The Power of Gratitude

Sitting in the wrap-up meeting of a recent IEEE Industry Applications Society (IAS) conference, I listened closely to conversations among the conference planning committee. The dialogue reminded me of a book I read the week before, *Gratitude Works!* by Robert A. Emmons.

Google Dictionary defines gratitude as “the quality of being thankful; a readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness.”

A well-thought-out thank you, personalized to the individual and the situation, instead of a half-hearted “thanks,” can be powerful in conjuring positive feelings of appreciation. Psychological research suggests that an expression of gratitude is more than feeling thankful for something; it is more like a deeper appreciation for someone that produces long-lasting positive emotions. An expression of gratitude is also a powerful tool for strengthening interpersonal relationships. Research shows that people who express their gratitude tend to be more willing to forgive others.

Consider the glass containing water up to the halfway mark. While optimists and pessimists may debate whether the glass is half full or half empty, expressions of gratitude could focus on the beauty of the glass or the importance of water to sustain life. The latter view can be very important in volunteer organizations since volunteers may have limited time and resources to contribute. The fact that someone is willing to volunteer may be as important as how much time and energy is contributed.

The IAS is completely dependent on volunteers who contribute their time, energy, and financial resources to enable the success of the Society’s many regional and technical activities, and genuine expressions of gratitude help create a strong culture of volunteers who feel appreciated. Going back to the conference wrap-up meeting, I was not only observing the committee leader expressing gratitude but also the peer-to-peer expressions among the conference committee.

Emmons suggests that we can develop and nurture character traits of gratitude by incorporating exercises that strengthen those traits. He suggests setting aside time on a regular basis to

- identify something positive in your life that may be ending soon, and take the time to be grateful for having had it in your life
- identify something positive in your life and how it may not have occurred if not for the actions of others
- compose and deliver a message of sincere thanks to someone.

In closing, I would like to express my appreciation to Don Zipse and John Cunningham for taking the time to comment on the “History” column article “Frank J. Sprague and Railroad Safety” that appeared in the May/June 2018 issue of IEEE Industry Applications Magazine, and to Barry Brusso, editor. The letters from Don and John can be found in the “Letters to the Editor” column in this issue.