

3

The Ripple Effect

Collaboration and the Dynamics of Giving and Taking Credit

It is well to remember that the entire universe, with one trifling exception, is composed of others.
—John Andrew Holmes, former U.S. representative and senator

You probably don't recognize [George Meyer](#)'s name, but you're definitely familiar with his work. In fact, odds are that someone close to you is a big fan of his ideas, which have captivated an entire generation of people around the world. Although I didn't know it belonged to him until recently, I've admired his work since I was nine years old. Meyer is a tall, angular man in his mid-fifties who sports long, stringy hair and a goatee. If you ran into him on the street, you wouldn't be able to place his face, but you might have a hunch that he's a Grateful Dead fan. You'd be right: in the last five years of Jerry Garcia's life, Meyer attended at least seventy different Grateful Dead concerts.

Meyer attended college at Harvard, where he was nearly suspended after he sold a refrigerator to a freshman and accepted payment, but never delivered it. He was almost suspended again when he used an electric guitar to shatter a window of a dorm room. A rare bright spot in his college career was being elected president of the *Harvard Lampoon*, the famous comedy magazine, but it was quickly tarnished by an attempted coup. According to journalist David Owen, Meyer's peers "tried to overthrow him in a bitter and vituperative internal battle, because they thought he wasn't responsible enough."

After graduating from college in 1978, Meyer moved back home and looked for ways to earn quick cash. He spent much of his time in college gambling on dog races at a greyhound track, so he thought he might be able to make a career out of it. He parked himself at a public library and began analyzing scientific strategies for beating the system. It didn't work: after two weeks, he ran out of money.

Three decades later, George Meyer is one of the most successful people in show business. He has

been a major contributor to a movie that grossed more than \$527 million. He has won seven Emmy Awards and invented several words that have entered English dictionaries—one of which was uttered every day by my college roommate for four years. But he is most celebrated for his role in a television phenomenon that has changed the world. Insiders maintain that as much as any other person, he is responsible for the success of the show that *Time* magazine named the single best television series of the twentieth century.

In 1981, at the recommendation of two friends, Meyer sent a few writing samples to a new NBC show called *Late Night with David Letterman*. “Everything in his submission, down to the last little detail, was so beautifully honed,” Letterman gushed to Owen. “I haven’t run across anybody quite like that since.” During the first season, Meyer invented what was to become one of Letterman’s signature routines: using a steam roller to crush ordinary objects, like pieces of fruit. After two years with Letterman, Meyer left to work on *The New Show* with Lorne Michaels and then joined *Saturday Night Live*, departing in 1987 to write a script for a Letterman movie that was ultimately shelved.

When Meyer’s two friends recommended him to Letterman, they called him “the funniest man in America.” This wasn’t a statement to be taken lightly—the two went on to become an Emmy-winning pair of comedy writers on shows like *Seinfeld*, *The Wonder Years*, and *Monk*. And if you look at what George Meyer has accomplished since he finished the Letterman movie script, you might be inclined to agree with them.

George Meyer is the mastermind of much of the humor on *The Simpsons*, the longest-running sitcom and animated program in America.

The Simpsons has won twenty-seven prime-time Emmy Awards, six of which went to Meyer, and changed the face of animated comedy. Although Meyer didn’t launch *The Simpsons*—it was created by Matt Groening and developed with James L. Brooks and Sam Simon—there is widespread consensus that Meyer was the most important force behind the show’s success. Meyer was hired to write for *The Simpsons* before it premiered in 1989, and he was a major contributor for sixteen seasons as a writer and executive producer. Meyer “has so thoroughly shaped the program that by now the comedic sensibility of *The Simpsons* could be viewed as mostly his,” writes Owen. According to humor writer Mike Sacks, “Meyer is largely considered among the writing staff to be its behind-the-scenes genius among geniuses,” the man “responsible for the best lines and jokes.” Jon Vitti, one of the original *Simpsons* writers who authored many of the early episodes and later served as a producer on *The Office*, elaborated that Meyer is “the one in the room who writes more of the show than anyone else—his fingerprints are on nearly every script. He exerts as much influence on the show as anyone can without being one of the creators.”

How does a man like George Meyer become so successful in collaborative work? Reciprocity styles offer a powerful lens for explaining why some people flourish in teams while others fail. In *Multipliers*, former Oracle executive Liz Wiseman distinguishes between [geniuses and genius makers](#). Geniuses tend to be takers: to promote their own interests, they “drain intelligence, energy, and capability” from others. Genius makers tend to be givers: they use their “intelligence to amplify the smarts and capabilities” of other people, Wiseman writes, such that “lightbulbs go off over people’s heads, ideas flow, and problems get solved.” My goal in this chapter is to explore how these differences between givers and takers affect individual and group success.

Collaboration and Creative Character

When we consider what it takes to attain George Meyer's level of comedic impact, there's little question that creativity is a big part of the equation. Carolyn Omine, a longtime *Simpsons* writer and producer, says that Meyer "has a distinct way of looking at the world. It's completely unique." Executive producer and show-runner Mike Scully once commented that when he first joined *The Simpsons*, Meyer "just blew me away. I had done a lot of sitcom work before, but George's stuff was so different and so original that for a while I wondered if I wasn't in over my head."

To unlock the mystery of how people become highly creative, back in 1958, a Berkeley psychologist named Donald MacKinnon launched a path-breaking study. He wanted to identify the unique characteristics of [highly creative people](#) in art, science, and business, so he studied a group of people whose work involves all three fields: architects. To start, MacKinnon and his colleagues asked five independent architecture experts to submit a list of the forty most creative architects in the United States. Although they never spoke to one another, the experts achieved remarkably high consensus. They could have nominated up to two hundred architects in total, but after accounting for overlap, their lists featured just eighty-six. More than half of those architects were nominated by more than one expert, more than a third by the majority of the experts, and 15 percent by all five experts.

