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## Saying thank you to your boss can pay dividends

Genuine expressions of gratitude in the workplace can be very positive influences when used effectively.

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Brett Graff is a reporter & former U.S. government covering the economic forces affecting real people.

This season for counting blessings had barely begun when high-profile Miami event planner Karla Dascal got a message from her company's controller, Raul Duran. He'd sent to her a text that read, at least in part, "Thank you for the opportunity to work and earn a living. I am so grateful." Dascal actually receives communication from Duran expressing the same sentiment all year long. And she's certain that among all her employees it's Duran's appreciation — and not incidentally his positive outlook — that makes him absolutely indispensable to her company.

"Gratitude is one of the most powerful things," says Dascal. "The three problems we all feel are 'I'm not worthy, I'm not good enough, I'm not competent.' But gratitude has the power to change everything."

That's why researchers are now saying that — like Duran — we should all be showing plenty of appreciation to our supervisors during the holiday season and beyond. It won't just advance our relationships but can even improve how bosses view our on-the-job performance. With any luck, better work will bring bigger paychecks.

Thing is, if your feelings of gratitude are to be effective, you'll have to actually express them — and in a way that doesn't make everyone around you cringe because you're brownnosing. (Ah, ha.) And it gets trickier: Feelings of appreciation are practically impossible to fake. But experts who reveal the psychology behind it all say once you adapt the right the mentality, the money may follow.

"We found that saying 'thank you' works because it makes a boss feel, 'What I'm doing is worthy and makes a positive difference,'" says Yeri Cho, a researcher at the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California. "Bosses have a lot of power but that doesn't mean they always feel competent. And there's a tendency in those cases for the boss to act in self-defense — sometimes they even denigrate their employees. Gratitude reduces those tendencies."

She found this out by pulling over 180 subjects into a lab and assigning them the job of supervising make-believe — they didn't know that — subordinates named Taylor, who would be assembling a table. The Taylors "drafted" a work plan for their supervisors to evaluate and send back. The supervisors, in return, got a note from Taylor saying either, "Dear Supervisor, I received your feedback. Best, Taylor" or a nearly identical message that included the phrase "Thank you for your feedback." Later, some of those supervisors got a message from the examiner — who could be considered, say, a CEO or a client — telling them their competence level fell below the average.

Even so, it was the supervisors who had received the 'thank you' from their subordinates that then rated those employees as being more competent and more intelligent.

"Bosses mistreat employees when they feel insecure, even if they have power that's coming from their role as a boss," says Cho. "But saying 'thank you' mitigates that."

It's tough to say exactly how or why gratitude changes our physiological and mental states, says Dr. Suzanne Lechner, an assistant professor of psychiatry and psychology at the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine, because the research is in its infancy. But there's good reason to assume that — like other positive feelings — both giving and receiving appreciation balances our levels cortisol, the stress hormone.

"All people want to feel needed and appreciated," she says. "We're social beings by nature, this is hard wired into our brains: that we're social and we care what other people think. That we care we're included and that we are of value to our group."

Past studies on the human mind have concentrated on negative feelings — depression, anxiety and stress — but the new field of positive psychology lists gratitude as one of our strengths and virtues, says Lechner. To have any value, however, those thankful feelings have to be genuine, though that's a matter of focus, she says.

At work, even when projects are challenging or the boss is difficult, identify things to appreciate — clean restrooms, a steady paycheck — simply by keeping a journal. Then be sure to express your thanks in simple ways, says Lechner. Tell the boss, "I appreciated it when you \_\_\_" or "Thank you for \_\_\_"

"Don't drive the point home too much," Lechner warns. "That's the point when people think you're brownnosing."

Even if your colleagues do accuse you of sucking up, don't be surprised if you see them doing the same in a few weeks, says April Kelly, CEO of Boss Studios in Omaha, Neb., and author of *Gratitude at Work*. Sure, no one will be alerted if you send a text like Duran. But also consider poking your head in your boss' office when the door is open and say one or two succinct sentences before departing.

“Everyone needs to know when they’re hitting their target,” says Kelly. “And that includes bosses. It’s lonely at the top.”

*This is a monthly column by Miamian **Brett Graff**, a former U.S. government economist who writes about how economic forces are affecting real people.*