **This should not be surprising.**

Positive and negative emotions are contagious.

You can take advantage of managing positive emotional contagion using available technology.

There is an app that can be purchased on iTunes called Grateful: A Gratitude Journal.

On Android devices a similar app is called Attitudes of Gratitude.

Every day, you write down 3-5 things that you are grateful for, however trivial it might seem to you.

The basic idea is to focus thoughts on the asset enhancement components of your life. The impact of the Emmons and McCullough research suggests that the mere exercise of writing down things you are grateful for will change your outlook on life. It then will alter how you are perceived by others.

You don't need to pay for an app.

Using your iPhone, set up Notes to create a journal. You can write down what is going well in your life or dictate notes to your mobile device.

### **Thank You for Doing Your Job.**

In Agatha Christie's **A Caribbean Mystery**, a waiter serves a hotel guest and the guest responds with, "Thank you." Her husband remarks, "Do not thank the waiter. He is just doing his job."

How common is it that leaders refrain from praising team members for just doing what they are paid for?

An obvious implication of the Emmons and McCullough study is that the husband's approach is wrong.

If positive emotions are contagious, then expressions of gratitude to employees for performing what you consider to be basic job functions may reward these employees to perform those same tasks at higher levels in the future.

Start infecting your team with gratitude and you may end up infecting yourself.

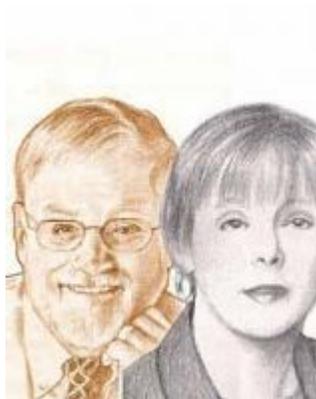
Place a copy of this article's Pain Scale on your wall as a physical reminder that organizing your world around binary thinking is both inappropriate and dangerous.

### **References.**

Christie, A. **A Caribbean Mystery**. (1964). New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: an experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. **Journal of Personality and Social Psychology**.

## About the Authors



Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

Its mission: help companies achieve Leadership and Career Success for valued senior level talent. Core services revolve around retained search, leadership coaching/career management, and executive outplacement.

Each month PSYCHOLOGY TODAY publishes their perspectives about leadership. To date there are over 300,000 downloads.

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