From there, forty of the country's most creative architects agreed to be dissected psychologically. MacKinnon's team compared them with eighty-four other architects who were successful but not highly creative, matching the creative and "ordinary" architects on age and geographic location. All of the architects traveled to Berkeley, where they spent three full days opening up their minds to MacKinnon's team, and to science. They filled out a battery of personality questionnaires, experienced stressful social situations, took difficult problem-solving tests, and answered exhaustive interview questions about their entire life histories. MacKinnon's team pored over mountains of data, using pseudonyms for each architect so they would remain blind to who was highly creative and who was not.

One group of architects emerged as significantly more "responsible, sincere, reliable, dependable," with more "good character" and "sympathetic concern for others" than the other. The karma principle suggests that it should be the creative architects, but it wasn't. It was the ordinary architects. MacKinnon found that the creative architects stood out as substantially more "demanding, aggressive, and self-centered" than the comparison group. The creative architects had whopping egos and responded aggressively and defensively to criticism. In later studies, the same patterns emerged from comparisons of creative and less [creative scientists](#): the creative scientists scored significantly higher in dominance, hostility, and psychopathic deviance. Highly creative scientists were rated by observers as creating and exploiting dependency in others. Even the highly creative scientists themselves agreed with statements like "I tend to slight the contribution of others and take undue credit for myself" and "I tend to be sarcastic and disparaging in describing the worth of other researchers."

Takers have a knack for generating creative ideas and championing them in the face of opposition. Because they have supreme confidence in their own opinions, they feel free of the shackles of social approval that constrict the imaginations of many people. This is a distinctive signature of George Meyer's comedy. In 2002, he wrote, directed, and starred in a small play called *Up Your Giggy*. In

his monologues, he called God “a ridiculous superstition, invented by frightened cavemen” and referred to marriage as “a stagnant cauldron of fermented resentments, scared and judgmental conformity, exaggerated concern for the children . . . and the secret dredging-up of erotic images from past lovers in a desperate and heartbreaking attempt to make spousal sex even possible.”

The secret to creativity: be a taker?

Not so fast. Meyer may harbor a cynical sense of humor, deep-seated suspicion about time-honored traditions, and a few past indiscretions, but in a Hollywood universe dominated by takers, he has spent much of his career in giver style. It started early in life: growing up, he was an Eagle Scout and an altar boy. At Harvard, Meyer majored in biochemistry and was accepted to medical school, but decided not to attend. He was turned off by the hypercompetitive premed students he met in college, who would regularly “sabotage each other’s experiments—so lame.” After being elected president of the *Lampoon*, when peers attempted to depose him, Owen notes that “Meyer not only survived that coup but also, characteristically, became a close friend of his principal rival.” After graduating and failing at the dog track, Meyer worked in a cancer research lab and as a substitute teacher. When I asked Meyer what drew him to comedy, he said, “I love to make people laugh, entertain people, and try to make the world a little better.”

Meyer has used his comedic talent to promote social and environmental responsibility. In 1992, an early *Simpsons* episode that Meyer wrote, “Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington,” was nominated for an Environmental Media Award, granted to the best episodic comedy on television with a pro-environmental message. During his tenure, *The Simpsons* won six of these awards. In 1995, *The Simpsons* won a Genesis Award from the Humane Society for raising public awareness of animal issues. Meyer is a vegetarian who practices yoga, and in 2005 he cowrote *Earth to America*, a TBS special that utilized comedy as a vehicle for raising awareness about global warming and related environmental issues. He has done extensive work for Conservation International, producing humorous PowerPoint lectures to promote biodiversity. In 2007, when scientists discovered a new species of moss frogs in Sri Lanka, they named it after Meyer’s daughter, honoring his contributions to the Global Amphibian Assessment to protect frogs.

Even more impressive than Meyer’s work on behalf of the planet is how he works with other people. His big break came when he was working on the Letterman movie script in 1988. To provide some variety in his workday, he wrote and self-published a humor magazine called *Army Man*. “There were very few publications that were just trying to be funny,” Meyer told humorist Eric Spitznagel, “so I tried to make something that had no agenda other than to make you laugh.” The first issue of *Army Man* was only eight pages long. Meyer typed it himself, arranged it on his bed, and started making photocopies. Then he gave away his best comedy, sending copies to about two hundred friends for free.

Readers found *Army Man* hilarious and started passing it along to their friends. The magazine quickly attracted a cult following, and it made *Rolling Stone* magazine’s Hot List of the year’s best in entertainment. Soon, Meyer’s friends began sending him submissions to feature in future issues. By the second issue, there was enough demand for Meyer to circulate about a thousand copies. He shut it down after the third issue, in part because he couldn’t publish all of his friends’ submissions but couldn’t bear to turn them down.

The first issue of *Army Man* debuted when *The Simpsons* was getting off the ground, and it made its way into the hands of executive producer Sam Simon, who was just about to recruit a writing team.

Simon hired Meyer and a few of the other contributors to *Army Man*, and they went on to make *The Simpsons* a hit together. In the writers' room, George Meyer established himself as a giver. Tim Long, a *Simpsons* writer and five-time Emmy winner, told me that "George has the best reputation of anyone I know. He's incredibly generous in giving and helping other people." Similarly, Carolyn Omine marvels, "Everybody who knows George knows he is a truly good person. He has a code of honor, and he lives by this code, with a supernatural amount of integrity."

George Meyer's success highlights that givers can be every bit as creative as takers. By studying his habits in collaboration, we can gain a rich appreciation of how givers work in ways that contribute to their own success—and the success of those around them. But to develop a complete understanding of what givers do effectively in collaboration, it's important to compare them with takers. The research on creative architects suggests that takers often have the confidence to generate original ideas that buck traditions and fight uphill battles to champion these ideas. But does this independence come at a price?

Flying Solo

In the twentieth century, perhaps no person was more emblematic of eminent creativity than [Frank Lloyd Wright](#). In 1991, Wright was recognized as the greatest American architect of all time by the American Institute of Architects. He had an extraordinarily productive career, designing the famous Fallingwater house near Pittsburgh, the Guggenheim Museum, and more than a thousand other structures—roughly half of which were built. In a career that spanned seven decades, he completed an average of more than 140 designs and 70 structures per decade.

