

Are you a giver or a taker?

MARCELLA BREMER SEPTEMBER 29, 2015 [CULTURE](#) [3 COMMENTS](#)

Success and satisfaction depend on who you are but also on how you treat others... According to Adam Grant's research, you could be one of three types in the workplace: a Taker, a Giver, or a Matcher. How do you behave at work? And what is your workplace culture like?

Imagine we take part in the famous experiment by the psychologist Daniel Kahneman. I have to split ten dollars with you. You may accept or reject my offer. In case of rejection, neither of us will get anything. I decide to keep 8 dollars, and I offer you 2 dollars – will you accept my offer? Accepting it means that you get 2 dollars at least. Declining my offer means no money for you. But not for me either.... What will you do? As it turns out, most of you would reject my unfair offer. Because you assess it as unfair, you'd rather take your loss to punish me and teach me a lesson. Tit for tat!

The experiment is well known, and it illustrates what Adam Grant builds on in his extensive book "Give and Take – Why helping others drives our success." People don't like "takers". Some people are generous "givers". But most people in the workplace seem to be "matchers" who value reciprocity. "I scratch your back if you scratch mine." Adam Grant is Wharton's youngest full professor and single highest-rated teacher. He has been recognized as one the world's 40 best business professors under 40.



Do you give or take more?

What determines your success is, apart from talent, hard work, and luck, your relationships with other people. There are two extremes in how we relate to one another. On the one end of the spectrum is the Taker. **Takers like to get more than they give**; they are self-focused because they expect others to act selfish, too. They believe that the world is a competitive, dog-eat-dog place. "If I win, you lose." If they give, they do so strategically. They believe that "the pie" is fixed. So they'd rather get the largest piece of it.

Givers are on the other end of the relationship spectrum. **Givers like to give more than they get** – they simply want to help others. They are other-focused and trust people up front, assuming the best of them. They believe that people are good and that there is abundance – there will be enough for everyone. "If I win, you win, too! We can all win together." They give with no strings attached, expecting nothing in return. But by giving generously in time, advice, efforts – they seem to enlarge "the pie" for everyone. Because people copy their generous behaviors and pay it forward, they trust each other more and come up with innovative ideas that eventually enlarge the pie.

Somewhere in between these extremes, we'll find the matchers. They prefer balance. They value fairness, reciprocity and equality. They have a norm of quid pro quo. If they give, they'll expect some favor in return, sooner or later.



*Givers give more than they get,
trusting abundance*

[CLICK TO TWEET](#)

The Workplace makes us cautious

Do you recognize these styles at work? Most people act like givers outside the workplace (research by Yale psychologist Margaret Clark). Worldwide, people value "giver values" such as helpfulness, responsibility, social justice and compassion. But in the workplace, most of us become matchers – probably because we get cautious. **Giving to a taker can be risky** – it may cost you energy and time and prevent you from getting your own work done – while you get nothing in return. Or even worse, you are being mocked or your reputation is damaged or your ideas might be stolen.

People who operate like givers at work are often afraid to admit it. Sherryan Plesse, an executive at a prestigious financial services firm, says: "I was conditioned to leave my human feelings at the door and win. I want my primary skills to be seen as hard-working and results-oriented, not kindness and compassion." The fear of being judged as weak and naive prevents giving at work. Work is seen as a zero-sum game, a fixed pie. You anticipate self-interested behavior from others and that's why being competitive seems the rational thing to do, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Beware of the sharks at work...! They can be nice people who don't know how else to behave.

Some takers can look nice and generous in the short term. But they may turn out to be fakers in the long run. Grant shares interesting cases and shows that even the size of the CEO's photo in annual reports is an indication of taker-tendencies. Do you want to detect a taker? Check how they treat subordinates and people "who can do nothing for

*Workplaces are zero-sum games
instead of abundance spaces*



[CLICK TO TWEET](#)

them". What do you see? Takers can do great damage, especially in a leadership role in the spotlight. So ask yourself – what example do you set?

Black Holes sucking your Energy

What does "taking" do to your workplace culture? Social network researchers Professor Rob Cross and IBM's Andrew Parker found that "the takers were black holes. They sucked energy. The givers were suns, radiating. They created opportunities for colleagues to contribute rather than imposing ideas on them and claiming the credit for achievements. When someone disagreed with them, givers showed respect instead of condescending them." Givers work for the team, but takers for themselves. If everyone around you hides information, you will do so, too. But in the long run, "taking", hoarding and mistrust hurt everyone in the organization.

