

SAM AND BONNIE RECHTER FELLOWSHIP IN POSITIVE LEADERSHIP Research Report

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Feeling appreciated is integral to developing and sustaining high-quality relationships, but many employees do not feel appreciated at work. In this research, we proposed that when supervisors engage more frequently in the type of gratitude expression (agentic or communal) that matches subordinates’ preference for the type of expression, subordinates will feel more appreciated and engage more frequently in a risk-carrying, discretionary behavior (voice). We define a supervisor’s agentic gratitude expression as *a supervisor’s expression of gratitude to a subordinate that acknowledges the subordinate’s job or career-related competency*, whereas a supervisor’s communal gratitude expression is *a supervisor’s expression of gratitude to a subordinate that shows warm feelings for the subordinate as a work partner, as an organizational or team member, or as a friend*. We developed and validated (in five steps) new scales of supervisor agentic gratitude expression and of supervisor communal gratitude expression (see Appendix) and adapted these new scales to measure subordinate preference for supervisor agentic gratitude expression and subordinate preference for supervisor communal gratitude expression, respectively.

We conducted a field survey study with 124 supervisor-subordinate dyads and found that supervisors’ engagement in gratitude expression that was congruent with subordinates’ preference for the type of gratitude expression was positively related to subordinates’ felt appreciation. Supervisors’ gratitude expression that was incongruent with subordinates’ preference was negatively associated with subordinates’ felt appreciation. The response surface patterns (generated based on polynomial regression results) differed for supervisors’ agentic versus communal gratitude expression (see Figure 1 versus Figure 2). Additionally, as predicted, felt appreciation mediated the effect of congruence on voice. In a supplementary experiment with full-time employees ($N = 102$), we tested the theoretical mechanisms and demonstrated that felt appreciation had a positive indirect effect on voice through positive regard and perceived reduction of relational risk.

This paper has theoretical and practical significance, and fits the scope of positive leadership and helps advance the Project’s mission of increasing positive leadership in the world. Across cultures, humans have an innate desire to feel appreciated in relationships (Gordon et al., 2012). Yet many employees do not feel appreciated at work, which has motivated many organizations to implement employee appreciation programs (Deutschendorf, 2019; Hayes, 2019; Kaplan, 2012). Leaders try to make employees feel appreciated, as this positive experience is integral to increasing followers’ motivation and retaining valuable employees (Conlin, 2022; Schooley, 2022). It is no surprise that there is much public discourse on how leaders can express gratitude to followers (Conlin, 2022; Gibson et al., 2020) – a prominent issue regarding the promotion of positive leadership. Different from many previous studies, our research adopted a

dyadic-relational approach, stressing responsiveness in an ongoing relationship (Reis, 2012). A leader’s gratitude expression, even when occurring frequently, may not elicit a follower’s felt appreciation if such expression misfits the follower’s preference.

Our research contributes to the emerging literature on leader gratitude expression. Our research stresses the role of followers’ preferences in guiding their reactions to their leader’s gratitude expression. In appraising the regard from their leader, followers assess how responsive their leader’s gratitude expression is to their preference. Our view stresses the “relational” nature of gratitude (Locklear et al., 2023). We also expand the scope of (limited) work on gratitude expression in leadership settings by proposing agentic and communal (broad) types of leader gratitude expression. In doing so, we acknowledge employees’ fundamental needs for agency and communion at work, which are important for positive leaders to consider.