Although Wright was prolific throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century, beginning in 1924, he took a nine-year nosedive. As of 1925, “Wright’s career had dwindled to a few houses in Los Angeles,” write sociologist Roger Friedland and architect Harold Zellman. After studying Wright’s career, the psychologist Ed de St. Aubin concluded that the lowest Wright “ever sank architecturally occurred in the years between 1924 and 1933 when he completed only two projects.” Over those nine years, Wright was about thirty-five times less productive than usual. During one two-year period, he didn’t earn a single commission, and he was “floundering professionally,” notes architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne. By 1932, “the world-famous Frank Lloyd Wright” was “all but unemployed,” wrote biographer Brendan Gill. “His last major executed commission had been a house for his cousin” in 1929, and “he was continuously in debt,” to the point of struggling “to find the wherewithal to buy groceries.” What caused America’s greatest architect to languish?

Wright was one of the architects invited to participate in MacKinnon’s study of creativity. Although he declined the invitation, the portrait of the creative architect that emerged from MacKinnon’s analysis was the spitting image of Wright. In his designs, Frank Lloyd Wright appeared to be a humanitarian. He introduced the concept of organic architecture, striving to foster harmony between people and the environments in which they lived. But in his interactions with other people, he operated like a taker. Experts believe that as an apprentice, Wright designed at least nine bootleg houses, violating the terms of his contract that prohibited independent work. To hide the illegal work, Wright reportedly persuaded one of his fellow draftsmen to sign off on several of the houses. At one point, Wright promised his son John a salary for working as an assistant on several projects. When John asked him to be paid, Wright sent him a bill itemizing the total amount of money that John had cost over the course of his life, from birth to the present.

When designing the famous Fallingwater house, Wright stalled for months. When the client, Edgar Kaufmann, finally called Wright to announce that he was driving 140 miles to see his progress, Wright claimed the house was finished. But when Kaufmann arrived, Wright had not even completed a drawing, let alone the house. In the span of a few hours, before Kaufmann’s eyes, Wright sketched out a detailed design. Kaufmann had commissioned a weekend cottage at one of his family’s favorite picnic spots, where they could see a waterfall. Wright had a radically different idea in mind: he drew the house on a rock on top of the waterfall, which would be out of sight from the house. He convinced Kaufmann to accept it, and eventually charged him \$125,000 for it, more than triple the \$35,000 specified in the contract. It’s unlikely that a giver would have ever been comfortable deviating so far from a client’s expectations, let alone convincing him to endorse it enthusiastically and charging extra for it. It was a taker’s mind-set, it seems, that gave Wright the gall to develop a truly original vision and sell it to a client.

But the very same taker tendencies that served Wright well in Fallingwater also precipitated his nine-year slump. For two decades, until 1911, Wright made his name as an architect living in Chicago and Oak Park, Illinois, where he benefited from the assistance of craftspeople and sculptors. In 1911, he designed Taliesin, an estate in a remote Wisconsin valley. Believing he could excel alone, he moved out there. But as time passed, Wright spun his wheels during “long years of enforced idleness,” Gill wrote. At Taliesin, Wright lacked access to talented apprentices. “The isolation he chose by creating Taliesin,” de St. Aubin observes, “left him without the elements that had become essential to his life: architectural commissions and skillful workers to help him complete his building designs.”

Frank Lloyd Wright’s drought lasted until he gave up on independence and began to work interdependently again with talented collaborators. It wasn’t his own idea: his wife Olgivanna convinced him to start a fellowship for apprentices to help him with his work. When apprentices joined him in 1932, his productivity soared, and he was soon working on the Fallingwater house, which would be seen by many as the greatest work of architecture in modern history. Wright ran his fellowship program for a quarter century, but even then, he struggled to appreciate how much he depended on apprentices. He refused to pay apprentices, requiring them to do cooking, cleaning, and fieldwork. Wright “was a great architect,” explained his former apprentice [Edgar Tafel](#), who worked on Fallingwater, “but he needed people like myself to make his designs work—although you couldn’t tell him that.”

Wright’s story exposes the gap between our natural tendencies to attribute creative success to individuals and the collaborative reality that underpins much truly great work. This gap isn’t limited to strictly creative fields. Even in seemingly independent jobs that rely on raw brainpower, our success depends more on others than we realize. For the past decade, several Harvard professors have studied [cardiac surgeons](#) in hospitals and security analysts in investment banks. Both groups specialize in knowledge work: they need serious smarts to rewire patients’ hearts and organize complex information for stock recommendations. According to management guru Peter Drucker, these “knowledge workers, unlike manual workers in manufacturing, own the means of production: they carry that knowledge in their heads and can therefore take it with them.” But carrying knowledge isn’t actually so easy.

In one study, professors Robert Huckman and Gary Pisano wanted to know whether surgeons get better with practice. Since surgeons are in high demand, they perform procedures at multiple hospitals. Over a two-year period, Huckman and Pisano tracked 38,577 procedures performed by 203 cardiac surgeons at forty-three different hospitals. They focused on coronary artery bypass grafts, where surgeons open a patient’s chest and attach a vein from a leg or a section of chest artery to bypass a blockage in an artery to the heart. On average, 3 percent of patients died during these procedures.

When Huckman and Pisano examined the data, they discovered a remarkable pattern. Overall, the surgeons didn’t get better with practice. They only got better at the *specific hospital* where they practiced. For every procedure they handled at a given hospital, the risk of patient mortality dropped by 1 percent. But the risk of mortality stayed the same at other hospitals. The surgeons couldn’t take their performance with them. They weren’t getting better at performing coronary artery bypass grafts. They were becoming more familiar with particular nurses and anesthesiologists, learning about their strengths and weaknesses, habits, and styles. This familiarity helped them avoid patient deaths, but it

didn't carry over to other hospitals. To reduce the risk of patient mortality, the surgeons needed relationships with specific surgical team members.