Other research shows that **consistent and visible giving is contagious**, and it motivates others in a system to shift their reciprocity styles. James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis found that giving spreads rapidly in social networks. When one person contributed to the group at a personal cost over a series of rounds, more people were inclined to do the same in future rounds, even if the giver who started it was not present. Today the advantages of givers amplify thanks to technology and our interconnected, service-oriented jobs; most of us work with people. Because relationships and reputations are visible, takers will be detected sooner. Teams depend on givers to share information, to volunteer for unpopular tasks and to provide help. Adam Grant claims that givers thrive in the service economy where collaboration matters. The case for giving is: if you give at work, the takers won't compete with you. The matchers want to pay you back with good stuff, and the givers accept you as one of them...!

Trust-But-Verify

But of course, you must be careful not to give me 8 dollars all the time – while you keep only 2 dollars, right? If you give me too much, you become a doormat. You may even get a burnout if you spend too much time and energy on others. Research shows that successful givers are just as ambitious as takers. Takers score high on the dimension self-interest and low on other-interest. But successful givers also scored high on self-interest, in addition to a high score on other-interest. They give generously and with no strings attached, but they are careful not to overextend. They tend to balance interests between self and the other. Their motto seems Trust-But-Verify. They check if others are genuine by asking them to pay the favors forward to others – and gauge the response. Is the receiver willing to give to others? Successful givers do sincerity screening; who is worthy of receiving help and who is a taker in disguise? Successful givers adjust their strategy to their counterpart: they are collaborative until they find out they're dealing with a taker – then they become more competitive.

Who are you?

Adam Grant's book entails much more than these rough lines. It really got me thinking because it's easy to apply. Simply look around you: **Who are the givers, the matchers, the takers in your life and work?** Givers invite me to their workshop or send me their books without expecting to be covered or featured front page. Matchers will help me do social media marketing (and tweet about this magazine) only if they are included in the current issue.

Takers request a free annual subscription before they consider an interview – or send me an invoice if I attend their workshop to write about it. Don't get me wrong: most people are generous givers regarding this magazine. They share their articles, they are willing to edit their writing, they give us permission to use their art works and photos, they make time for interviews and help us Tweet and Like and Plus....

*#Culture: Fear of being judged
as weak prevents kindness at
work*

[CLICK TO TWEET](#)



How do I behave? I became more aware of my own tendencies through Grant's book. That was very insightful. But Grant also offers a survey to determine your give-and-take quotient even further, and it provides interesting dilemmas.

A colleague leaves your company and starts a successful software business. Then he asks you to introduce him to the CEO of a great technology company – who you know from way back. You haven't seen this CEO in many years but you yourself were thinking of contacting him in a few months' time because you have plans for a start-up... What do you do? Will you make the connection immediately, stall or say you can't reach the CEO...? Are you afraid of competition or ready to share because there's enough for everyone? The competition would make me think – but I would make the connection. Come on, I'll be just fine!

If you have only one hour left before your plane leaves and you receive three requests to check a PowerPoint presentation for the company's annual gathering this afternoon (you can't attend this year) – whose will you check? Your boss's presentation, your seasoned colleague's or the intern who is really nervous about presenting their first research findings...? Interesting! I don't have a boss – but my tendency would be to scan my boss's presentation. That was our workplace culture, way back when I still had a job and a boss. First please the boss! But what would a real giver do?

I wonder how self-aware or honest the other participants were when they took Adam Grant's survey. I felt the dilemmas – and scored myself even if I didn't like what I found. When I really put myself in some situations, I felt that I would get cautious and not as generous as I would have liked... So, my results were okay (40% giver) but most people give more compared to me – according to the survey. That surprised both my colleague and me because many people call me generous.

What matters is that this give-take concept helps me become more aware and observant of my own behaviors. Every time I get a request by email, I'm careful and reflective before I answer. **It helps me train my levels of trust and generosity.** As top-networker Adam Rifkin, says: "You should be willing to do a 5-minute favor for everyone."

But the 5-minute favors are not the problem. It's the requests that ask more trust of us, that show us our natural and/or acquired interaction styles. In my work as a change consultant, one client doesn't pay in time (ever) – but will I show up on time as a group facilitator for their event? How do I respond to the prospect that asks for free Skype consultancy for the third time – but who doesn't seem likely to buy my services and I've already had 2 one-hour sessions with him? Do I send my articles in Word-format to all the students who ask for them? Giving, matching or taking? Interesting!

How do you behave at work?

Giving, matching, taking?

CLICK TO TWEET

Workplace Giving

How do you behave at work? Workplaces and schools are often designed as zero-sum environments with fixed rankings that put members in win-lose relationships or situations. That's why people will lean towards taking, so everyone withholds giving. But if you have a natural mix of givers, takers and matchers in your workplace: you can magnify the giving, make it more the norm, enticing the matchers to give more too and the takers to be less selfish (because they want to look good). **How's that for an approach to develop a culture of kindness in your workplace?**

- **What's your usual style at work? Giving, matching, taking?**
- **How can you enhance giving in your workplace?**
- **How can you give more while protecting yourself from takers?**