

DOES GRATITUDE IMPACT EMPLOYEE MORALE IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is study the possible impact of gratitude on employee morale and explore how the use of gratitude as a verbal reward can enhance the morale of an employee within an organization. It also aims to understand the current perception of gratitude in the workplace in organizations in India.

Design/methodology/approach: The research is a combination of a literature review of 20 papers and quantitative survey responses from 120 full time professionals with minimum three years of work experience across the spectrum of industries. Since employee morale as a component is difficult to measure quantitatively, indicators representing the same were identified. Contentment, Happiness and Motivation were the key indicators used in the research to try and establish a correlation between gratitude and employee morale.

Findings: Gratitude has a positive impact on motivation, happiness and contentment and respondents feel that there is still scope for further improvement in the culture of gratitude. Personally expressed gratitude has a greater impact than gratitude expressed generally towards the team.

Research limitations and implications: Although it is presumed that all respondents are from India, the respondents were not asked to divulge information regarding their location in the survey. Conducting this survey in another country with another value for gratitude could produce different results. Therefore, the applicability of findings for this research is best suited to organizations that either have operations in India or largely deal with an Indian workforce. Other variables to study the impact on employee morale that have been eliminated from this research are productivity, performance, employee engagement and culture. Hence, the research is only suited for drawing clear inferences of the relation between gratitude and employee morale.

Originality/value: Practical application after synthesizing themes explored in this research can help executives/managers improve employee morale in the organization with better use of gratitude in their verbal communication and maintain a satisfied workforce.

KEYWORDS: gratitude, employee morale, motivation happiness , contentment

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INTRODUCTION

Gratitude is one element of open and frank communication, which is perceived as an antecedent of trust. (Human Resource Management International Digest, 2016). Gratitude as seen in other research papers positively influences job satisfaction and employee experience. As satisfaction increases, employee loyalty also grows. In the workplace, gratitude indicates that people are valued by the company. (Human Resource Management International Digest, 2016). Organizations across the world are beginning to realise the importance of gratitude.

In India, however, it is disturbing to notice that the culture of gratitude is not merely on a decline, but is lacking in most organisations. While IT firms following international HR policies still try to incorporate this said culture of thankfulness and gratefulness, most sectors like Hospitality, Manufacturing, Medicine show little to no regard for gratitude as an effective tool to impact and boost employee morale. With India emerging as a global power and competing with companies at a global level now, it is all the more important that within the Indian context a culture of gratitude develops across sectors in the corporate sector in order to move from a mentality of competition and aggression to collaboration and harmonious existence. The benefits of doing so have already been witnessed by organisations across the world that have understood the importance of this component.

The research addresses current managerial gratitude practices in the workplace and employees' perception of the same. Whether it is a simple "thank you", or gratitude expressed in front of the entire team for work well done, gratitude in any form leaves an impact on those expressing it as well as those at the receiving end. The results will help understand the nuances of employee communication in the workplace and how the nature of this communication can make an employee feel valued. Any individual working in an organisation and interacting and directing employees will be able to understand the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of various kinds of expressed gratitude and accordingly work on their practices with the aim of impacting employee experience and satisfaction. Research has shown how gratitude is related to well-being, positive relationships and adaptive personality characteristics. This paper goes further to show the significance of the same in the context of the Indian workplace.

Several indicators of employee morale have been identified like employee respect, appreciation, acknowledgement, motivation, employee contentment, happiness and satisfaction. The research focuses on three indicators: motivation, happiness and contentment. These three indicators have been chosen because they increase the reliability and reliability of the Cronbach Alpha value. In addition, a clear relation between other indicators and employee morale cannot be clearly established through the research method used (questionnaire). These indicators can be better tested using internal processes of the organization like their performance management system. The aim of the study is to use the indicators identified to discern the existence and level of employee morale in the workplace. Gratitude has been an underappreciated part of the work environment and its importance goes unnoticed. The study also aims to recognise the type of gratitude that has the most impact and understand if the frequency of expressed gratitude has any bearing on the level of employee morale.. The paper also tries to draw perceptive inference of any employee's affinity to individually expressed gratitude vis.a.vis that expressed to the team as a whole.

There is also an attempt to understand current employee perception regarding the scope for further improvement in the culture of gratitude as practiced in their respective organisations.

In addition, other related themes like employee respect and overuse of gratitude have also been explored. This research will help organizations understand the significance of gratitude in the workplace in terms of improving employee morale. Higher employee morale translates to job satisfaction, a feeling of engagement with the workplace which will in turn lead to better performance and higher productivity. Organizations need to understand the way humans function in order to be able to create a functional and healthy work environment. Work relationships across organizations are increasingly becoming more and more transactional, and the very essence of human relationships is lost. The absence of real relationships with others around them can affect the morale and behaviour of employees. The research also attempts to highlight how crucial gratitude is for various relationships, among colleagues, with superiors and with subordinates. The effect of gratitude changes depending on who all are involved in the exchange. This research will facilitate an understanding, for employers as well as employees, of how gratitude affects those around them as well as their relationships with others.

