

Leading with Gratitude

L to R: Matt Strawn, Jay Finks, Ryan Mindell, Doug Pollard and Joshua Johnston



What is “leading with gratitude” and how could it help your staff to thrive and forge authentic, win-win relationships with partners? Moderated by Matt Strawn, CEO of the Iowa Lottery, the panel considered subjects ranging from Simon Sinek’s “start with why” principle to the challenges of connecting with staff in the digital age. Panelists shared practical advice about how to turn buzzwords like authenticity, connection, and purpose into tangible actions that will help lotteries deliver their missions.

Alongside Matt, the other panelists were:

- **Jay Finks**, Executive Director, Oklahoma Lottery
- **Joshua Johnston**, Executive Director, Washington Lottery
- **Ryan Mindell**, Deputy Executive Director, Texas Lottery
- **Doug Pollard**, Co-Chief Executive Officer, Pollard Banknote

Matt began the discussion by describing his unorthodox introduction to a recent Iowa Lottery’s Board of Directors meeting. He shared a message of gratitude received from the winner of an Iowa Lottery experiential prize: “Thanks again for an amazing time at the concert. My husband and I never

get to do something like that for ourselves. We have six kids and our youngest has a terminal disorder. So, everything we do is to make his time left the best it can possibly be. So, for us to do something just for ourselves, well, it was awesome. It meant more than you would ever know.”

Everyone in the lottery industry knows how thankful winners are for their good fortune. The winner in Matt’s example did not win a life-changing jackpot. But their expression of gratitude captures the personal impact that lottery has on winners and captures the impulse to appreciate our blessings, an impulse that brings out the best in all of us.

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The billions of dollars that are generated for the benefit of good causes and society also evoke heartfelt expressions of gratitude.

The theme of this discussion was how all of us, even though we haven’t won the lottery or been a direct recipient of lottery funds, nurture that impulse to be grateful for all that we do have and are blessed with. How

can we make the meaning and purpose of gratefulness come alive on a more personal level for everyone around us and how does it apply to business and leadership? Or, as Matt put it, “How can the concept of gratitude be infused throughout the entire organization to create a sense of connection and appreciation?”

Referencing Webster’s definition of gratitude as “awakened thankfulness,” he asked, “How do we as leaders awaken that thankfulness in ourselves so that we lead with gratitude? And, more importantly, how do we awaken that thankfulness in those that we’ve been entrusted to lead so

that they not only fulfill their work objectives but also feel fulfilled at work?”

Concluding his opening remarks, Matt expressed gratitude to the “amazing lottery community for the love and support” he received during his recent health struggles. He also thanked “the team at the Iowa Lottery who not only had my back as I

Continued on page 35

focused on the most important objective in my literal life but also kept delivering the promise of the Iowa Lottery to the people of our great state.”

Matt attributed the team’s successes to “the culture of gratitude we have created at the Iowa Lottery. A culture that looks out for each other. A culture that is productive and continues to deliver amazing results for Iowa.”

Similarly, a 2023 American Enterprise Institute study showed that most workers considered “a welcoming workplace” the most or one of the most important factors when choosing employment. “While money gives people what they need to live,” Matt explained, “a sense of belonging and connection on the job is what helps them thrive. And what gives people that sense? Gratitude.”

sure they’re motivated to perform even during tough times, we need to ask ourselves how we can connect all employees to what we’re doing strategically.”

Joshua Johnston also explored the sense of fulfillment that comes from understanding each staff member’s individual why and using it to connect them to the organizational why. “We have to really try to understand the staff and their own personal motivations and whys. That engagement creates a culture of belonging, which is a critical underpinning of any organization.”

“We can’t succeed without a really diverse set of folks around the table,” Joshua added, “but if they don’t feel comfortable at work, they’ll leave. So, my why is making sure staff feels safe, comfortable, and deeply connected to the organization.”

Building on that, Matt described how his own “leading with gratitude principles have twin pillars. The first is knowing and communicating your why so that it permeates your entire organization’s DNA. The second was best expressed by Theodore Roosevelt: ‘People don’t care what you know until they know you care.’”

Addressing the question of how you show that you care, Matt suggested, “A major part is listening to partner organizations to understand their perspectives. We no longer see them as just a ‘vendor’ who provides a commodity to us; instead, we express gratitude and respect to foster a sense of belonging and common ownership of shared success.”

Similarly, Joshua explained that the Washington Lottery “has shifted from saying ‘vendor’ to ‘business partner.’ And that’s really critical because words matter. Our success is intrinsically linked with that of our business partners, and that terminology emphasizes the strength of that connection.”

Doug recalled management guru Tom Peters’ recommendation to “manage by walking around” to get to know colleagues personally and directly express gratitude. Applying that philosophy in modern virtual organizations requires a deliberate plan and execution. “We have to connect technology with these soft skills,” Josh added. “Videoconferencing is a very useful tool, but we also need to get out on the road, talk to people directly, understand what they do, look them in the eye, and say thank you.”

Continued on page 40

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Bringing in the panel, Matt mentioned Simon Sinek’s book *Start with Why*, which emphasizes the importance of leaders understanding the purpose that motivates them and thinking hard about what really motivates the people around them.