Figure 1. Response Surface for Agentic Gratitude Expression

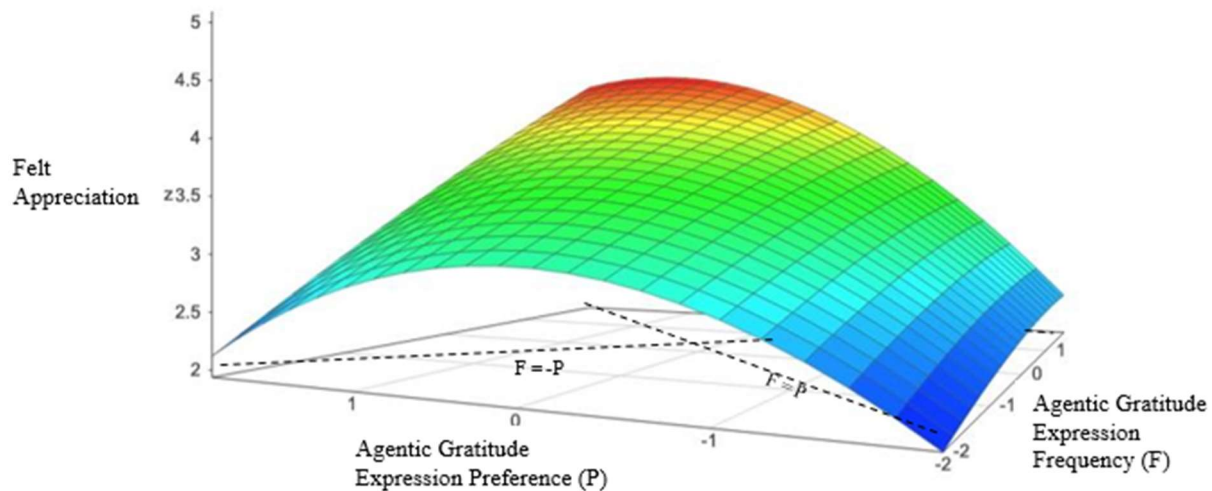
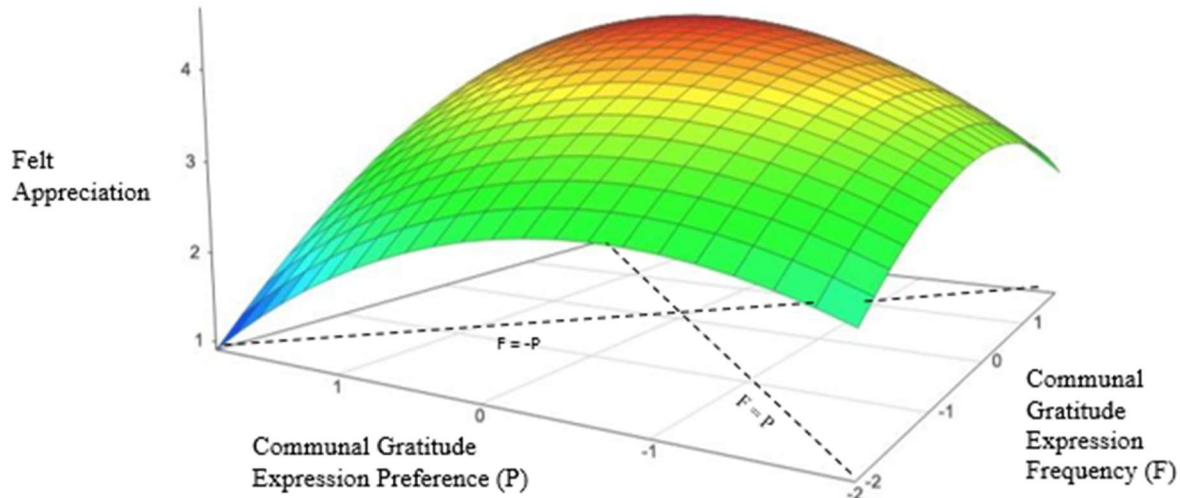


Figure 2. Response Surface for Communal Gratitude Expression



Appendix. New Scales

My supervisor expresses gratitude to me by:

Agentic gratitude expression

1. evaluating my performance positively (as a part of formal monthly/quarterly/yearly evaluation).
2. facilitating my work (e.g., covering my shift, giving me flexible schedules).
3. increasing my pay (e.g., a raise, bonuses) and/or benefits (e.g., vacation days).
4. promoting my career (e.g., expanding my job, increasing opportunities, providing coaching or mentoring).
5. nominating me for or giving me an organizational award or formal recognition.

Communal gratitude expression

1. using body language (e.g., a hug, a smile, a pat on the back, high five, a handshake).
2. providing verbal affirmation (e.g., kind words, compliments, verbal appreciation).
3. giving me homemade or purchased food or beverages (e.g., donuts, ice cream, coffee).
4. giving me a physical gift (e.g., a gift card, a gift, a movie/event ticket).
5. using a written form (e.g., a thank-you card, note, email, or letter).
6. strengthening our relationship (e.g., hanging out or doing things together after work).
7. organizing or hosting an appreciation party or event specifically for me.

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