

The Power of the Reverse “Thank You” – Influencing Others Made Easier

If you thank people only *after* the fact, you’re missing half the power.

By Kate Zabriskie

Most of us like to be thanked, especially when the sentiment is sincere. For that reason, “thank you” is one of the most powerful phrases in the English language.

In addition to using it to recognize past acts, you can also say “thank you” to influence people’s future behavior.

- *I know we all want to finish this meeting on time, so before we start I want to thank you in advance for sticking to our agenda. And thank you for being such an efficient, professional, and focused group. We couldn’t ask for a better team!*
- *I want to thank all of you for your patience. Your fabulous attitudes make my job easier when we’re running behind. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to make the wait better for you or if I can answer any questions, and thank you again.*
- *I know you understand how important giving great customer service is to our success, and I appreciate how hard you work to be an exceptional staff. I want to thank you in advance for going the extra mile today. In particular, thank you for greeting people with enthusiasm, finding clever ways to delight them, and handling any problems promptly and professionally. Thank you again for your effort.*

Why Bother

Some people will argue that thanking people for doing what they’re “supposed to do” is a waste of time. Chances are, however, those same people find themselves frustrated by customers, clients, board members, and co-workers who don’t behave the way they should.

For those nonbelievers, the thank-you-in-advance method of influence is certainly worth a shot.

Why Thank You in Advance Works

Thanking people in advance works for three reasons:

People feel an obligation to reciprocate after they’ve received something.

We all want to conform to a positive image of ourselves. In other words, “I’m going to act like a good employee because I am a good employee.”

A third explanation for the thank-you method’s power has to do with instruction. Often, we assume people intuitively know what they’re supposed to do. Guess what? Many don’t, they’ve forgotten, they’re preoccupied, or they’re simply not thinking. When they know what you want, they’ll usually follow your suggested course of action.

The Structure of an Advanced Thank You

To plan an advanced thank you, use the following framework:

- 1. Think about** the desired result. “I want people to show up on time.”
- 2. Identify the type of people** who typically demonstrate that behavior. “Responsible and accountable people show up on time.”
- 3. Craft a statement** that identifies the people you’re addressing as that group, and be specific about what you want to see.

I appreciate the fact that we have such a dedicated, conscientious team. I want to thank you in advance for giving 110% this week. The hours during the holiday season are demanding, and it takes a true group of professionals to act upbeat and engaged with every visitor, whether it’s first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon. Thanks again for your diligence and dedication.

Tips & Cautions

Thanking people in advance is part science and part art. The above structure provides a framework for your message. The specific words you choose, the tone in which you deliver them, and your timing are subjective. The following tips and cautions should help you get the most from the method.

You should thank people for good behavior before you’ve observed anything egregious. For example, imagine a chaotic scene where people at a fundraising event are pushing and shoving each other. It’s more difficult to thank

“Some gratitude offered earlier could have helped avoid mayhem.”



them into a reverse course after they've gone wild. However, a little advanced gratitude offered earlier could have helped avoid mayhem.

Thanking people is not a substitute for confronting inappropriate behavior. For example, if an employee comes to work dressed improperly, you can't thank your way around addressing the problem. However, you can use "thank you" as part of the corrective conversation. "Mary, I appreciate you listening to me this morning, and I want to thank you in advance for taking the conversation seriously. I know you have what it takes to represent our organization well. I look forward to seeing you be successful here."

Thanking people for everything dilutes the method's effectiveness. "Bill, I want to thank you for coming in on time today. I know how important punctuality is to you, and thank you for parking in the employee lot and not taking a visitor's space. . . ." Too much of that, and Bill's going to think you've got a screw or two loose. Worse still, he's not going to believe a word you say.

There are some people with whom this method falls flat. They weren't behaving in a way we wanted before we tried it, and they're not behaving after the fact either. Fortunately, this group is small.

Perfecting the science and art of the advanced "thank you" takes time. The more you practice, the easier it is. Soon it will become a strategy your brain launches on autopilot.

I know you'll eventually be successful in getting this to work, and I want to thank you in advance for giving the method a try. Who will you influence first? 

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More Ways to Influence People

For maximum impact, use a spectrum of strategies to steer people toward desired behaviors. These articles at NonprofitWorld.org offer a good variety:

Sneaky and Insightful Board Room Questions (Vol. 37, No. 1)

Three Simple Questions that Get Donors to Give (Vol. 35, No. 2)

The Five A's of Influence (Vol. 29, No. 3)

Secrets to Creating a Board that Makes Cash Gifts (Vol. 37, No. 2)

Leading from Feeling: Coaching Tools for Interpersonal & Organizational Excellence (Vol. 27, No. 1)

How to Tap into Purpose to Motivate People (Vol. 38, No. 2)

The Power of Your Messages (Vol. 32, No. 3)

How to Run the Perfect Board Meeting – While Inspiring Board Members to Raise Funds (Vol. 36, No. 4)