



iLLUminate Blog Transcript: Liuba Belkin on Workplace Gratitude

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- ANNOUNCER: 00:02 [music] This podcast is brought to you by iLLUminate, the Lehigh Business blog. To learn more, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news.
- STEPHANIE VETO: 00:13 Welcome to iLLUminate, the podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. I'm your host, Stephanie Veto. Today we're talking with Liuba Belkin about her recently published paper on workplace gratitude. Liuba is an associate professor and the director of the management program. Her research focuses on individual effective states and emotions in organizational settings. Hi, Liuba. Welcome to the show.
- LIUBA BELKIN: 00:36 Hi, Stephanie. Thank you for inviting me. Very happy to be here.
- VETO: 00:40 What drew you to studying workplace environments and emotions?
- BELKIN: 00:44 I believe two main reasons. And the study of emotions began almost 20 years ago, when I was doing my dissertation. And at that time, I was studying how emotions felt and expressed in virtual context, so through email in organizations, influence employee attitudes, behavioral outcomes, etc. And I was studying it in a particular context, and what I found was also interesting. In the field, there was almost nothing on emotions and emotional effects in the virtual context, of course, but also outside of the virtual context. And the majority of my colleagues in management field also considered a study of emotions something maybe not too serious of a topic, or not important, compared to so-called objective or real outcomes and behaviors.
- BELKIN: 01:45 But we know that this cannot be further from the truth, and the last 20 years or so of research specifically in my field, which boomed on emotions, demonstrated that, in fact, emotions are very important to consider, what kind of emotions employees feel in organizations and their companies and their teams, this effective climates, it influenced everything from their attitudes and behaviors to overall emotional climates. And of course, it affects performance on the individual level, but also team performance and organizational performance.
- BELKIN: 02:24 So that was kind of one of the reasons that drew my attention and kind of wider focus on emotions, not just in virtual contexts that I started to study in different projects. But the second reason was also so-called macro reason, about 10 years ago. So, again, I think it's also the advancement of communication, technology, social media, really contributed to this sense of a lot of kind of negativity, societal polarization, all these negative emotions. And it kept me thinking that we have enough anger and fear and hostility outside of workplace, and I really want to focus on something positive because you can't really eliminate it, kind of focusing on how do you eliminate anger or hostility or at least control it in certain ways.
- BELKIN: 03:19 So I thought maybe it's a better way to focus on the power of positive emotions, and not just positive, but specifically what we call transcendent emotions, like gratitude and compassion. So emotions that not just affect you, but really change how people around you behave, how they see you. And about 10 years ago, I started my research on gratitude, also the effects of how you feel when you feel grateful. And it's partially



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personal as well. Really, in my daily life, I practice gratitude. And I do know it's like a muscle. Even if you don't think-- grateful you don't have it, you definitely can practice, and you can become better at that. Just noticing small things, what you have in your life, and also expressing it to others. And we found some amazing things in the workplace now and beyond it that when people express simple tokens of gratitude to others, it not just brightens their day, it really changes their behavior. And we especially saw this powerful effects during crisis. When COVID hit, I had a stream of research looking at how this crisis mode affected people in organizations. And for example, one of the research, we found that just simple gratitude expressions of supervisors to their subordinates, different clients. Sometimes these were a hug, sometimes saving some really needed materials or just asking how you're doing, or giving a day off. There were different kinds. At that time, we didn't differentiate. This is what I'll talk about in a second in this paper. But what we found was that it really signaled to employees that my manager cares. And it didn't require economic-- like a lot of investment or a lot of time and effort. And we saw some really powerful effects in terms of people going above and beyond, trying to help organization, not what they're required to do, but really treating it differently. And it's very important, especially in crisis, right, when organizations are really trying to survive in this difficult time.