The research has identified two main variables: gratitude and employee morale. Gratitude is the independent variable which impacts employee morale, the dependent variable.

- **Gratitude:** Gratitude is an emotion which occurs after people receive aid which is perceived as costly, valuable, and altruistic (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). However, an industry definition experiences slight variations in the definition. Gratitude is part of a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world (Alex M. Wood, Frohb, & Geraghty, 2010). For an organisation, gratitude is the thankfulness or gratefulness of the organisation and representatives of the organisation, i.e. the employers/ supervisors/ managers towards the dedicated efforts of the employees to align their individual goals with organisational goals and diligently work towards accomplishing these goals both for the benefit of the organisation as well as themselves.
- **Employee Morale:** It has a direct impact on productivity of an individual employee. It is a corner stone of business (Beck, 2016). In human resource terms, employee morale related to job satisfaction, and the feeling of well-being an employee has within his workplace setting. Industrial employee morale is something more than group rapport. (Melany E Baehr, 1958)
- **Contentment:** It is a state of happiness and satisfaction. From an industry point of view, it refers to the satisfaction an employee perceives with his job and the environment in which he operates as an employee. It is a state of fulfilment that an employee feels within his work place and related to the roles and responsibilities that he has to undertake as a part of his job.
- **Happiness:** It is a state of feeling or showing pleasure. From an organisational standpoint, happiness refers to the pleasure employees derive by the virtue of performing the role assigned to them as a part of their job and with the overall working of the organisation.
- **Motivation:** It is the desire or willingness to do something that is stimulated by a sense of purpose. For the purpose of this research, we focus only on employee motivations that stimulate them to perform better with more vigour and set them on a path which is in constant pursuit of achieving greater efficiency.

- **Gratitude and employee morale:** There is conclusive proof to show that employee morale directly impacts productivity, which in turn improves the performance of the employee as well as the overall organisation. We seek to establish if gratitude as a stimulus to enhance employee morale can be used as an effective tool by supervisors and line managers as a part of their verbal communication to boost the morale of employees.
- **Employee morale and contentment:** Contentment is a sub variable in the research that is an indicator of existence and enhancement of employee morale. It is a crucial link between gratitude and employee morale. Gratitude as a form of appreciation improves contentment of employees with their job and their work surroundings. A direct correlation between gratitude and contentment, and contentment and employee morale is what the research seeks to establish to confirm the relationship between the dependent and independent variable.
- **Employee morale and happiness:** Happiness is the second sub variable that is an indicator of how gratitude can impact employee morale in the long run. Happiness is seen as an essential component for the existence of high employee morale and happiness as a feeling noticeably increases for an employee when he/ she is appreciated through verbal or written gratitude.
- **Employee morale and motivation:** Motivation is a critical indicator of employee morale. It drives the way an employee performs in an organisation. Motivation itself is driven by several other parameters like fulfilment of needs both intrinsic and extrinsic, respect, recognition and gratitude. The research only focuses on the impact gratitude has on employee motivation that furthers their morale as an employee of the organisation.
- **Indicators and variables:** Motivation, contentment and happiness are sub variables which have been used as indicators of employee morale. We seek to establish a direct relationship between these indicators and gratitude that expresses that a higher value of these sub variables would lead to a higher value of the dependent variable. Gratitude is the independent variable that directly impacts these 3 indicators and in turn has an impact on how employee morale increases or decreases within the organisation.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper are two:

- To understand the current perception of gratitude in organisations in the Indian context
- To establish a positive relationship between employee morale and gratitude, with the aim of showing how the existence of gratitude in the workplace can lead to higher employee morale.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gratitude can be considered both a trait of character and act(s) of communication providing an overarching definition of gratitude as an orientation toward noticing and appreciating the positives in life (Alex M. Wood, Frohb, & Geraghty, 2010). The trait of gratitude “involves both cognitive and affective elements” (CHEN & WU, 2014).

McCullough, M.E., Emmons, R.A. and Tsang, J.-A. (2002), “The grateful disposition: a conceptual and empirical topography” illustrates the former: gratitude is the “general tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people’s benevolence”(McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).

As per the research paper by **Crystalee Webb Beck (Department of Communication, Weber State University, Ogden, Utah, USA)** titled ‘**Perceptions of thanks in the workplace: Use, effectiveness, and dark sides of managerial gratitude**’, focus group participants were asked about the role of gratitude in their job. Their responses offered a range of employee sentiment, from gratitude-as-a-need to wanting appreciation for a boost, to outright distaste for any form of recognition. One employee articulated gratitude as a deep-rooted need. The outcome indicates verbal words of thanks should not be underestimated in the workplace. Notably, employees ranked verbal words of appreciation higher than monetary bonuses. Employees identified verbal appreciation as the most frequent medium of gratitude received by their managers (Beck, 2016).

