

Actualizing Success: Gratitude Investments

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Welcome to Actualizing Success. In this podcast series, our in-house advisors discuss today's finance and technology topics, with an emphasis on solutions that embrace tomorrow.

Kerry Wekelo: Hi, my name is Kerry Wekelo, I'm the Chief Operating Officer at Actualized Consulting. On today's episode of actualizing success, I am joined by Najma Khorrami. And Millicent Tracey, Najma is the founder of Gratitude Circle, a social media app that empowers users with positivity and a widely published author on gratitude. She also has some books coming out this fall, which is very exciting because I've actually read one and that one is on gratitude and there's another one on self-care for children. Millicent Tracey is a contact I met through her connection with the Treasury Management Association of New York. She is an accomplished FinTech professional who employs gratitude in her own leadership, a career. We both are advisors for Tech to Empower, which connects business leaders and female-lead nonprofits, helping them to scale to the next level. And I'm super excited to have both of you on the show today so we can talk a little bit about gratitude. And I'll start by just saying, you know, Najma, I'm always really inspired by the writings that you're doing and how prolific you are, and everything around positivity and gratitude, and really helping people, you know, see how they can empower that in their life so thank you for being on the show today.

Najma Khorrami: Oh, thanks, Kerry, for having me. Thank you very much.

Kerry Wekelo: Yeah. And Millicent means, we met with TMANY, and I feel like we've known each other forever, and your enthusiasm, and I just have been really grateful to have you in my circle as well so thanks for being with us today.

Millicent Tracey: Yes, same with me. Same with me. I feel like we're kindred spirits.

Kerry Wekelo: Exactly. So, let's go ahead and get started. I think it's important to point out that gratitude is simple and effective. And on top of that, it's free. Najma, you've recently published an article about this idea of net profit. In terms of gratitude. This is a great metaphor, especially for our audience who have a background in business and finance. Can you explain a little bit to our audience on how this net profit relates to happiness, and how you came up with that idea?

Najma Khorrami: Sure, Kerry. So, the equation for net profit margin is actually something that I wanted to relate to life. And so, in that equation, you have certain components. And it's the first obvious one in any business, any successful business is total sales. So total sales, I equate that with recouping the pure joy in the happiness that's basically in our everyday lives that we don't really notice, actually, until we kind of pay attention and focus on I guess, you could say, the present moment, or what we have before us like a meal, or even the opportunity to have a nice warm shower. That's what I mean by the pure joy and happiness that's around us. And then there's the rest. So, there's like, an equation, the rest of its basically operating expenses, cost of goods sold and taxes, which are part of it as well. And so, when you look at those different components, like operating expenses, I equated to infrastructure to any business. So, for example, in life, what I equate the infrastructure to is, is having a vision and a long-term goal or multiple goals in your life so that's kind of the foundation or the infrastructure for the for your life. And that's the metaphor between business and life in terms of operating expenses. And I'm cost of goods

sold, I equate that to your day in and day out effort because like any business, you must cycle products, or services that you have in so that happens every day. And then the taxes are basically obligations that you have like making dinner or doing laundry. Those are things that are also part of life. How I came up with it was kind of like I wanted to equate just business to life. And I guess I got kind of creative, and I came up with that, so I thought it was a good analogy to write about for Entrepreneur Magazine, and I went ahead and what went with that.

Kerry Wekelo: Yeah, I love I've just loved the idea and I think it makes so much sense. And even like from an internal perspective, like at Actualize when I'm looking at like the net profit, it's, you know, us being grateful for our people and making sure that we're providing this place where they want to come to work. And we're, we do mid-year reviews, and I'm talking with our people right now. and many times, we're so hard on ourselves, that we even forget to be grateful for ourselves so we can show and take some time off and just really, you know, taking that time to continue to be grateful and move forward not only for others, but for ourselves as well. So that's great. Now, Millicent, from a business professionals' perspective, would you agree with this metaphor? I mean, I definitely agree. As I said, it adds so much value to an organization. What have you seen around this term about net profit with your own implementation of gratitude?