VETO: 05:36

I think, well, and I was really excited to speak with you about your research because even from a personal perspective, with this type of work, I've always said to friends and family, I could be counting buttons for a living, but as long as I have some sort of buy-in, and that's how I would always describe it, like I need to believe in my group or my team or my manager or whatever, where I feel like I'm a part of something or I feel that gratitude both ways. It doesn't matter what I'm doing. It's just that sort of sense of professional community where we're all building something. And you struggle to find that in a lot of places. And I have a lot of friends and acquaintances that really struggle with that in the workplace. And it doesn't seem like too difficult of a thing. I don't know. [laughter] But it is.

BELKIN: 06:40

Well, it's not. There is this notion that-- which again, I think rewards are important. And that's kind of what this paper-- we try to distinguish between agentic and communal gratitude, right? So rewards and promotions and kind of-- you can show you appreciate people with monetary rewards. But simple rewards, that simple gratitude expressions that show you care, you see your employees as individuals, you're not just trying to kind of this-- it's not transactional relationship. You're not just trying to squeeze every dime that matters. That's one thing. And the other thing kind of got me thinking when you started talking about your experiences that I also studied. I'm a member of this positive organizational scholarship that started in the University of Michigan 20 plus years ago. And this is the amazing people that really energize me when I see their research. We have conferences every couple of years, and I love going there. But what you were describing is what they termed, a number of years ago, what's called "high-quality connections". So there are encounters at work with people, they can be a couple of minutes, but it makes you feel energized. And maybe your day was not going so well, but someone asking, "How are you doing?" And chatting for a couple of minutes, and you light up. And this energy is real.

BELKIN: 08:03

It's not just what you think it is. It actually can lift people up. On the other hand, workplaces when the relationship is either very transactional or there're abusive



supervisors or the effective climates are negative, it really drains you. And no matter how much they reward you, eventually you will leave, right? There's a certain point-- again, I do not discount the importance of material rewards, but the story is much more complex and bigger in that way. And we as human beings, we need to be part of something important, something like-- and we have to have a purpose. That's a bunch of other projects I'm doing right now [laughter] I can talk about, but it's-- so please stop me because I really get engaged with that. Because I think these things are all connected, and that's what I see, one of my missions, by doing this research, is to bring awareness to managers and practitioners about it.

VETO: 08:58

Absolutely. And you recently co-authored a paper called More Than Words. I'm going to try to get this right as best as I can, "A risk regulation model of supervisor gratitude expression, felt appreciation, and subordinate voice." That was published in the Journal of Management recently, right?

BELKIN: 09:18

Yeah.

VETO: 09:19

Congratulations. That's awesome.

BELKIN: 09:20

Thank you.

VETO: 09:21

Describe what this research is about at a high level, please.

BELKIN: 09:25

So this work is very dear to my heart and I have an amazing team of co-authors that we did together. And we started actually-- that's really interesting. I mentioned Positive Organizational Scholarship Group because we conceived of this idea when we met with one of the-- she's the leading author on this paper, Sharon Sheridan. We started talking about this project almost I think like eight years ago, something like that. It took some time, but it's a very rigorous research and I'm very proud actually and happy to see it finally published. So there we started talking about these gratitude expressions in the workplace, and this whole notion is, in a simple way, that, well, you express gratitude and then kind of employees see that and then they change the behavior and kind of in a rewarding ways.

BELKIN: 10:22

But it's a very wonderful idea, but life doesn't work like that. And in fact, again and again, this yearly large-scale employee surveys done by this big companies like Gallup, et cetera, what they show is that supervisors somehow think they really express gratitude a lot to their employees, but there is mismatch because employees don't really feel appreciated at all. And what we started talking about with Sharon and then other co-authors who joined the team is that, how about we just go and study what kinds of gratitudes are usually expressed in the workplace? And then we looked at dyads of supervisor subordinates and then kind of see if there is match and mismatch, and why do we care?