While Huckman and Pisano were collecting their hospital data, down the hall at Harvard, a similar study was under way in the financial sector. In investment banks, security analysts conduct research to produce earnings forecasts and make recommendations to money management firms about whether to buy or sell a company's stock. [Star analysts](#) carry superior knowledge and expertise that they should be able to use regardless of who their colleagues are. As investment research executive Fred Fraenkel explains: "Analysts are one of the most mobile Wall Street professions because their expertise is portable. I mean, you've got it when you're here and you've got it when you're there. The client base doesn't change. You need your Rolodex and your files, and you're in business."

To test this assumption, Boris Groysberg studied more than a thousand equity and fixed-income security analysts over a nine-year period at seventy-eight different firms. The analysts were ranked in effectiveness by thousands of clients at investment management institutions based on the quality of their earnings estimates, industry knowledge, written reports, service, stock selection, and accessibility and responsiveness. The top three analysts in each of eighty industry sectors were ranked as stars, earning between \$2 million and \$5 million. Groysberg and his colleagues tracked what happened when the analysts switched firms. Over the nine-year period, 366 analysts—9 percent—moved, so it was possible to see whether the stars maintained their success in new firms.

Even though they were supposed to be individual stars, their performance wasn't portable. When star analysts moved to a different firm, their performance dropped, and it stayed lower for at least five years. In the first year after the move, the star analysts were 5 percent less likely to be ranked first, 6 percent less likely to be ranked second, 1 percent less likely to be ranked third, and 6 percent more likely to be unranked. Even five years after the move, the stars were 5 percent less likely to be ranked first and 8 percent more likely to be unranked. On average, firms lost about \$24 million by hiring star analysts. Contrary to the beliefs of Fraenkel and other industry insiders, Groysberg and his colleagues conclude that "hiring stars is advantageous neither to stars themselves, in terms of their performance, nor to hiring companies in terms of their market value."

But some of the star analysts did maintain their success. If they moved with their teams, the stars showed no decline at all in performance. The star analysts who moved solo had a 5 percent probability of being ranked first, while the star analysts who moved with teammates had a 10 percent probability of being ranked first—the same as those who didn't move at all. In another study, Groysberg and his colleagues found that analysts were more likely to maintain their star performance if they worked with high-quality colleagues in their teams and departments. The star analysts relied on knowledgeable colleagues for information and new ideas.

The star investment analysts and the cardiac surgeons depended heavily on collaborators who knew them well or had strong skills of their own. If Frank Lloyd Wright had been more of a giver than a taker, could he have avoided the nine years in which his income and reputation plummeted? George Meyer thinks so.

I Wish I Could Hate You

After Meyer left *Saturday Night Live* in 1987, he hightailed it out of New York City and moved to Boulder, Colorado, to work on the Letterman movie script alone. Just like Frank Lloyd Wright, Meyer had isolated himself from his collaborators. But in stark contrast to Wright, Meyer recognized that he needed other people to succeed. He knew his performance was interdependent, not independent: his ability to make people laugh was due in part to collaborating with fellow comedy writers. So he reached out to people who had worked with him at the *Lampoon* and on his past shows, inviting them to contribute to *Army Man*. “I believe that collaboration is such a beautiful thing, especially in comedy,” Meyer told me. “In a community of funny people, you can get that rare synergy, jokes you never could have come up with on your own.” Four colleagues ended up helping Meyer with the inaugural issue. One of those colleagues was Jack Handey, who contributed an early installment of “Deep Thoughts,” which went on to become a wildly popular series of jokes. Meyer published “Deep Thoughts” three years before they became famous on *Saturday Night Live*, and they contributed to the success of *Army Man*.

The juxtaposition of George Meyer with Frank Lloyd Wright reveals how givers and takers think differently about success. Wright thought he could take his architectural genius from Chicago, where he worked with a team of experts, to a remote part of Wisconsin, where he was largely alone. Wright’s family motto was “truth against the world,” and it’s a familiar theme in Western culture. We tend to privilege the lone genius who generates ideas that enthrall us, or change our world. According to research by a trio of Stanford psychologists, Americans see independence as a symbol of strength, viewing [interdependence as a sign of weakness](#). This is particularly true of takers, who tend to see themselves as superior to and separate from others. If they depend too much on others, takers believe, they’ll be vulnerable to being outdone. Like Wright, the star analysts who left their investment banks without their successful teams—or without considering the quality of the new teams they were joining—fell into this trap.

Givers reject the notion that interdependence is weak. Givers are more likely to see interdependence as a source of strength, a way to harness the skills of multiple people for a greater good. This appreciation of interdependence heavily influenced the way that Meyer collaborated. He recognized that if he could contribute effectively to the group, everyone would be better off, so he went out of his way to support his colleagues. When Meyer wrote for *Saturday Night Live* in the mid-1980s as a virtual unknown, he was almost always in the office, making himself available to give feedback. He ended up helping famous comedians like Jon Lovitz, Phil Hartman, and Randy Quaid with their writing and delivery.

Behind the scenes on *Saturday Night Live*, many writers were competing to get their sketches on the show. “There was a Darwinian element,” Meyer admits. “There might be ten sketches per show, and we would have thirty-five or forty sketches on the table. There was a bit of a battle, and I just tried to be a good collaborator.” When big stars like Madonna were slated to appear on the show, his colleagues flocked to submit sketches. Meyer submitted material for those shows, but he also put in extra effort on sketches for less electric guests, who tended to attract fewer sketches. Meyer took it upon himself to develop compelling sketches for less glamorous guests like Jimmy Breslin because that was where the show needed him most. “I just wanted to be a good soldier,” Meyer says. “When

people weren't as excited, that's when I felt I had to step up my game." He rose to the occasion, cowriting a hilarious sketch for Breslin that had James Bond villains on a talk show. Breslin played Goldfinger, offering tips on designing fortresses and griping about having his schemes thwarted by Bond. The sketch predated the hit *Austin Powers* spoof of Bond movies by more than a decade.