Millicent Tracey: Yeah, so I absolutely agree and love this metaphor. I, you know, I see that happiness should be a goal, just like getting revenue, incurring revenue as a goal. And you should account for, quote, unquote, unnecessary expenses to incur, so that you can generate that revenue slash happiness, so that it's a priority for the business for you even. So, it's funny, when I heard a little bit about Najma, this concept on net profit, and did some research, I was like, oh, okay, because I will say, during the pandemic, I did realize that I had the space finally to kind of make happiness or, and or gratitude a priority in my day-to-day life where I hadn't done that before. And so, I look at that what I do on a day-to-day basis, just a few minutes every day, to make it a point to like, it's my investment in myself and others, to spend time and incur those expenses or effort on my happiness or gratitude each day. And like I mentioned, I do that a little bit each day, a few minutes, like two or three minutes, a few times a day, and I can't believe what a difference it makes. I can't believe how it kind of calms me grounds me and then that seems to be somewhat contagious with others that I interact with. So, I love this metaphor Najma. Thank you.

Najma Khorrami: Yeah, sure. I mean, I'm glad it resonated with both of you. And the hope is that we want to spread gratitude from this, you know, this podcast, to anyone who's interested in it and tries to kind of open that door, so to say, so I think it's definitely worth talking about. I'm glad we're doing that.

Kerry Wekelo: And that reminds me of, and I'm glad that you're adding it in on a daily basis, Millicent. I mean, within our internal team, one of the practices we do at the beginning of the week, is we say what we're grateful for, for ourselves. Like, I'm grateful that I've met new people, especially during the pandemic, both of you, I bet during this time, and then also being grateful for somebody on your team, or maybe even a family member, and then remembering to denote something that you like a win that you had during the week. And what I found has really brought our team closer together. And because we're sharing personally and professionally, we're getting to know each other better, and what is important to each other as well. So, to your point, Millicent, it is contagious and it just, it just exudes this positivity. And it feels so good as well.

Millicent Tracey: Absolutely. Yeah.

Kerry Wekelo: Like I've been saying, you know, and, as we really base our workplace off an environment, of gratitude, meaning like, we give appreciation to our team, and then we fuse it into our culture. We do that through peer recognition programs, regular feedback, and just really, genuinely caring about our employees and their passions. As I said, we were going through our review cycle right now. And I mean, I just talked with somebody, and she was like, do you have any constructive feedback? And I was like, I really need you to take a vacation. She's like, that's it? I was like, I do need Yeah, you need to take some time off. Because in herself reflection, she said she didn't feel like she could at certain points of the month. So, I said, okay, well, it's my responsibility to make sure you feel like you have coverage for those times of the month that you don't feel like you could take off right. So, it was just it was funny, because she's thinking she's getting this big, you know, review and I'm like, well, I think you should take vacation. So, and it all goes back to the gratitude and wanting your people to be happy. Millicent, can you give some specific policies or practices that you've encountered or incorporated into your leadership now that you're focused more on gratitude?

Millicent Tracey: Yeah, I think I have a couple. The first one that comes to mind is, when I was at Wells Fargo, we launched something called the customer Advisory Council, where we met with our commercial customers about 10 to 12. at a time, for a day and a half, and I'll be spent doing during that day half was getting their very candid feedback on our products, our interactions with them our overall relationship with our bank, as a way, obviously to improve ourselves, and to show gratitude for, you know, being our client. And what I realized in doing that, so I did that, I led that for seven years, met with over 700 customers. And I realize, you know, gratitude that I define gratitude, it's not just, you know, saying thank you for any given act, but it's also it can be defined in so many other ways. And I could not believe how many customers thanked us for actually just allowing them to hear their feedback. They were so grateful, just for being open and receptive to their feedback. And so, you know, that was one thing we did, and obviously, it delivered so many benefits, right like loyalty, and using their feedback to direct our product roadmap. And so that was one thing that I think worked really well. And then obviously, like you said, Kerry, like even in things like in doing performance reviews, like using something like a 360-feedback concept, whether it's formal, once a year, twice a year, or it's just on a regular basis, constantly saying, you know, how am I doing as your manager? Give me some constructive feedback. I truly think that's a form of gratitude as well saying, you know, thank you for working with me, it regardless of what hierarchical position you're in.