BELKIN: 11:16

So there are two kind of these big contributions and ideas in this paper, is that number one, supervisors expressed gratitude in different ways. And we developed and validated the scale where we distinguish these two general categories of types of gratitude expression. And what we found is that employees have different preferences for those types, and when those preferences match with actual type of expression, good outcomes happen. And then when they don't match, that the outcomes we studied, like voice behavior, does not happen. And again, we didn't study negative outcomes, but we definitely see the influence impact on important



outcomes such as voice, constructive voice. And what we mean by voice is that there are always problems in organizations, things happening. And the decision of employee to speak up when there are problems or when, let's say there is a team meeting and you know you have other information that maybe is not shared, and you know that it would be the wrong decision to pursue, or something else is happening, or you've seen some misconduct. So it's always your choice to speak up or not. And you're not required to, right?

BELKIN: 12:36

And the thing is, voice is a very risky behavior because it can be helpful for organization. But employees need to know that they will be safe, right? So the manager will, if not listen-- well, at least listen, but not punish them for this or their colleagues, right? And why would you speak up if it's not the organization? It's not the requirement of your job, right? So it's very much discretionary behavior that employees decide whether they will engage it or not for the benefit of organization. And that's what we studied. And we found really positive effects of this match between types of expression to employee preferences, voice. And we also looked at the psychological mechanisms.

BELKIN: 13:26

And we conducted, I think, eight studies or so, a lot of supplementary to make sure we actually tapping into something new and distinguish it from other mechanisms that might be in play. And I'm happy to report that that's the case with all the other kind of mechanisms we started concurrently with what we looked at, which was-- so kind of if I walk you through is that gratitude expression that matches the preference really conveys the signal to employees saying, "Well, my manager understands me. He or she gets me," right? So that's the feeling of appreciation. That's when you have it, right? When there is match. And when you feel appreciated because of this perceived regard for you as a human being, that's when you engage in this prosocial discretionary behavior, such as voice.

VETO: 14:21

And in the paper, you do talk a lot about risk and voice and risk behavior, as you've said. And it's funny because when I was first going over it and reading it and trying to understand it, I was like, "Risky behavior. What does that mean? And why would this be?" And so that makes so much more sense. But I do want you to talk a little bit more about that behavior and maybe the trust an employee might have or a subordinate might have when it comes to voicing something that might be an issue or of concern and why that's important. But also are there instances when that can be a problem for the company?

BELKIN: 15:05

Well, the risk regulation theory really borrowed from the psychology research. And that theory is pretty well known in the context of interpersonal relationships, studied in romantic relationships, mostly in psychology field. And the idea behind this is that when people are in interdependent relationships, for example, again, in personal relationships, people always kind of manage this two broad goals. One is protecting themselves, right? Avoid getting rejected or getting hurt. And the other one kind of investing in the relationship, trying to connect, building, because we have this really innate desire to connect. We have this kind of communal need. It's as strong drive as other motivational needs. We know this from psychology. But then we thought but this is basically the same thing in the work context. So supervisor subordinate always manage this, again, this two broad goals. I'm trying to avoid getting hurt. It is a professional relationship, but still, we have the connection here. We have the



relationship, right? And then I also would like to invest for professional reasons and it can be for personal reasons as well, but building, strengthening the relationship, but also kind of this two major goals are the same, and when people manage this interdependent relationships, and by the way, we studied the employee, but supervisors are also dependent on their subordinate, right, because their career depends on them and they also have to deal with them on daily basis. So there is a mix of kind of this career and also personal desire to keep this relationship well alive and balanced. But why it's important specifically in the context of the workspace is that to manage these relationships, people kind of pay attention to different signals.

BELKIN: 17:20

So how do you know that the person won't hurt you actually perceives you in high regard, right? So there are two kind of-- and please correct me if I'm going too into psychological details too much, but I think it's important. There are two main mechanisms. One is this kind of attributional system that you look at the other's behavior and you decide whether it signals that you care for me or not, and based on that, there is behavioral system that's saying, well, I decide at the moment, will I engage in something risky, right? Because if there is no risk, then if the behavior is not like voice or there is nothing that would hurt you, this mechanism is not important. What's important is if you get the signal that the person cares for me, when the moment comes that you can help, you don't have to, you will actually go and lend the hand, right? And by this, you do it for the other person, but you also do it for the relationship because you're investing in the relationship.