On “finding your why,” Ryan Mindell commented, “I think the Lottery has it easy. We have a built-in ‘why’ in the service we provide to our beneficiaries, society, and good causes. We are all blessed to be in a genuinely noble occupation, and hopefully, our mission already motivates everyone in our industry. But we can’t assume everyone gets it and feels it on an ongoing basis. We all need to be reminded of our mission. We all need encouragement to feel appreciated and inspired. So, we have to connect personally and meaningfully and make that integral to our communication style and corporate culture.”

Ryan continued by emphasizing the importance of everyone’s contributions. “Everyone is a leader, whether they’re leading an organization, a team, a project, or an assignment. So we all need to understand how our actions matter and how the people we impact daily respond to our communication and management styles.”

Matt discussed the science behind this topic of gratitude. “Data from a 2019 study in *Positive Psychology* shows that grateful workers are more efficient, productive, responsible, willing to volunteer, connected to their teammates, happier, and more effective leaders.”

The data supporting this thesis resonated with Ryan who stressed that “the science on leadership by connecting on a personal, meaningful level is really persuasive. And that’s important,” he added, “because there are still people who think that business is only about metrics, operations, and execution. They need to see this data to understand that soft skills really do affect results.”

Ryan also raised the issue of employees who feel disconnected from the Lottery’s mission because they can’t see how their own role contributes. In response, Matt recommended “setting up processes that democratize information and enable people to input into organizational decision-making so that they are invested in the process and understand where their piece of the puzzle fits.”

Reflecting on “finding your why,” Doug Pollard cited a Chinese proverb that advises, “If you want to be happy for life, help others.” He also emphasized the importance of showing all staff the difference their work makes. “It’s important for people to feel part of something that they can take pride in. And that’s exactly what the Lottery is. But we still need to build that sense of community within our organizations, and we need to give staff opportunities to see the direct and powerful difference that our collective work is making to the people we serve.”

Similarly, Jay Finks spoke of the importance of employee involvement and empowerment. “If we want to empower our staff and make

Ryan agreed with Joshua about the importance of words and intentionally planning how to demonstrate gratitude to remote workers. He also emphasized that “it’s easy to forget that communication is as much about listening as it is about talking. Everyone needs to be confident that when they’re talking to you, they have your full attention.”

On the theme of two-way communication, Matt explained how sharing information about future plans and industry trends helps staff at all levels to both contribute to management decisions and understand the final decisions taken.

Building on that, Jay discussed a recent tough decision and admitted, “In meeting with the staff, I shared more than I ever had about my thought process. And the response was ‘Thank you, we appreciate that because we wanted to know why this is happening.’” He also discussed staff who might not engage proactively. “As leaders we always say, ‘My door is always open.’ But some people might not come through it. So, we have to go through their doors.”

“We enrolled our young leaders in the same training and development program as the emerging retail leaders in our state.”

Expanding on that theme, Joshua detailed how the Washington Lottery is “working with our business partners to understand our market and design products and promotions to appeal to the specific interests of our players. To develop that understanding, our sales staff do more consulting than selling, digging deep into the numbers to help us understand what is moving, what isn’t, and why. And our retail partners really like that customized, individualized approach, which focuses on why the Lottery is important to their overall business strategy and how they can increase sales in their own stores.”

Joshua also illustrated how to create genuine partnerships with an example. “The pandemic was rough, and we saw a rise in thefts. But we let our partners know that we’ve got their backs, and we adjusted some of our rules to reduce the impact if they did get robbed. So, there are two sides to this. Of course, we need to make sure they have products they can sell. But we also need to

what motivates them in order to effectively address their concerns.”

On the importance of partnerships, Jay shared how the Oklahoma Lottery had gone from having one key account manager to a team of seven. “And their whole purpose is building mutually beneficial partner relationships that last.”

Matt asked the panel for actionable advice by sharing what they wished they would have known when they started as managers. In response, Jay described how the first staff member he managed was fired for not matching his attitude in terms of demanding more work for herself and her direct reports. Reflecting on that, he said, “I failed her because I said, ‘She’s not like me, which means she doesn’t measure up.’ I failed her because I didn’t adapt my management and communication style to connect with her why.”

Ryan shared how he used to worry too much about how he appeared to his staff and not enough about what impact he would have on them. “We need to worry less about sounding smart and focus more on understanding and being understood.”

Similarly, Doug advised, “Worry less about what people will think about what you say and focus more on listening to what they have to say and how they feel when the interaction is over. Let’s not talk so much and instead start with good questions. Figure out what we can learn from people and how to use that to help them succeed.”

Continuing that theme, Joshua advised ensuring you understand and appreciate your impact on others. Addressing organizational change management specifically, he said, “Understand the impact that changes will have on others and make sure you give them the time and the support required to process that.”

Sharing advice based on his early career in politics, Matt emphasized the importance of moral authority in leadership. “I didn’t understand the difference between having a title and actually having moral authority as a leader. And that relates to everything we’ve discussed because leading with gratitude builds your moral authority in your organization and your community.”

