

## INDIFFERENCE, GRATITUDE<sup>1</sup>, AND OBSEQUIOUSNESS STORIES<sup>2</sup>

### How to Use These Stories

Leadership begins when people exhibit virtues with excellence. Virtues are standards of moral behavior, such as courage, integrity, kindness, and humility. This document focuses on the virtue of gratitude. When we lead with exceptional gratitude, we feel deeper satisfaction over what we accomplish, we help and benefit others, and we improve the world around us.

Like all virtues, too much or too little of a virtue is a vice. Thus, when leaders are not grateful enough, people may feel unnoticed and lose interest in their work. When leaders are too grateful, people may become overly confident and produce lower quality work.

Leading with exceptional gratitude is often difficult. It is difficult to find the optimal expression of gratitude between indifference and obsequiousness. It is difficult because a grateful action in one situation is not a grateful action in another situation. It is difficult because the people who care about a situation often disagree about the best way to exhibit gratitude, and in many of these cases each person—including you—will be partially right and partially wrong, and we need to learn from each other and work through conflict to sort this out. Even when you figure out how to exhibit exceptional gratitude, it is also important to communicate what you are doing to others so that they will understand what you are doing.

This document contains stories of people being grateful and of failing to be grateful. (The titles next to people's names are their titles at the time the story occurred and may not be their title currently.) Discussing diverse situations in which people failed or succeeded to live up to their values often helps people to recognize and act on other opportunities when they arise. By discussing these stories in meetings, on teams, over internet or intranet forums, or in classrooms, groups can come up with ideas for leading with exceptional gratitude, learn each other's perspectives, work through disagreements, and generate ideas. For example, you might read and discuss one story at the beginning of a weekly meeting, post a story on a team forum and ask people to share their thoughts, begin a work shift by discussing a story, use a story in a town hall meeting, or use the stories as fodder for discussion in classroom settings. The following questions may be helpful in discussing the stories. Choose whichever questions are most helpful for your group.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to being used to foster discussions about the virtue of gratitude, these stories may also be used for discussions about appreciation or thankfulness.

<sup>2</sup> The stories in this document were written or told by the protagonists. Daniel Hodges edited them and added the reflection questions with assistance from Ryan Quinn. The stories are to be used as the basis for class discussion, and not to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of a particular situation. Some protagonists agreed to use their real name, others asked for us to use a pseudonym. The goals of this document include becoming aware of issues, identifying the benefits and drawbacks of taking different approaches, assessing their impact on outcome(s), and learning ways of addressing situations you may encounter in the future.

1. What, if anything, did people do in this story that was grateful?
2. How could the people in this story have been more grateful? How could they have been exceptionally grateful?
3. How might some experiences from your own life be similar to this story?
4. What inspires or elevates you about this story?
5. What disappoints or angers you about this story?
6. What might you have done in this story to overcome your disappointment or anger and help the person who disappointed or angered you to do better?
7. What caused the people in this story to behave the way they did?
8. Who in this discussion disagrees with you? What could you do to understand this person's point of view?
9. How might your perspective on this story be wrong?
10. What ideas can you take from this story and discussion to apply in your own life?

### **Story #1: Achmad Hidayatullah, Manufacturing Manager**

Some of the team members in our plant felt that others were not working as hard as they could. They were quick to point out faults and criticize, and their criticism was not constructive. It struck me as odd to see high performers lowering others to point out their own personal achievements.

I thought about this for a long time. Eventually, I realized this the complainers may be complaining because I (their manager) had failed to highlight all of the efforts of our team members. I had inadvertently created an environment where team members felt unappreciated for their extra effort. I started to brainstorm ideas with team leaders to address this problem. I had trusting relationships with them, so they were able to give me good, critical feedback and good ideas for improvement.

I decided to identify all the good work done by our team members once a month at the team meeting. As I compiled a list of good work, it became clear that team members were putting in much more extra effort than I had realized. We decided to create an "extra effort box" in which anyone can submit a form that recognizes a fellow team member's extra effort. These are the submissions that I present monthly to the entire company to highlight all the excellent work of my team. The reception was great.

### **Story #2: Kevin Potts, Vice-Chairman of Practice Operations and Associate Professor**

When I return to work after being away for a few days, I tend to expect the worst. For example, I ask myself questions such as "What issues are my patients having? With what problems have my partners and managers been dealing? Did they handle them the way I would have handled them? What complaints and concerns do the staff have?"

One time, on a morning when I returned to work after being away, I was thinking about my tendencies as I got ready in the morning before I returned. I realized that my usual questions tended to focus on me and my needs instead of others and their needs, and that they were too negative.

When I got to work, I encountered some of the issues I had imagined. When those issues came up, I asked my managers and supervisors to meet with me to discuss the issue together. During this meeting, I tried listening to my staff and their concerns instead of reacting negatively. I thanked my staff for the work they had put in and for their help with operations while I was out of the country. At the end of the meeting, we were able to develop adjustments and other solutions to the issues we had encountered. My staff was relieved, and it seemed like their morale was better than it had been previously.

### **Story #3: Brad Smith, Superintendent**

When I became the superintendent, I had a list of changes that needed to be made. I executed all of them during my first week. For example, we re-arranged every single secondary school administrator except one in the entire district. All of the changes were equally significant.

Although I did well at taking critical action quickly, I failed to communicate as well as I should have, on two fronts. First, I did not adequately communicate the reasons for the changes. I did not do this because, frankly, everybody knew why it was happening. Even so, I should have communicated directly with the affected individuals. They needed to hear it from me. Failing to tell them, even though the reasons were evident, was a failure to respect them and their feelings.

My second communication failure may have been even more critical. I should have explained how we came to our decisions for these changes to employees in the district. I did not communicate that at all. I was different in my approach from the previous superintendent in that I was willing to decide on three days' notice. However, by not communicating, my actions looked like autocratic decisions with no room for discussion.

I learned from my mistakes. A year later, we fired all the district librarians. This time, however, I talked with my administrators. I had them give me a top-to-bottom, ranked-order listing of their faculty members. Then I told them, "We have 20 librarians in our district, and you ranked 18 out of 20 of them as being in the bottom five of your faculty rankings at your school." I also talked with three or four of the librarians and asked them how we should re-design libraries. It was a much more open conversation.

The decision with the librarians did not play well in the news. In fact, on my wall, I have a cartoon from the local paper panning my decision. However, this time I had included people in the conversations. The decision was received much better internally than the previous ones were. We had a blunt conversation about here's why it was happening. Even the librarians with whom

we communicated about the change supported the changes that we were trying to make, and I attribute that heavily to the fact that we communicated openly with them.

#### **Story #4: Andrea Goulet, Founder, and Chief Strategy Officer**

I watched Brené Brown’s TEDx talk about failure and vulnerability, while I was working at a digital marketing company, and started to think about what those issues look like in our industry. People in our industry do a lot of motivating through shame, and a lot of shaming overall. Individuals often do not see problems as opportunities to learn, but as failures. When I started my own company, I decided that I may not change the industry, but I could at least eliminate the culture of shame from my own company.

One example of shame that is embedded in our industry is a specific command that people use to figure out who modified software at a specific time. The command that you type in to figure this out is “git blame.” In our company, we changed the command so that if you wanted to find out who modified the software, you had to type in “git history.” We also started an explicit initiative to look for things in the code that people wrote—and in the coding process—so that we could point out what people are doing well. This reminds us that our developers are doing their best. We do not want to pin the blame on one person and create issues. Instead, we want to recognize the hard work of everyone involved in developing software.