Kerry Wekelo: How can I support you better is a form of gratitude?

Millicent Tracey: Exactly. I was going to say that like now, you know, I'm no longer at Wells, but I'm an advisor and a board member for tech companies and I view gratitude as kind of disrupt reciprocity. So, it's not just saying thank you, but it's this evolving, I don't know, dynamic, where it's anything from offering to spend time with someone talking, offering to help them with an initiative, even investing and tying it back to this net profit concept. These are all gratitude investments that I can make with the hope of generating happiness revenue, not just for me, but for the beneficiaries. So, I really am into this creating a vibe of gratitude that helps everybody in the interaction, and both the receiver as well as the giver of the gratitude.

Kerry Wekelo: I love gratitude investments. Can I steal that terminology?

Millicent Tracey: Yes! Absolutely have it.

Kerry Wekelo: Excellent, thank you. That was wonderful. I love all those ideas, and even going to your clients and customers and them being thankful. I mean, it just shows how it can really have this ripple effect for sure. So, Najma, going back to you, gratitude still has a lot of people who doubt its effectiveness. Despite that fact that there is scientific backing, and I know you have done a lot of research on that. So, for example, gratitude is related to 23% lower levels of stress hormones, and people can reduce their dietary fat intake by 25%, who keep a gratitude journal. It also has been related to a 10% improvement in your sleep quality, while also helping with chronic pain. This is all studies done by Robert Edmonds who is an expert in gratitude. Can you tell us some of the things that get in the way of people adopting a grateful outlook?

Najma Khorrami: Yeah, absolutely. Some of the basic ones, I guess, I would say, are that gratitude doesn't really have a rapid response. So, by that, I mean, you know, when we're living in a society where a lot of people want like, you know, quick turnaround, quick, meeting deadlines, quick responses, basically. And I think what gratitude is, and you guys, you nailed it as well, It's an investment. And I actually have another analogy. Speaking of analogies, if you use gratitude, it's kind of like a piece of great art. It requires time, let's say it's a sculpture, it requires time to make that sculpture and bring it to life. It's not like it actually forms in five or 10 minutes. You must invest in it, like you all said. And by investing, it means, you know, taking focus and attention from the distractions that we have in everyday life, which are part of everyday life, and they shouldn't be ignored, but to focus that on what's before you and that you're grateful for beats smaller bake. And then another thing is that people don't realize that gratitude is the right door to open. So, people are kind of, I mean, if they hear the concept of gratitude, saying an article weather or book, or, you know, in an influencer, who's tweeting about it, they might think, okay, that's nice, but they don't really open the door to gratitude. And what happens is, when you open that door, to showing gratitude, you open, like a domino series of doors. And so, you're not just, you know, saying I'm grateful for you're building networks, I would say, I would even badge for networks in your brain that lead to positive emotions. Positive goal setting not only is contagious, but it also actually it lets you grow as a person. So, you're developing personal growth, and you empower yourself and you start that domino series of doors, builds you as a person and takes you to places that you probably didn't think you would before. Those are just a couple of things that people kind of ignore. But I think shouldn't to get the most out of being grateful,

Kerry Wekelo: I love how you said it, you know, like a piece of art, and it just continues to build and, you know, I have a really strong practice on mindfulness as well. But honestly, gratitude is the fastest way I can pivot my mindset. If I just take a quick moment to think about even if it's a challenge, well, maybe I'm learning something in this moment and I'm grateful for that. And it's just, it's the most powerful tool I have in my toolbox, honestly.

Najma Khorrami: Right, yeah! it's one of the it's one of probably the, if you put priority in terms of what tools you use every day. And these are like mind tools if you vote priority to them. You probably should, I mean, in my humble opinion, I think gratitude should come first. And then there's meditation, there's mindfulness, like you said, there's exercise, going on walks, all of those are excellent things to do. But if you are essentially, I think, and I think Oprah has a quote, where you think what you think is what you become. And she elaborates on it probably way more eloquently than just that. But you know, when you start to prioritize gratitude in your mind, like I was saying, it builds that network, it feeds a network in your mind, as well as opening that domino series of doors, or if you want to call it like, you know, connections or synapses in your brain, and then it leads to other positive things.

