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Thoughts from Staff College.....the sixth in our new series of Faculty blogs

Free: Leadership

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I was once travelling in a car in the middle east with a very senior oil executive. As we drove along, he apologised for the fact that he would have to make some work calls. I, of course, understood that in his position he would need to be in constant communication with his staff.



There was a national holiday coming up and I expected that he would be barking orders and demanding details about the closing price per barrel,

estimates of the size of reserves and the predicted cost of future exploration. After all, this was the hard-nosed oil business, not a charity. Instead, he spoke to members of his team individually and thanked them for their efforts over the preceding weeks. This was not some sort of grand, bland *'you've all done very well'* – but more like the thanks you would receive from an old acquaintance whom you had helped out. It was friendly and sincere. He asked about people's families and wished them well. The executive was a very bright man.

Which brings me to smallpox inoculation. The first English person to be inoculated against smallpox, in March 1718, was Edward Montagu, the five-year-old son of the British Ambassador in Constantinople. It was in fact, his mother Lady Mary Montagu, who had observed Ottoman women conducting variolation. This involved taking the pus from a mild smallpox blister and introducing it to the scratched skin of an uninfected person. The subject would then develop a mild case of smallpox and develop immunity. Her son survived, and when Lady Mary returned to London, she promoted the practice among her friends, including the Princess of Wales. Lady Mary was a very bright woman.

However, the British medical establishment was less enthusiastic about what they saw as an Oriental folk treatment. Which reminds me of an NHS consultant I read about who said that he didn't believe in giving his team positive feedback. In his view, good work is what people are paid for and so you shouldn't need to thank people for simply delivering what they were contractually obliged to provide. The surprising thing, for me, was that the consultant wasn't some curmudgeonly septuagenarian Sir Lancelot Spratt type but was, in fact, relatively junior and in his thirties. I wondered what his team made of this approach. I also wondered how bright he was.

A number of studies have indicated that simply thanking people for their efforts, rather than their achievements, can have a huge impact. It has been suggested that productivity can be improved by [20% through one piece of authentic, specific praise.](#)

So, even if you think that there is too much trivial praise heaped on people these days. If you despair of the fact that everyone who works for the NHS, or the Armed Forces, or is a Key Worker (which seems to cover everyone else) is now dubbed a 'hero'. If you feel that delivering good work is what should be expected in return for good pay, then may I suggest you pay attention to the words of a very bright woman?

You see, apart from her leading role in introducing vaccination, Lady Mary was also an author and a woman of letters, corresponding with Alexander Pope, who became infatuated with her. I suspect she also knew a thing or two about leadership, as one of her most famous sayings is that:

'politeness costs nothing and gains everything.'

Thank you for reading.