Blau, P.M. (1964), Exchange and Power in Social Life, landmark social exchange theory establishes the expectation of reciprocity when gratitude is extended. Yet, more recent studies find true gratitude is “not about reciprocity, nor is it about being polite or even indebted”. (PM, 1964) Gratitude “serves as a mechanism” and “source of human strength enhancing one’s personal and relational well-being” for both giver and receiver. (Froman, 2009)

In a business environment that is constantly transforming, it becomes all the more necessary to keep employees motivated, interested and loyal towards the organisation. While conventional methods of offering monetary and tangible benefits still work as a major differentiating and motivating factor, employees desire for more. Employees need to feel like their work and efforts are valued by an organisation and not taken for granted. Appropriate recognition is one way of acknowledging this. Shows of appreciation can: help make the workplace a positive and happy environment; shape, influence and strengthen relationships between management and workforce; and significantly increase the possibility of business success. Some analysts purport that expressing gratitude can become a natural tendency. Companies should therefore strive to make gratitude an inherent part of organizational culture. (Human Resource Management International Digest, 2016)

As per references made in the paper, **Waters, L. (2012), “Predicting job satisfaction: contributions of individual gratitude and institutionalized gratitude”**, correlated employee job satisfaction to “a workplace culture that endorses gratitude”. (Waters, 2012)

Even though most employee recognition activities are well-intentioned, they actually often lead to negative results, such as the ‘impersonal’ feeling after everyone on a

team receives the same certificate or gift card”. White adds that without a sense of being valued by supervisors and colleagues, “employees start to feel like a commodity or that they are being used”. (White, 2015)

Mazzei, A. (2010), in “Promoting active communication behaviours through internal communication” adds “the internal communication department has a key role in encouraging active employee behaviours in addition to delivering messages”. (Mazzei, 2010)

In their study of 150 employees in India, **Dasgupta, S.A., Suar, D. and Singh, S. (2014), “Managerial communication practices and employees’ attitudes and behaviours”**, explored the effects of managerial communication practices, finding employees were keenly interested in the respect and recognition they were (or were not) receiving. They found employees’ top three reasons to stay in organizations (in order of importance to employees) were: collaborative approach, respect/recognition, and person-job match. Conversely, top-ranked reasons for employees’ intentions to quit organizations were: hierarchical/dominant approach, humiliation, and lack of respect/recognition. (Dasgupta, Suar, & Singh, 2014)

However, the relationship between gratitude and employee morale has not yet been elucidated. We therefore identified three variables that are **indicators of employee morale**, namely **employee contentment, happiness and motivation**. The research attempts to identify the existence of these variables, and in turn the nature of employee morale, and link it to the gratitude expressed and experienced by an employee. In this study we investigated the experience of employees across industries with the attempt to understand how they perceive gratitude. The study attempts to establish the relationship between gratitude and employee morale and show how the existence of gratitude can affect employee morale positively.

RESEARCH DESIGN / METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire developed for the study contains 12 questions, the responses of which have been used to establish a correlation between the indicators of employee morale and gratitude, understand the individual’s perception of gratitude and understand their individual behaviour with respect to expression of gratitude.

Survey: In total 120 (62 females and 58 males) working professionals participated in the survey. The age of the respondents ranged from 22 to 66 years, but most (61.66%) were from the age bracket of 24-35 years. The respondents came from a spectrum of 16 industries, with a majority (21.6%) from the software industry, followed by 11.2% from financial services and 9.5% from information and manufacturing each. A considerable number of respondents belong to mass media, education, healthcare and government services. A random sampling technique was used, the only criteria being minimum 3 years of work experience in any field.

Procedure: 6 questions pertained to demographic information, and 12 multiple-choice (ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) questions were used. Of these, 4 questions were to establish a relation between employee morale and gratitude, 5 were to understand the perception of gratitude in current workplace and 3 were to analyse individual behaviour related to gratitude. A 7 point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Moderately Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Moderately Agree and Strongly Agree) was used for all

questions. The questionnaire was circulated via email and social media like WhatsApp, Facebook and LinkedIn. A pilot study was conducted with 23 respondents and the Cronbach’s reliability test was used to test the reliability of the questionnaire.

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	23	95.8
	Excluded ^a	1	4.2
	Total	24	100.0