Kerry Wekelo: So, as we're trying to move people to get them on board with gratitude, Millicent, what are some ways that you've helped to get people on the gratitude bandwagon?

Millicent Tracey: Well, so, you know, I, one of the ways, I think, and one of the obvious ways to do that is to also just tell them to do, obviously, I just mentioned that for, for purposes of being thorough, but yeah, that one really is not that effective. For me, the most effective way that is, has been to walk the walk, and not just talk that talk. So, allowing people on my teams to, you know, access examples of how, hopefully how I express gratitude, or engage with gratitude, whether that's sitting in on a phone call, or conference call or zoom call with someone else, or even seeing it played out in written communications, just kind of making a being consistent with hopefully, hopefully, I'm consistent with, with engaging gratitude in all my interactions, and just exposing that to people. And because, as we've all acknowledged, it's contagious and it doesn't just happen overnight. Being consistent over and over time, I think helps just kind of reinforce that pattern. That's what I've done. Yeah, no,

Kerry Wekelo: I think consistency and leading by example, yeah. Excellent. No, I agree, 100%. Now, I'm going to ask this question. I'd like you both to answer it. Was there any kind of pivotal moment in your life or career for both of you that helped shift your brain, or perspective, to be more focused on gratitude?

Najma Khorrami: Yeah, so for me, that's a great question. I think people have different, you know, paths to take when it comes to finding gratitude. I was actually just speaking with a cousin at a picnic that we had a few weeks ago and she was telling me, yet I've been thinking about you and your gratitude platform, the gratitude circle app and the platform that comes with that. And she was saying, you know, I've, I'm going on my journey as well. And I thought, how cool you know, everyone who finds gratitude is basically like unraveling and their journeys unfolding. And so, for me, I think that started around the time when I was writing for The Huffington Post, I had the opportunity to become a contributor. Over about the course of two years, I came out with several articles for their platform, when they were taking contributors from across the country. This was the US Huffington Post. So, I think at that point, I researched it more. And having a public health background, it solidified my appreciation of it because of a lot I mean, Dr. Emmons, who's a foremost researcher, and Dr. Frederick's, Barbara Fredrickson, also is a foremost researcher, a lot of those types of studies that had researched that I've looked into to share on the Huffington Post platform with my readers and that audience there. The research, just it with my public health background, it, you know, I could understand better, and it really solidified the concept in my mind. And I thought, how great to be able to practice this. And about around that time, I'd also started a gratitude journal. At this point, I wasn't using it. With pen to paper, I was typing it on my laptop, daily, I would put down three things. And then every week, I would refer three things that I was grateful for. And then every week, I would look back, and I just noticed that you're like the memories that came from showing gratitude, the memories would become more positive overall. And it's interesting, because just today I saw another psychologist on Instagram, she's talking about a negativity bias that we have, so innately, sometimes we look through a filter of negativity around the world. And, you know, that's surprising to me. But gratitude you know, bumps that negativity lens to kind of fights with it. And it lets you build those positive memories. And that's a long way of saying but it started around the Huffington Post time for me,

Kerry Wekelo: I use the negativity bias a lot to help people understand that it that it is that is your first reaction, right in many situations to look at the negative, but if you train yourself to focus more on

gratitude, it will be that you know, building blocks and that ripple effect we've been talking about. What about you Millicent?

Millicent Tracey: I guess my pivotal moment is a bit unfortunate. So, my middle daughter had passed away when she was 10 months. And after she, yes, thank you, she battled this crazy, rare cancer called a TRT. And for her, it manifested itself as a brain tumor. And usually, it's a brain tumor. She was the youngest child to have it, she was diagnosed at 10 weeks. And you know, not a lot was known about it, no protocols or anything for treatment, everything was experimental and just kind of living through that experience, afterwards, really kind of sets it forces you to learn some lessons. And so, I will say like, and it's been I think it's been about 13 years. And obviously there's not one day I go by those goes by that we don't think about her, that I don't think about her, But I literally I can say now if and this is obviously after a lot of work. I can say no, it was truly a gift that we had that experience with her. Obviously, I wish she was still here, but I feel like we my husband and I or I should speak for myself but I'm a better person for having gone through that. And she taught us about gratitude, and how to just be grateful about, you know, what I would call little things even. So, that was the pivotal moment for me.