VETO: 18:21

I find that, yeah, that's really interesting and that makes total sense. And I find that, for me, in certain situations where I feel maybe safer, or I am treated as a professional, or I have a seat at the table and they want me there, I'm able to voice something or bring something up that maybe nobody else would, and I've also been in situations where I also have nothing left to lose [laughter], so I'm just going to be honest [laughter]. And I know that's not a common thing, but kindly honest about things or voicing things that you know what, there's nothing left to lose. Here we go. This is how I feel and this is how we can fix it. And that also has earned trust as, on my level, to express myself and has gotten me in a little bit of trouble in the past too. I'm not going to lie, but it's interesting you saying these thing in theory, and how, in general, things can work and feel, and then from the perspective of me where it's like I'm experiencing this in the workplace for the past 20 years. It's like it's so true [laughter].

BELKIN: 19:36

And to your point, first of all, kind of being truthful to yourself, it makes you feel good, but also helping others. Again, this is something that hardwired us as species and I think that's-- well, it's not me. It's evolutionary biology shows that's probably how we survive. We couldn't survive on our own, right? We needed a network of strong connections and we hardwired to invest in good relationships and be part of something bigger than ourselves. And this is the mechanism. So it benefits organization, but it also makes the employee feels good. Again, when it's constructive voice. And that's kind of, I think, goes to your second question. Can it be a bad thing? Can it be a problem? Well, constructive voice is not given that the managers actually listen and try to find out, again, if this is said not out of spite or just the desire to feel important, right? So this is not constructive voice. And there are people who complain all the time.



VETO: 20:38

Yes, there's a difference between complaining, right?

BELKIN: 20:40

Right. Yeah. This is more about people speaking honestly without fear for something that they see there is a problem, and they're trying to solve. It doesn't mean they have all the answers, but as a manager and leader, you really would like to have as much information and honest opinions as possible. Because again, as often it happens, people say, "Well, no matter what, I'll just give the positive information because why bother? And the manager will like me." But again, if you really care for your company, you don't want that. You actually want the truthful information, not the ones that people just presenting it to you so you feel good.

VETO: 21:21

Looks good on paper.

BELKIN: 21:24

The main idea is that we really had several samples of online panels where we just ask them. We ask the supervisors first, "How do you express gratitude in the workplace?" So here are the list of, "Tell us, just write down what you usually do." Then we ask subordinates, those who have supervisors, direct supervisors, how do they express? So they let us know. Then we compose, let's say, I don't know, 30, 40 items of different things. And we asked a different panel of respondents to kind of sort it out in different categories. And that's slowly but surely multiple steps. So we came up with these two broad categories, agentic gratitude expression and communal gratitude expression. The way we define that is that agentic gratitude expression is something that when the manager recognizes you for your performance and kind of progresses your career. It can be monetary reward. It can be awards, so kind of more economics, so to speak, based and career success directly based, right? And then there is what's called communion gratitude expression. It can be a thank-you note. It can be bringing baked goods, taking out a coffee, or hanging out after work, all of these things. So we thought it doesn't make any sense to distinguish between each single one because there are multiple ways to express communal gratitude. But the idea is kind of signaling, "I see you as a person, I see you as my team member," kind of human being relational expression.

BELKIN: 23:05

And then our main study where we found 124 supervisor-subordinate dyads, and really looked at kind of this, first, how the supervisors expressed their gratitude and then they felt appreciation that their subordinates felt their preference, as they indicated earlier, and then the behaviors, and specifically, we'll looked at voice. And then we wanted really to kind of tease apart what is the exact mechanism, why we see that felt appreciation because of this match, mismatch sometimes leads to voice and sometimes it doesn't. And using this risk regulation theory, we kind of compared different mechanisms, and we were at different experiments with it. So that was the lab experimental research as a supplementary to really see that this perception of high regard is something that is what is born out of this match between expression and preference, right? And if I feel that you regard me highly, I really feel that's when I feel appreciated. Not when you express something that, I mean, I might care about--but and we talk a little bit about mismatch, why it can be even dangerous. Sometimes, you express a lot of relational gratitude, right? And the example is, let's hang out after work or high five, and I do a lot of work, and I think I don't need this. I mean, we all have the drive for both types, but in different due to our personalities, circumstances, and in different times in our life, we need more connection at work or we need less. And same for [inaudible]. And some people would say, can too much