a. List wise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.765	.747	14

Scale Statistics

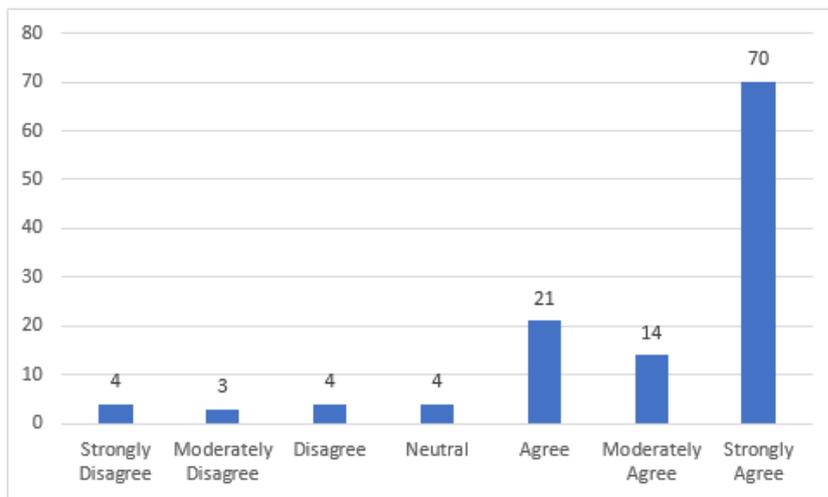
Mean	Variance	Std. Deviation	N of Items
78.74	92.656	9.626	14

Figure 1

DATA ANALYSIS

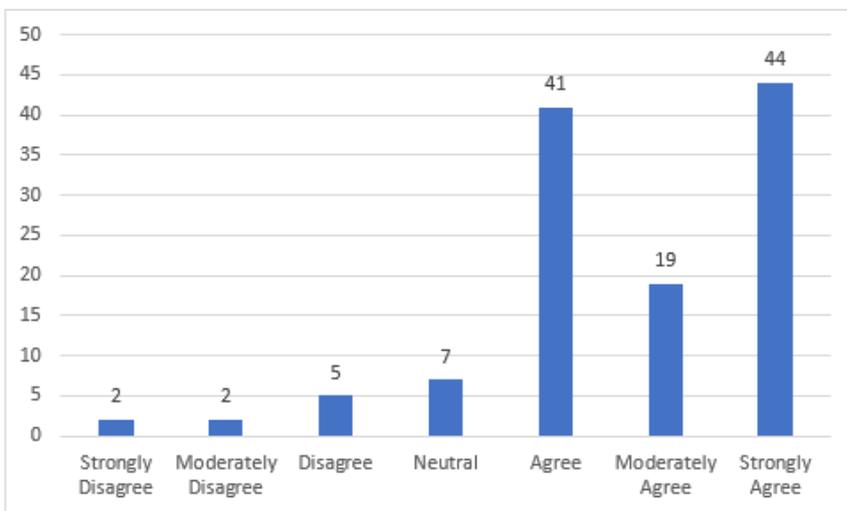
Relation between gratitude and motivation

As per the results of Pearson’s test, a positive correlation (0.56) has been recorded, confirming that motivation levels in employees are higher when there exists a culture of gratitude in the organisation. 87.5% of respondents agree that they feel motivated every time their organisation expresses gratitude towards their contribution.



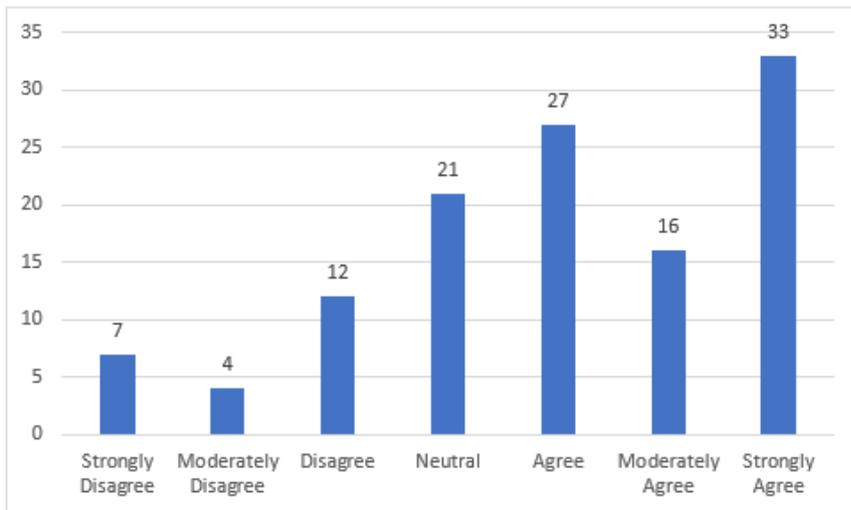
Relation between gratitude and happiness

A positive correlation of 0.44 was recorded as per the Pearson’s test, indicating that higher levels of gratitude bring greater happiness to employees in an organisation. 86.6% respondents feel happy when someone says thanks and expresses gratitude.