Meyer's pattern of giving continued on *The Simpsons*. Among writers, the most popular task was typically to write the first draft of an episode, as it allowed them to put their creative stamp on it. Meyer would generate plenty of ideas for episodes, but he rarely wrote the first draft. Instead, feeling that his skills were needed more in rewriting, he took responsibility for the dirty work of spending months helping to rewrite and revise each episode. This is a defining feature of how givers collaborate: they take on the tasks that are in the group's best interest, not necessarily their own personal interests. [This makes their groups better off](#): studies show that on average, from sales teams to paper mill crews to restaurants, the more giving group members do, the higher the quantity and quality of their groups' products and services. But it's not just their groups that get rewarded: like Adam Rifkin, successful givers expand the pie in ways that benefit themselves as well as their groups. Extensive research reveals that people who give their time and knowledge regularly to help their colleagues end up earning more raises and promotions in a wide range of settings, from banks to manufacturing companies. "On *The Simpsons*, I think George surrendered himself to the show," Tim Long says. "Intuitively, he understood that the best thing for him was for the show to be as good as possible."

There's a name for Meyer's actions: in the world of mountaineering, it's called [expedition behavior](#). The term was coined by the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), which has provided wilderness education to thousands of people, including crews of NASA astronauts. Expedition behavior involves putting the group's goals and mission first, and showing the same amount of concern for others as you do for yourself. Jeff Ashby, a NASA space shuttle commander who has flown more than four hundred orbits around Earth, says that "expedition behavior—being selfless, generous, and putting the team ahead of yourself—is what helps us succeed in space more than anything else." John Kanengieter, who directs leadership at NOLS, adds that expedition behavior is "not a zero-sum game: when you give it away, you gain more in response."

Part of Meyer's success came from expanding the pie: the more he contributed to the success of his shows, the more success there was for the whole team to share. But Meyer's expedition behavior also changed the way his colleagues saw him. When givers put a group's interests ahead of their own, they signal that their primary goal is to benefit the group. As a result, givers earn the respect of their collaborators. If Meyer had competed to draft his strongest sketches for Madonna, his fellow writers might have viewed him as a threat to their own status and careers. By doing his best work for less coveted guests, Meyer was doing his colleagues a favor. Takers no longer felt that they needed to compete with him, matchers felt that they owed him, and givers saw him as one of them. "When you were breaking your story or rewriting your script in the room, George was always a welcome addition to the group," says Don Payne, a *Simpsons* writer since 1998. "He would always come up with something that would make your scripts better. That's what draws people to him; they respect and admire him."

In addition to building goodwill, volunteering for unpopular tasks and offering feedback gave Meyer the chance to demonstrate his comedic gifts without leading colleagues to feel insecure. In one study, University of Minnesota researchers Eugene Kim and Theresa Glomb found that highly talented

people tend to make others jealous, placing themselves at risk of being disliked, resented, ostracized, and undermined. But if these talented people are also givers, they [no longer have a target on their backs](#). Instead, givers are appreciated for their contributions to the group. By taking on tasks that his colleagues didn't want, Meyer was able to dazzle them with his wit and humor without eliciting envy.

Meyer summarizes his code of honor as “(1) Show up. (2) Work hard. (3) Be kind. (4) Take the high road.” As he contributed in ways that [revealed his skills](#) without spawning jealousy, colleagues began to admire and trust his comedic genius. “People started to see him as somebody who wasn't just motivated personally,” Tim Long explains. “You don't think of him as a competitor. He's someone you can think of on a higher plane, and can trust creatively.” Carolyn Omine adds, “Compared to other writers' rooms I've been in, I would say *The Simpsons* tends to look longer for jokes. I think it's because we have writers, like George, who will say, ‘No, that's not quite right,’ even if it's late, even if we're all tired. I think that's an important quality. We need those people, like George, who aren't afraid to say, ‘No, this isn't good enough. We can do better.’”

In a classic article, the psychologist Edwin Hollander argued that when people act generously in groups, they earn [idiosyncrasy credits](#)—positive impressions that accumulate in the minds of group members. Since many people think like matchers, when they work in groups, it's very common for them to keep track of each member's credits and debits. Once a group member earns idiosyncrasy credits through giving, matchers grant that member a license to deviate from a group's norms or expectations. As [Berkeley sociologist](#) Robb Willer summarizes, “Groups reward individual sacrifice.” On *The Simpsons*, Meyer amassed plenty of idiosyncrasy credits, earning latitude to contribute original ideas and shift the creative direction of the show. “One of the best things about developing that credibility was if I wanted to try something that was fairly strange, people would be willing to at least give it a shot at the table read,” Meyer reflects. “They ended up not rewriting my stuff as much as they had early on, because they knew I had a decent track record. I think people saw that my heart was in the right place—my intentions were good. That goes a long way.”

In line with Meyer's experience, research shows that [givers get extra credit](#) when they offer ideas that challenge the status quo. In studies that I conducted with colleagues Sharon Parker and Catherine Collins, when takers presented suggestions for improvement, colleagues were skeptical of their intentions, writing them off as self-serving. But when ideas that might be threatening were proposed by givers, their colleagues listened and rewarded them for speaking up, knowing they were motivated by a genuine desire to contribute. “When I think about George in a writers' room, nice is not what I would say. He's spicier than that.” Carolyn Omine laughs. “But when George is tough, you know it is only because he cares so much about getting it right.”

In 1995, during the sixth *Simpsons* season, Meyer told his colleagues he would be leaving the show at the end of the season. Rather than seeing his departure as an opportunity for personal advancement, the writers didn't want to let him go. They quickly joined forces to recruit him back, persuading him to return as a consultant. Soon they had him all the way back as a full-time writer. “At a very early point, they realized that George was too important to let out of the room,” Jon Vitti told the *Harvard Crimson*. “Nobody's opinion is more valued than George's.” Looking back on his experiences working with Meyer, Tim Long adds that “there's something magical about getting the reputation as someone who cares about others more than yourself. It redounds to your benefit in countless ways.”

Claiming the Lion's Share of the Credit

Although Meyer's giving strengthened his reputation in the inner circles of show business, he toiled in anonymity in the outside world. In Hollywood, there's an easy solution to this problem. Writers gain prominence by claiming credits on as many television episodes as possible, which proves that the ideas and scenes were their brainchild.