Finally, Matt invited the panelists to share actionable advice about implementing a gratitude-infused approach to leadership.

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From a lottery business partner perspective, we depend on each other for our success. To that end, Doug highlighted the importance of creating win/win partnerships based on mutual trust. He argued that if a lottery solely focuses on cost reduction, that approach “flies in the face of this industry’s collaborative ethos. Driving down costs doesn’t leave money for innovation. Instead, we need to invest in driving progress and innovation to fight against the competition we’re facing from casinos and others. Thankfully, this industry has a proven record of delivering a predictable and very high ROI.”

Matt described how positive partnerships can be created by showing gratitude and understanding partners’ perspectives. Giving a practical example of the latter, he explained,

connect with them on a personal why level by letting them know we won’t abandon them when times get tough.”

Ryan agreed that it is essential to understand our retail partners’ goals and how lottery products fit into their overall ecosystem. “It’s not just telling them how well our tickets are going to sell; it’s about how our products compare to energy drinks or what Coke is doing to support the retailer or secure its premium shelf space. And understanding the various ecosystems of different retailers, from grocery stores to gas stations, helps us have better conversations, make better decisions, and align our efforts to overcome their challenges, which will ultimately accrue to our benefit. We need to understand our retailers’ whys and think about

Ryan said, “Take time to really understand people and their why. Spend more time listening than speaking and make sure you appreciate and respect where people are, what they’re thinking and feeling.”

Jay agreed, “Get out of your office and communicate, call some teams up out of the blue, be present when you talk to people. Ask people what’s motivating them and what’s discouraging them right now. I’m usually surprised by the answers. Even if you don’t have the remedy for their concerns, you will find that they appreciate

your willingness to listen, acknowledge their concerns, and think about how to work on improving things.

Doug offered a practical example of enabling authentic conversations. “After our annual staff survey, I meet with staff in groups but without their supervisors. You would be amazed at what people will say when their supervisor isn’t there. Amazing value comes from them feeling heard and being able to talk to me directly, and we use what they say to create actions.”

Concluding the discussion, Matt shared his commitment to “spending five good minutes each day thinking, ‘How can I engage with and thank a team member.’ Just five good minutes, and always let them know that you were thinking about them. I can personally attest to the power of that, and I’ve seen the impact it has on a team when you really understand their why and awaken that thankfulness. You’re going to be a better leader, and your team’s going to be more productive because that sense of belonging and connection will help them thrive.” ■

Multi-Prong Approach to the Most Time-Efficient Implementation of an Online Selling Channel — continued from page 12

and marketing perspective. We see these digital assets that we have included and developed also as tools of increasing our presence and footprint in the Romanian society. We are staying focused on one of our most important missions – that of being an actively involved actor in society. For instance, our in-house-developed platform and the partner apps include educational resources about responsible gaming practices, ensuring that players are informed and promoting a healthy approach to lottery participation. And we are constantly learning from our 3rd party app partners in ways that enhance our in-house capabilities.

We are also keeping our level of involvement in CSR actions at a peak performance as we are committed to creating a positive impact in society.

What is the next frontier you are working on now?

Ionuț Valeriu Andrei: The next step is to launch the native in-house developed App. This year I want to finish our analysis of the online casino and sports betting platform and if possible by the end of Q3 to be able to launch an RFP. We have an important duty to continuously enhance our clients’ user experience and to improve our RG policies.

Our extraordinary interaction within the EL and WLA team is as well a top priority for us and we want to contribute as much as possible to the benefit of our associations. This year we are proud to host in Bucharest EL Corporate University (ELCU) INDUCTION seminar, and we are thrilled to welcome all professionals from EL Lottery and Associate Members. ■

The Future of iLottery: Predictions for 2030 — continued from page 23

deal with the lottery). We can expect that more of our competitors will follow suit, further encroaching on our own market share.

The need to address online lottery play becomes even more apparent in Les Brown’s “attention economy,” when player time and attention are considered the scarcest resources of all. This means that unless U.S. Lotteries learn to effectively capture, manage, and maintain their player’s attention by providing them with online play – they’ll fall hopelessly behind competitors who are providing these online experiences.

This includes developing innovative marketing and sales strategies to attract

and retain iLottery players and create opportunities to cross sell iGaming, sports betting, and competing products, or risk losing our player base to our competitors. Moti also believes that lotteries should not just assume that if they build it, players will come to play iLottery. If players have already churned to our competitors to buy iLottery products, it will be significantly more challenging to lure them back. Additionally, costs will exponentially increase to remarket to churned players, highlighting the need to own our players now, and cater to our U.S. customer’s desire for online Lottery play.

As we walk towards our shared future, proactive creativity and collaboration will

be key to the (i)Lottery industry’s success in 2030. By pooling our resources and sharing best practices, lotteries can effectively educate legislators and underscore iLottery’s contributions to worthy causes, to successfully combat our competitor’s growing legislative opposition. This collective approach will be essential, and we must own our players end-to-end and win their loyalty in the wake of this new competition, or ultimately risk losing our market share and our player base. ■