Relation between gratitude and contentment

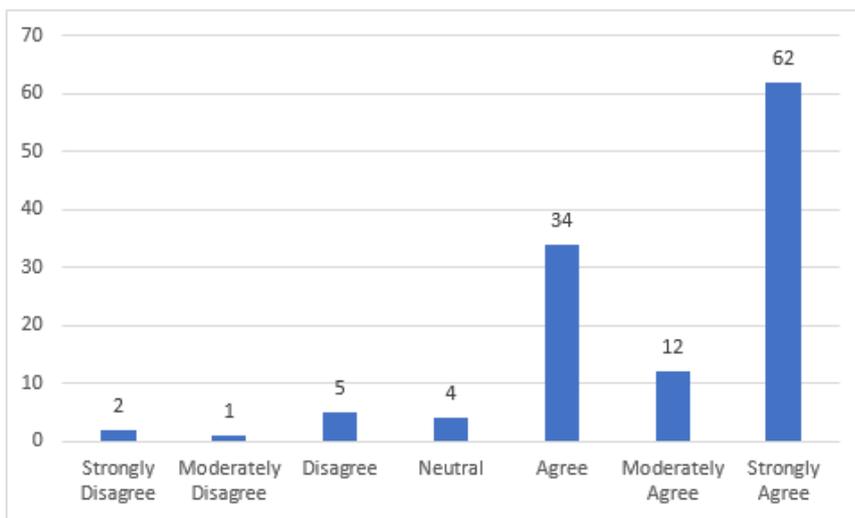
As per the results of Pearson’s test, a positive correlation (0.56) has been recorded establishing that gratitude is positively related to how content an employee feels within the organisation. 63.3% respondents are content with their job in an organisation where a culture of gratitude exists. 21 respondents reacted neutrally to being content with their jobs while 23 respondents feel that gratitude is not a part of their organisational culture.



PERCEPTION OF RESPONDENTS

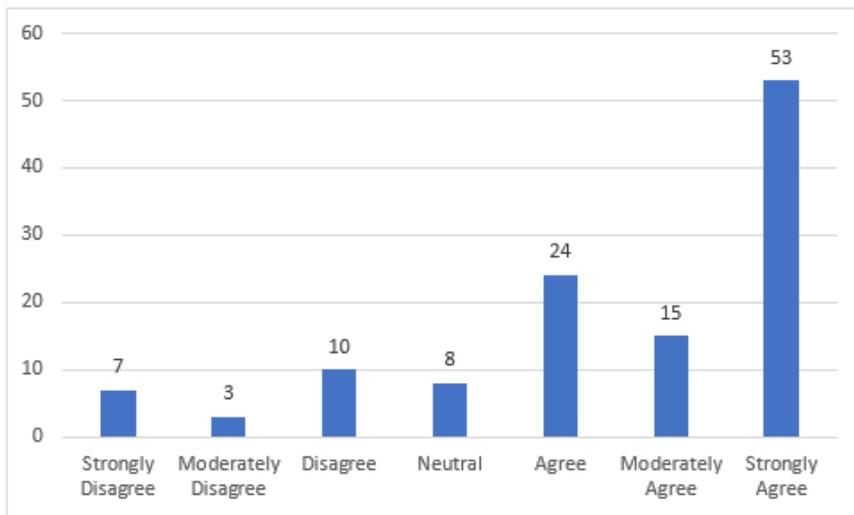
Perception in context of workplace

60 respondents out of 120 strongly agree that gratitude is important in the context of workplace while 35 respondents agree with the aforementioned statement. This question was asked to understand employee perception of gratitude and its importance. 79.1% respondents value gratitude as a part of their workplace culture and feel that it is important. On a Likert scale of 7, the average response is 5.92 (SD=1.36), indicating that the respondents are in agreement with the statement.



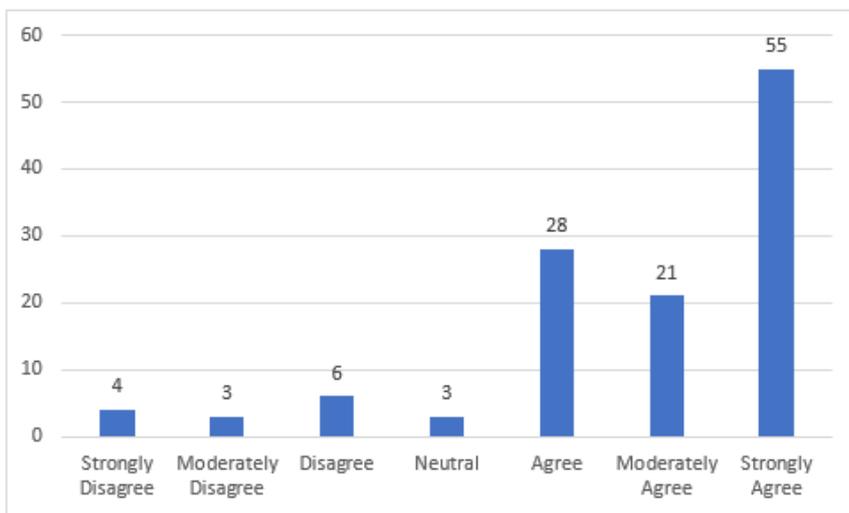
Perception of personally expressed gratitude

On a Likert scale of 7, an average result of 5.4(SD=1.7) was recorded indicating that respondents believe that personally expressed gratitude has a greater impact than generally expressed attitude. Of all respondents (n=120), 76.6% agree with the above statement.