George Meyer shaped and sculpted more than three hundred *Simpsons* episodes, but in quiet defiance of Hollywood norms, he's only credited as a writer on twelve of them. On hundreds of episodes, other writers got the credit for Meyer's ideas and jokes. "George never took writing credits on *The Simpsons*, even though he was an idea machine," Tim Long told me. "People tend to come up with ideas and jealously guard them, but George would create ideas, give them to someone else and never take credit. There's a crucial stretch of *The Simpsons* over ten years where he's not credited with a single joke, even though he was responsible for a huge number of them."*

By giving away credit, Meyer compromised his visibility. "For a long time, George's towering contribution to what some see as the most important TV show of the period was not as well known as it should have been," Long recalls. "He was generating a tremendous amount of material, and not really getting credit." Should Meyer have claimed more credit for his efforts? Hogging credit certainly seemed to work for Frank Lloyd Wright: at Taliesin, Wright insisted that his name be on every document as head architect, even when apprentices took the lead on a project. He threatened his apprentices that if they didn't credit him first and submit all documents for his approval, he would accuse them of forgery and take them to court.

Yet if we take a closer look at Meyer's experience, we might draw the conclusion that when Wright had success as an architect, it was in spite of taking credit—not because of it. Meyer's reluctance to take credit might have cost him some fame in the short run, but he wasn't worried about it. He earned credit as an executive producer, landing a half dozen Emmys for his work on *The Simpsons*, and felt there was plenty of credit to go around. "A lot of people feel they're diminished if there are too many names on a script, like everybody's trying to share a dog bowl," Meyer says. "But that's not really the way it works. The thing about credit is that it's not zero-sum. There's room for everybody, and you'll shine if other people are shining."

Time would prove Meyer right. Despite his short-term sacrifices, Meyer ended up receiving the credit he deserved. Meyer was virtually unknown outside Hollywood until 2000, when David Owen published his profile in the *New Yorker*, with the headline describing Meyer as "the funniest man behind the funniest show on TV." When Owen contacted key *Simpsons* writers for interviews, they jumped at the chance to sing Meyer's praises. As Tim Long puts it, "It makes me incredibly happy to extol George's virtues, even if I'm going to embarrass him."

Just as matchers grant a bonus to givers in collaborations, they impose a tax on takers. In a [study of Slovenian companies](#) led by Matej Cerne, employees who hid knowledge from their coworkers struggled to generate creative ideas because their coworkers responded in kind, refusing to share information with them. To illustrate, consider the career of the medical researcher [Jonas Salk](#), who began working to develop a polio vaccine in 1948. The following year, scientists John Enders, Frederick Robbins, and Thomas Weller successfully grew the polio virus in test tubes, paving the way for mass-producing a vaccine based on a live virus. By 1952, Salk's research lab at the

University of Pittsburgh had developed a vaccine that appeared to be effective. That year witnessed the worst polio epidemic in U.S. history. The virus infected more than 57,000 people, leading to more than 3,000 deaths and 20,000 cases of paralysis. Over the next three years, Salk's mentor, Thomas Francis, directed the evaluation of a field trial of the Salk vaccine, testing it on more than 1.8 million children with the help of 220,000 volunteers, 64,000 school workers, and 20,000 health care professionals. On April 12, 1955, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Francis made an announcement that sent a ripple of hope throughout the country: the Salk vaccine was "safe, effective and potent." Within two years, the vaccine was disseminated through the herculean efforts of the March of Dimes, and the incidence of polio fell by nearly 90 percent. By 1961, there were just 161 cases in the United States. The vaccine had similar effects worldwide.

Jonas Salk became an international hero. But at the historic 1955 press conference, Salk gave a valedictory speech that jeopardized his relationships and his reputation in the scientific community. He didn't acknowledge the important contributions of Enders, Robbins, and Weller, who had won a Nobel Prize a year earlier for their groundbreaking work that enabled Salk's team to produce the vaccine. Even more disconcertingly, Salk gave no credit to the six researchers in his lab who were major contributors to his efforts to develop the vaccine—Byron Bennett, Percival Bazeley, L. James Lewis, Julius Youngner, Elsie Ward, and Francis Yurochko.

Salk's team left the press conference in tears. As historian David Oshinsky writes in *Polio: An American Story*, Salk never acknowledged "the people in his own lab. This group, seated proudly together in the packed auditorium, would feel painfully snubbed. . . . Salk's coworkers from Pittsburgh . . . had come expecting to be honored by their boss. A tribute seemed essential, and long overdue." This was especially true from a matcher's perspective. One colleague told a reporter, "At the beginning, I saw him as a father figure. And at the end, an [evil father figure](#)."

Over time, it became clear that Julius Youngner felt particularly slighted. "Everybody likes to get credit for what they've done," Youngner told Oshinsky. "It was a big shock." The snub fractured their relationship: Youngner left Salk's lab in 1957 and went on to make a number of important contributions to virology and immunology. In 1993, they finally crossed paths at the University of Pittsburgh, and Youngner shared his feelings. "We were in the audience, your closest colleagues and devoted associates, who worked hard and faithfully for the same goal that you desired," Youngner began. "Do you remember whom you mentioned and whom you left out? Do you realize how devastated we were at that moment and ever afterward when you persisted in making your coworkers invisible?" Youngner reflected that Salk "was clearly shaken by these memories and offered little response."

Jonas Salk's moment of taking sole credit haunted him for the rest of his career. He launched the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, where hundreds of researchers continue to push the envelope of humanitarian science today. But Salk's own productivity waned—later in his career, he tried unsuccessfully to develop an AIDS vaccine—and he was shunned by his colleagues. He never won a Nobel Prize, and he was never elected to the prestigious National Academy of Sciences.* "In the coming years, almost every prominent polio researcher would gain entrance," Oshinsky writes. "The main exception, of course, was Jonas Salk. . . . As one observer put it, Salk had broken the 'unwritten commandments' of scientific research," which included "Thou shalt give credit to others." According to Youngner, "People really held it against him that he had grandstanded like that and really done the most un-collegial thing that you can imagine."