Kerry Wekelo: Thank you for sharing that and it's amazing how many times when it is something in your life that isn't positive, it moves you to find more peace and you know, and gratitude in your life. Bernie Brown, she's a researcher and a storyteller. And she said that she was blown away with the research on like, when people are going through like somebody passing away or losing a high-powered job or their house burns down, that the number one thing that the people that were able to move forward successfully, and in a positive light were those that were focused on what they were great grateful for what they still had in their lives. So goes online 100%. To what you're saying, for sure. Yeah,

Millicent Tracey: yeah. I mean, I know I'm convinced that every, quote unquote negative outcome in your life, there's a there's a gift in there first, like there is a reason it happened. It's a blessing in disguise, like all those cliches, I truly believe in them now.

Kerry Wekelo: Yeah, no, I and I think there's a cumulative talk about this a lot. There's this cumulative impact that if you're constantly looking for that gift, or that lesson, or how can you turn it into a positive? It's going to present itself.

Millicent Tracey: Absolutely, absolutely.

Kerry Wekelo: So, as we're wrapping up, and this has been a wonderful conversation, thank you, both. Each of you, what is one easy practice that you would recommend to someone that's just starting to abuse gratitude into their life?

Najma Khorrami: I'll start with that. What I do, is that I use this mantra kind of in my head. I say to myself, whenever, like, I want to be grateful for something or shift my focus, that's more important to shift your focus to what's in front of you. And this mantra is, what did I do to behold this, and then add whatever is in front of you, or, you know, whatever you're doing, and if you say that to yourself, and then you kind of think, wow, you know, I'm able to do or have whatever is in front of me, I just think that's very powerful. And it really solidifies the gratitude, feeling and the gratefulness inside.

Kerry Wekelo: That's a great idea. Thank you. Yeah, I love that. Great. Good one. What about email ascent,

Millicent Tracey: I had to come up with something simpler also, because I'm trying to teach my 12-year-old and 16-year-old girls how to do this. And the only thing I can get them to do, and this even included me when I was trying to start, is just to stop in the middle of your day, at least once and just take a breath. Just one deep breath, and then think about one thing you're grateful for. And believe it or not, that's still hard for them to do, because they think it's so silly. But I started doing that because everything else just seemed like too long or too much. And that helped me that helps me just kind of learn to like it and now I can do it more and more times each day. So, I'm still working on my girls to do that at least once today, though.

Kerry Wekelo: Well, I have a 13-year-old boy and a 16-year-old, what we'll do is at dinner, when we are able to sit down, we say one thing that we're grateful for. Sometimes that seems to be a challenge for them too. But I'm like waiting for that sign of gratitude. Maybe you can do it at dinner sometime as well. Or breakfast, or lunch.

Najma Khorrami: So, one other thing, I don't have kids yet, but my niece and nephew. We recently got into sharing a dinner time not what we're grateful for, but kind of fits because we talked about what is kind of a grateful thing like what good things happened during the day and what bad things happened during the day. So, we like to share that, and they've gotten used to it a little bit when they come over. So, I thought that was kind of nice and fits too.

Millicent Tracey: Yeah, we call that the highs and the lows. Oh, yeah.

Kerry Wekelo: Hey, I mean that could be a new article "Conversation Starters on Gratitude at the Dinner Table".

Najma Khorrami: Yes, yes.

Millicent Tracey: I even gave on my daughter's both have that there's like a three. I think there's a bunch of them, but a three-minute journal so that each day you write down three things, and they can't even they can't even handle that yet. That's too much work.

Kerry Wekelo: You know what you're planting the seeds, Melissa, and I love that I love Oh, that's true. Good point. See, there you go. You're a good mom. So, there you go. Thank you. Ladies, thank you so much for joining me today. And hopefully we'll be in touch soon. Thank you. Thank you so much.

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