Perception of monetary gratitude

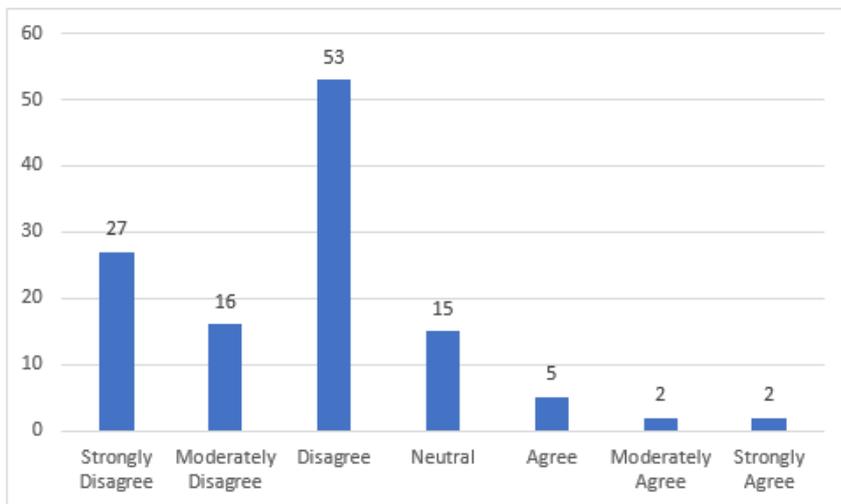
On a Likert scale of 7, an average result of 5.75 (SD=1.5) was recorded. This reflects that respondents (n=120) believe that the nature of gratitude need not be monetary, a mere gesture or verbal nature of gratitude would suffice. 86.6% respondents (n=120) agree with the above statement.



Perception of current culture of gratitude

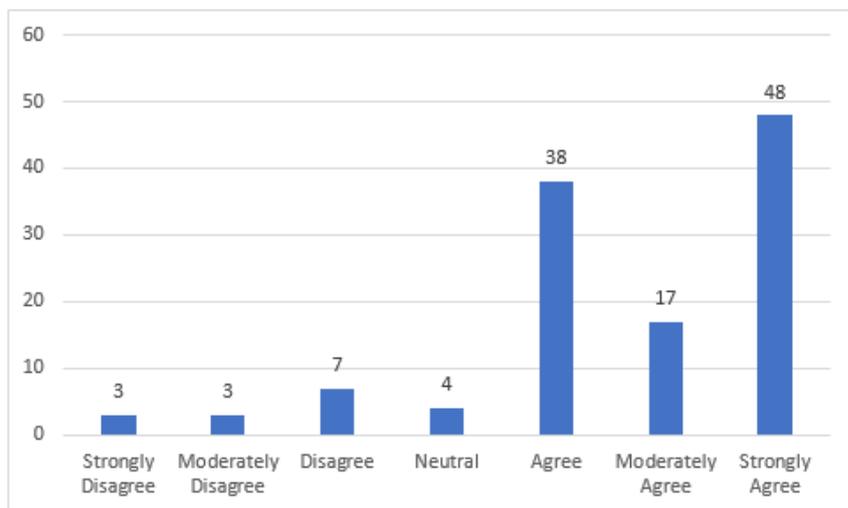
On a Likert scale of 7, an average result of 2.74(SD=1.2) was recorded. This shows that respondents (n=120) believe that there is still scope for improvement in the current culture of gratitude. Organisations presently in India have not been able to fully capitalise on the benefits of expressing gratitude and can improve and create a better culture of gratitude

within the organisation. 80% of the respondents see a scope for improvement in the culture of gratitude.



Perception of employee respect and gratitude

On a Likert scale, an arithmetical mean of 5.61(SD=1.5) has been recorded. Respondents (n=120) believe that gratitude as an indicator is important for how respected an employee feels in an organisation. 85.8% of respondents confer with the statement. An employee feels respected more if he is shown gratitude in his workplace by his superiors and generally by the organisation.

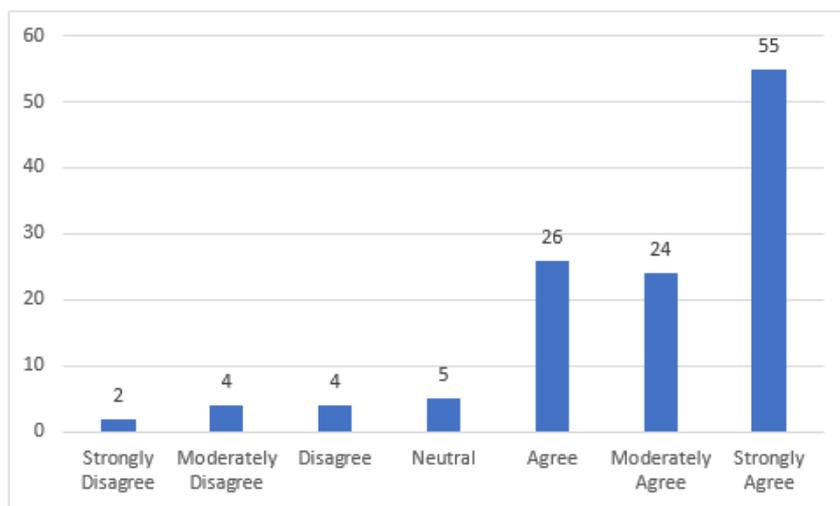


General readings also observed during the study as follows:

3 questions focussed on the individual behaviour of the respondents with regard to gratitude, in terms of how they react to it or how it makes them feel.