Salk thought his colleagues were jealous. “If someone does something and gets credit for it, then there is this tendency to have this competitive response,” he acknowledged in [rare comments about the incident](#). “I was not unscathed by Ann Arbor.” But Salk passed away in 1995 without ever acknowledging the contributions of his colleagues. Ten years later, in 2005, the University of Pittsburgh held an event to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the vaccine announcement. With Youngner in attendance, Salk’s son, AIDS researcher [Peter Salk](#), finally set the record straight. “It was not the accomplishment of one man. It was the accomplishment of a dedicated and skilled team,” Peter Salk said. “This was a collaborative effort.”

It appears that Jonas Salk made the same mistake as Frank Lloyd Wright: he saw himself as independent rather than interdependent. Instead of earning the idiosyncrasy credits that George Meyer attained, Salk was penalized by his colleagues for taking sole credit.

Why didn’t Salk ever credit the contributions of his colleagues to the development of the polio vaccine? It’s possible that he was jealously guarding his own accomplishments, as a taker would naturally do, but I believe there’s a more convincing answer: he didn’t feel they deserved credit. Why would that be?

The Responsibility Bias

To understand this puzzle, we need to take a trip to Canada, where psychologists have been asking married couples to put their relationships on the line. Think about your marriage, or your most recent romantic relationship. Of the total effort that goes into the relationship, from making dinner and planning dates to taking out the garbage and resolving conflicts, what percentage of the work do you handle?

Let's say you claim responsibility for 55 percent of the total effort in the relationship. If you're perfectly calibrated, your partner will claim responsibility for 45 percent, and your estimates will add up to 100 percent. In actuality, psychologists Michael Ross and Fiore Sicoly found that three out of every four couples add up to significantly more than 100 percent. Partners overestimate their own contributions. This is known as the [*responsibility bias*](#): exaggerating our own contributions relative to others' inputs. It's a mistake to which takers are especially vulnerable, and it's partially driven by the desire to see and present ourselves positively. In line with this idea, Jonas Salk certainly didn't avoid the spotlight. "One of his great gifts," Oshinsky writes, "was a knack for putting himself forward in a manner that made him seem genuinely indifferent to his fame. . . . Reporters and photographers would always find Salk grudging but available. He would warn them not to waste too much of his time; he would grouse about the important work they were keeping him from doing; and then, having lodged his formulaic protest, he would fully accommodate."

But there's another factor at play that's both more powerful and more flattering: information discrepancy. We have more access to information about our own contributions than the contributions of others. We see all of our own efforts, but we only witness a subset of our partners' efforts. When we think about who deserves the credit, we have more knowledge of our own contributions. Indeed, when asked to list each spouse's specific contributions to their marriage, on average, people were able to come up with eleven of their own contributions, but only eight of their partners' contributions.

When Salk claimed sole credit for the polio vaccine, he had vivid memories of the blood, sweat, and tears that he invested in developing the vaccine, but comparatively little information about his colleagues' contributions. He literally hadn't experienced what Youngner and the rest of the team did—and he wasn't present for the Nobel Prize-winning discovery that Enders, Robbins, and Weller made.

"Even when people are well intentioned," writes LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman, "they tend to overvalue their own contributions and undervalue those of others." This responsibility bias is a major source of failed collaborations. Professional relationships disintegrate when entrepreneurs, inventors, investors, and executives feel that their partners are not giving them the credit they deserve, or doing their fair share.

In Hollywood, between 1993 and 1997 alone, more than four hundred screenplays—roughly a third of all submitted—went to credit arbitration. If you're a taker, your driving motivation is to make sure you get more than you give, which means you're carefully counting every contribution that you make. It's all too easy to believe that you've done the lion's share of the work, overlooking what your colleagues contribute.

George Meyer was able to overcome the responsibility bias. *The Simpsons* has contributed many words to the English lexicon, the most famous being Homer's *d'oh!* response to an event that causes

mental or physical anguish. Meyer didn't invent that word, but he did coin *yoink*, the familiar phrase that *Simpsons* characters utter when they snatch an item from another character's hands. In 2007, the humor magazine *Cracked* ran a feature on the [top words](#) created by *The Simpsons*. Making the list were classics like *cromulent* (describing something that's fine, acceptable, or illegitimately legitimate) and *tomacco* (a crossbreed of tomato and tobacco made by Homer, first suggested in a 1959 *Scientific American* piece, and actually crossbred in 2003 by a *Simpsons* fan named Rob Bauer). But the top invented word on the list was *meh*, the expression of pure indifference that debuted in the sixth season of the show. In one episode, Marge Simpson is fascinated by a weaving loom at a Renaissance Fair, having studied weaving in high school. She weaves a message: "Hi Bart, I am weaving on a loom." Bart's response: "meh." Six years later, an episode aired in which Lisa Simpson actually spells out the word.

Meh has appeared in numerous dictionaries, from Macmillan ("used for showing that you do not care what happens or that you are not particularly interested in something") to Dictionary.com ("an expression of boredom or apathy") to *Collins English Dictionary* ("an interjection to suggest indifference or boredom—or as an adjective to say something is mediocre or a person is unimpressed"). Several years ago, George Meyer was caught by surprise when a *Simpsons* writer shared a memory with him about the episode in which *meh* first appeared. "He reminded me I had worked on that episode, and he thought I came up with the word *meh*. I didn't remember it." When I asked Tim Long who created *meh*, he was pretty confident it was George Meyer. "I'm almost sure he invented *meh*. It's everywhere—most people don't even realize it started with *The Simpsons*." Eventually, conversations with writers jogged Meyer's memory. "I was trying to think of a word that would be the easiest word to say with minimal effort—just a parting of the lips and air would come out."

Why didn't Meyer have a better memory of his contributions? As a giver, his focus was on achieving a collective result that entertained others, not on claiming personal responsibility for that result. He would suggest as many lines, jokes, and words as possible, letting others run with them and incorporate them into their scripts. His attention centered on improving the overall quality of the script, rather than on tracking who was responsible for it. "A lot of the stuff is just like a basketball assist. When somebody would say, 'George, that was yours,' I genuinely did not know," Meyer says. "I tended to not be able to remember the stuff that I had done, so I wasn't always saying when *I* did this and that. I was saying when *we* did this and that. I think it's good to get into the habit of doing that."