money or promotion be a bad thing? And yes, because if someone promotes you or gives you a raise, you might think, "Well, now they expect me to be here 24/7." And it's a good thing, but it's also like, do they think that maybe then that I have to work twice as hard? And some people are not ready for that. And on the other hand, there's a lot of communal gratitude expression. Well, maybe I'm a very private person. I want to spend more time with my family. They need my attention more. Or I just don't want to kind of go too much beyond the workspace.

BELKIN: 25:38

And the supervisor who invites you to this coffee-- I mean, it can be even borderline on something, is it more than professional relationship and maybe inappropriate? But even if it's not that, you might feel, I don't have that time. Maybe I have kids. Maybe I have other activities that are more important to me. So instead of failed appreciation, I might feel aggravated. So that's kind of, again, this is just kind of extreme examples, but the point is this sweet spot, the match between the preference is what drives this felt appreciation and then this behavior.

VETO: 26:17

I want to generalize, but from your experience and expertise in this, I found that prior to the pandemic, so before 2020, most of us were in the office five days a week, and I had a different career than most personally. I was a journalist, and so I worked days, nights, weekends, 24/7. Woohoo. That's what it was. But even in an office workspace after that part of my career, you're in the office five days a week. You're giving it your all. You had a great sense of community. It was even like, this is our work family kind of mindset. And then I feel like after the lockdown and pandemic and when things started going back in office and everything, there was a taste of that separation from work life. And again, I'm generalizing and making it up, but I feel like people are more careful with their time and that separation and that barrier where it's like, "You're not my family. I have my family." Or it's more like, I just find that there's definitely more of a separation or change in mindset. What do you think about that?

BELKIN: 27:35

Well, you ask very interesting questions. I think from a little different perspective, perhaps, because I also studied that and kind of these borders. It's a different kind of stream of my research, but it's all overlapping now. But I really studied this effect of this constant communication connection people experience at home while they're not at work, but they're still checking the email. And what I think is it's a cultural shift because in the United States, unlike many places in the world, and that's including Europe and some cultures, not all, there are some cultures also that workaholics in the Middle East, which is last studied region. But basically, it's a very different attitude towards work, right? So work is a very important part of people's lives, but it's not all. They don't leave for work. It's the other way around. They work to support their living. And then they enjoy their work, but they also really treasure their family time, their personal time. And I think that having this separation gave a taste to a lot of people that, "Well, maybe there is more to life than to work." I'm not discussing the merits of either approach. I love my job, but I also do know that oftentimes my family feels that that's all I have because it doesn't feel like work. I have all these interesting questions to explore. But I really rob, sometimes, my family or my friends from attention. And we need all of this. We need this kind of to pay attention to other parts of our lives so we don't burn down. So is it a good thing or a bad thing? I don't know. It's an empirical question, but perhaps you getting into something in terms of people became more careful. And in fact, there was what's called the wave of great resignation. I think 21, 22, when people realize, "Well, I'm quitting my job." There



were extreme cases saying, "Well, life is short. Let's do something else." And maybe they've been in the job and they kind of didn't look up and smell the roses. And suddenly they had this opportunity and maybe they found something that they contributed more. So it also depends whether they appreciated work, right? So I think, really, if you felt like a team before and hopefully managers were able to keep this feeling, it's hard. It's not the same, but through maybe Zoom meetings. And we, again, in my other projects, we studied that a lot, how do you keep up this energy and really have this one-on-one time with your subordinates. And if they did, so maybe it's not as visible for others who kind of then realize, "Maybe all the effort I'm doing, it's not as important," or "I'm not as appreciated as I thought I would be." And that changed their mind. But I don't know. I mean, it's another future research project, probably. Yeah. So thank you for bringing this up. A lot of my projects are not just from personal experience, because my job is a little different, right, with teaching and research than your typical nine-to-five office job. But talking to people and talking about the experiences then gets me thinking about the other things I know from my research and from the field and thinking, "Hmm, that would be very interesting phenomenon to study." So thank you.