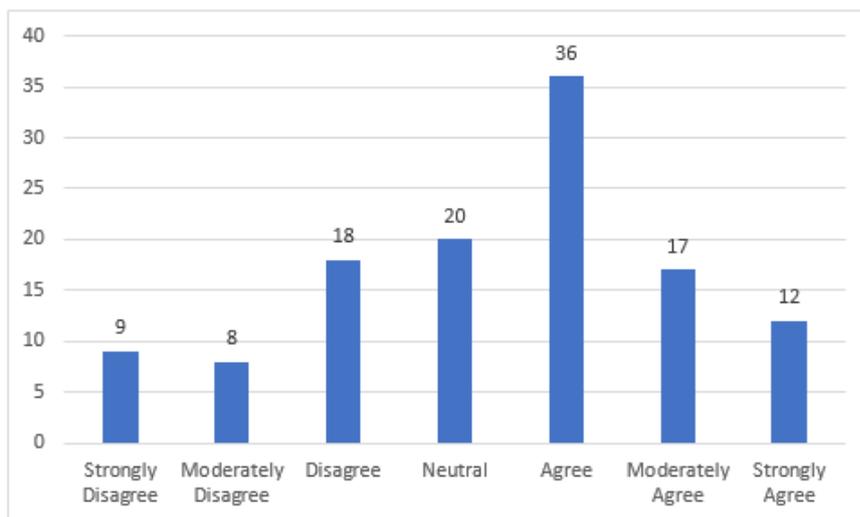
I frequently express gratitude towards my colleagues and subordinates.

For the above statement, the average result (n=120) was 5.84 (SD=1.43) indicating that employees frequently express attitude towards others in the workplace. 45.8% of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement.



Overuse of gratitude makes me take it for granted.

The average result (n=120) was 4.37 (SD=1.64) which shows that most employees agree that the overuse of gratitude would make them take it granted. The average result is closer to the neutral value which means that there are a considerable number of employees who are neutral/ disagree with the statement.

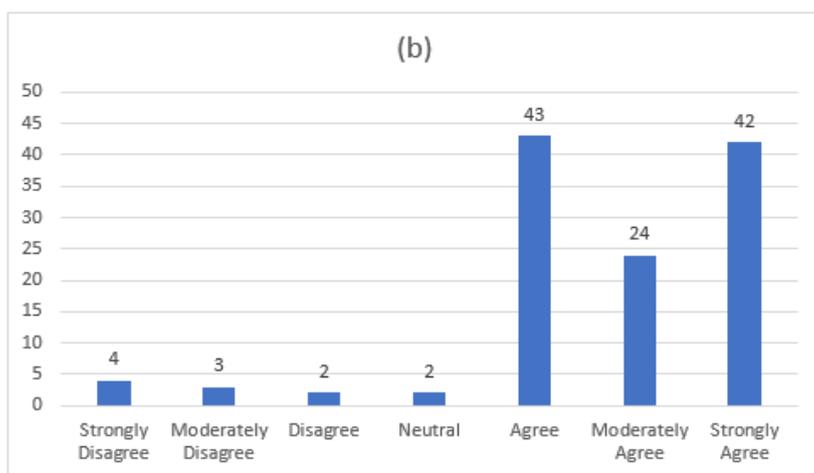
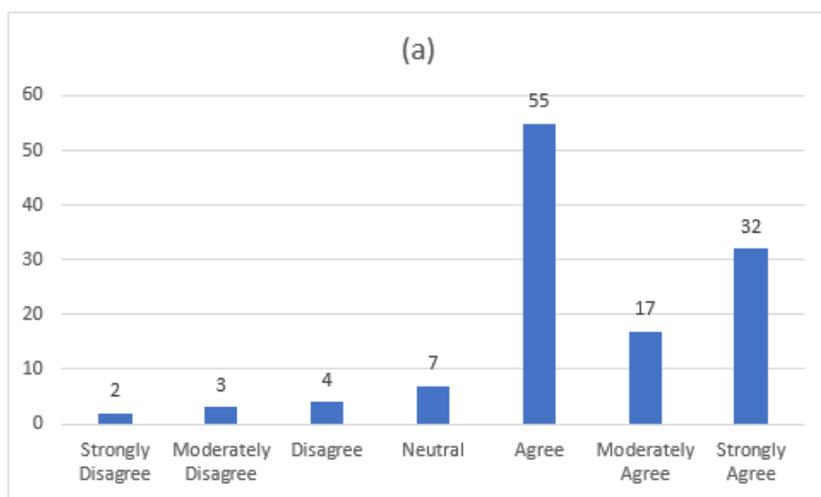


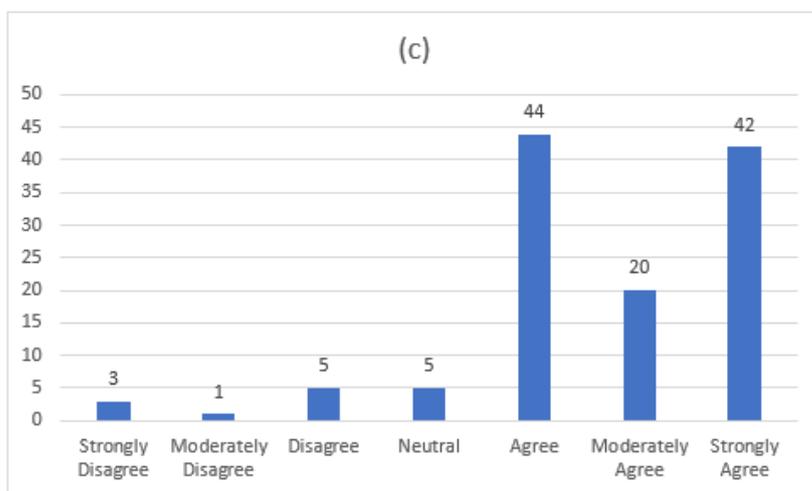
I feel appreciated when:

- My colleagues thank me
- My superiors thank me
- My subordinates thank me

This question was framed with the aim of identifying the difference (if any) felt by individuals when gratitude is expressed by different individuals. In the workplace environment, the relationship of any individual is different with his/her colleagues, superiors and subordinates and this could have an effect on the experience of receiving gratitude.

The mean result (n=120) for the statements above was 5.40 (SD=1.31), 5.64(SD=1.42) and 5.61(SD=1.36) respectively. After an analysis of the individual responses, it was observed that 32 respondents strongly agreed with the first statement, while 42 respondents strongly agreed with the second and third statements.





Influence of age:

The respondents (n=120) are between the age of 21 and 66. Results as per Pearson’s correlation test showed a negative correlation (-0.1) between age of respondent and their perception of the importance of gratitude. While 91.6% respondents who were millennials perceived gratitude to be an important part of organisational culture, the percentage reduced to 88.2% for respondents who were Gen X and 85.12% for respondents who were baby boomers.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the research has been to identify current managerial gratitude practices in the workplace and employees’ perception of the same. This study addresses two research questions- the first seeks to understand employees’ perception of gratitude in the workplace. The second research question aims to identify a relationship between gratitude and employee morale. The 3 indicators of employee morale- motivation, happiness and contentment, showed a positive correlation to the existence of gratitude in the employees’ workplace. 90% of respondents agree that gratitude is important in the context of the workplace. Employees’ contribution towards the organisation is part of his job role and is expected of him. Despite that, a mere gesture of gratitude, verbal or non-verbal is seen as a way to improve motivational levels of employees and encourage them to perform better.

A simple thank you by a supervisor or a peer, which we otherwise might take for granted actually has an impact on employee morale and makes an employee feel happy. Contentment with job depends on the fulfilment of a variety of needs and expectations that an employee has from his workplace and organisation. One of the contributory factors to increasing contentment among employees in the workplace is by expressing gratitude towards them. In the research conducted, 23 respondents disagreed with gratitude being a part of their organisational culture and 21 respondents were neutral about being content with their job.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The research offers practical implications to the organisation, specifically to the immediate supervisors, team leads and line managers on one spectrum and the human resource management team on the other spectrum. Managers at all levels, who are in some position of authority and have employees reporting to them need to self-evaluate the way they express gratitude towards their employees and the sincerity with which they do it. For the human resource management team, it is necessary for them to assess the current culture within the organisation and actively promote a culture of gratitude not only among higher management but all levels of management, so as to ingrain it within the organisational culture. Awareness about the impact gratitude has on employee morale should be communicated to managers operating at C-suite level and mid-level management. This would allow managers to lead by example and make a conscious contribution towards developing a culture of gratitude.

LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE OF FUTURE RESEARCH

Other countries could have a possibly different cultural value for gratitude and thus conducting the same research in another country could give different results. Understanding cross cultural differences in the value of gratitude could also assist while dealing with expats in the organization. Further research could be carried out to understand the most effective ways of expressing gratitude in workplace relationships. The paper focuses on the verbal expression of gratitude. Thus there is a need to understand how gratitude expressed in other ways like through the medium of social media could affect employee morale. The researchers feel the need to explore the effect of other variables like acknowledgement, employee respect and diversity and inclusion on employee morale. Another observation made by the authors that could be an interesting topic of research is the influence of age on the perception of gratitude.

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