VETO: 31:20

You're welcome. One last question before I let you go. Is there anything that stood out to you or surprised you about your research that was published?

BELKIN: 31:33

Well, probably is that, again, this fine distinction between not enough and too much. And what we found is that-- I mean, match is the sweet spot, but in terms of mismatch, not expressing enough of relational connection in simple ways actually hurts more than not expressing enough to integrate. Not hurts more. That's not accurate. It's a nuance. It kind of hurts for the injecting gratitude. And then the so-called the effect is pretty null, even. But with not expressing communal gratitude, it actually goes down deeper. And that's little nuance that matters. Again, you do not have as a manager or a leader to invite everyone for coffee or invest a lot of time into expressing. But simple thank you, simple, I don't know, spending a couple of minutes, and I recommend that to managers doing this on a regular basis with all their employees because research clearly shows that just asking questions about them, how they're doing, and really truly listening, not doing it formally because we all, social creatures, there are millions of years of evolution train us to sense fake attitudes, emotions. And when it's not genuine, you can feel it, right? So if you genuinely listen and genuinely care, it's just a couple of minutes maybe every month or so. That drives more positive behavior because it signals you cared about me, not as another cog there or a number, but as a human being. And it pays off so much in the long run, and again, in retention of employee talent, which is the most important thing for companies, and a lot of the great behaviors. So again, this little nuance that we found was interesting. I wouldn't say it's contrary to what I expected, but there is a difference. And I feel that's very important that we develop this scale so future scholars, when they study gratitude and their effects in the workplace, they actually just don't bundle it in the expression of gratitude, but they actually go and study different types and see other effects. There's so much to study. We're just kind of scratching the surface so far. So that's kind of in terms of theoretical or implications for my academic field, but in future research. But in terms of practitioners, I mean, simple things. I feel like I've said it so many times before, but this research kind of also brings these findings to places. First of all, you need to express the gratitude



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according to employee preferences. So the question is, how do I know? The answer is simple. I've seen so many times managers have the idea of what the employee is like, but just simple asking. For example, if you can give, you have the latitude to give an employee a day off or whatever the day cost to you, right, in monetary work, ask what they prefer, if it's the same thing to you, right? And some people will say, "I'd rather spend it with my kids or my loved ones." And some people would say, "No, I'd rather have money." That's fine. If it's the same to you, ask just me or some other. There are simple questions that starts with that, number one. Number two, you can get training on-- well, again, it's a muscle, so to speak, empathy, gratitude. All of these things you can practice, little things, just pay attention. Have a goal every morning. Just pay attention to three positive things your employees did and just mention it, right? So that's another thing. It's very simple. And then it becomes a habit. Once you start doing it, you actually start noticing things. So that's training. And then again, don't have this assumption that's kind of, "I know everything, one fits all thing." You're working with people. No one asks you to spend all your time finding their personality differences, but little things make a huge difference down the road. So I hope that managers and organizational leaders actually pay attention to our research findings of this paper and others. And small steps, kind steps with everything we're dealing with in macro kind of social environment keeps people in a little brighter mood and keeps you a little happy. So I think it's a win-win for all of us.

VETO: 36:28

Liuba, thank you so much for being on the show today. It was great talking with you.

BELKIN: 36:33

Thank you. I had fun. So thank you so much for meeting with me and listening to my research. I hope we can do it again very soon.

VETO: 36:42

Absolutely. I can't wait. I have so many more questions.

BELKIN: 36:46

Bring them on. Thank you, Stephanie.

VETO: 36:49

That was Liuba Belkin speaking with us about workplace emotions and gratitude. This podcast is brought to you by ILLUminate, the Lehigh Business blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh Business Thought Leaders or to follow us on social media, please visit business.lehigh.edu/news. This is Stephanie Vito, host of the ILLUminate podcast. Thanks for listening.