Research shows that it's not terribly difficult for matchers and takers to develop this habit. Recall that the responsibility bias occurs because we have more information about our own contributions than others'. The key to balancing our responsibility judgments is to focus our attention on what others have contributed. All you need to do is make a list of what your partner contributes *before* you estimate your own contribution. Studies indicate that when employees think about how much help they receive from their bosses before thinking about how much they contribute to their bosses, their estimates of their bosses' contributions double, from under 17 percent to over 33 percent. Bring together a work group of three to six people and ask each member to estimate the percentage of the total work that he or she does. Add up their estimates, and the average total is over 140 percent. Ask them to [reflect on each member's contributions](#) before their own, and the average total drops to 123 percent.

Givers like Meyer do this naturally: they take care to [recognize what other people contribute](#). In one study, psychologist Michael McCall asked people to fill out a survey measuring whether they were givers or takers, and to make decisions in pairs about the importance of different items for surviving in the desert. He randomly told half of the pairs that they failed and the other half that they succeeded. The takers blamed their partners for failures and claimed credit for successes. The givers shouldered the blame for failures and gave their partners more credit for successes.

This is George Meyer's modus operandi: he's incredibly tough on himself when things go badly, but quick to congratulate others when things go well. "Bad comedy hurts George physically," Tim Long says. Meyer wants each joke to make people laugh—and many to make them think. Although he holds other people to the same high standards that he sets for himself, he's more forgiving of their mistakes. Early in his career, Meyer was fired from a show called *Not Necessarily the News* after six weeks. Twenty years later, he ran into the boss who fired him. She apologized—firing him was clearly a mistake—and braced herself for Meyer to be angry. As he shared the story with me, Meyer laughed: "It was just lovely to see her again. I said 'Come on, look where we are; all is forgiven.' There are a few people in Hollywood who thrive on driving their enemies' faces into the dirt. That's such a hollow motivation. And you don't want to have all these people out there trying to undermine you."

In the *Simpsons* rewrite room, being more forgiving of others than of himself helped Meyer get the best ideas out of others. "I tried to create a climate in the room where everybody feels that they can contribute, that it's okay to fall on your face many, many times," he says. This is known as [psychological safety](#)—the belief that you can take a risk without being penalized or punished. Research by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson shows that in the type of psychologically safe environment that Meyer helped create, people learn and innovate more.* And it's givers who often create such an environment: in one study, engineers who shared ideas without expecting anything in return were more likely to play a [major role in innovation](#), as they made it safe to exchange information. Don Payne recalls that when he and fellow writer John Frink joined *The Simpsons*, they were intimidated by the talented veterans on the show, but Meyer made it safe to present their ideas. "George was incredibly supportive, and took us under his wing. He made it very easy to join in and participate, encouraged us to pitch and didn't denigrate us. He listened, and asked for our opinions."

When revising scripts, many comedy writers cut material ruthlessly, leaving the people who wrote that material psychologically wounded. Meyer, on the other hand, says he "tried to specialize in the emotional support of other people." When writers were freaking out about their scripts being rewritten, he was often the one to console them and calm them down. "I was always dealing with people in extremis; I would often talk people down from panic," Meyer observes. "I got good at soothing them, and showing them a different way to look at the situation." At the end of the day, even if he was trashing their work, they knew he cared about them as people. Carolyn Omine comments that "George does not mince words; he'll come right out and tell you if he thinks the joke you pitched is dumb, but you never feel he's saying you're dumb." Tim Long told me that when you give Meyer a script to read, "It's as if you just handed him a baby, and it's his responsibility to tell you if your baby's sick. He really cares about great writing—and about you."

The Perspective Gap

If overcoming the responsibility bias gives us a clearer understanding of others' contributions, what is it that allows us to offer support to colleagues in collaborations, where emotions can run high and people often take criticism personally? Sharing credit is only one piece of successful group work. Meyer's related abilities to console fellow writers when their work was being cut, and to create a psychologically safe environment, are a hallmark of another important step that gives take in collaboration: seeing beyond the [perspective gap](#).

In an experiment led by Northwestern University psychologist Loran Nordgren, people predicted how painful it would be to sit in a freezing room for five hours. They made their predictions under two different conditions: warm and cold. When the warm group estimated how much pain they would experience in the freezing room, they had an arm in a bucket of warm water. The cold group also made their judgments with an arm in a bucket, but it was filled with ice water. Which group would expect to feel the most pain in the freezing room?

As you probably guessed, it was the cold group. People anticipated that the freezing room would be 14 percent more painful when they had their arm in a bucket of ice water than a bucket of warm water. After literally feeling the cold for a minute, they knew several hours would be awful. But there was a third group of people who experienced cold under different circumstances. They stuck an arm in a bucket of ice water, but then took the arm out and filled out a separate questionnaire. After ten minutes had passed, they estimated how painful the freezing room would be.

Their predictions should have resembled the cold group's, having felt the freezing temperature just ten minutes earlier, but they didn't. They were identical to the warm group. Even though they had felt the cold ten minutes earlier, once they weren't cold anymore, they could no longer imagine it. This is a *perspective gap*: when we're not experiencing a psychologically or physically intense state, we dramatically underestimate how much it will affect us. For instance, evidence shows that physicians consistently think their patients are feeling less pain than they actually are. Without being in a state of pain themselves, physicians can't fully realize what it's like to be in that state.

In a [San Francisco hospital](#), a respected oncologist was concerned about a patient. "He's not as mentally clear as he was yesterday." The patient was old, and he had advanced metastatic cancer. The oncologist decided to order a spinal tap to see what was wrong, in the hopes of prolonging the patient's life. "Maybe he has an infection—meningitis, a brain abscess—something treatable."

The neurologist on call, Robert Burton, had his doubts. The patient's prognosis was grim, and the spinal tap would be extremely painful. But the oncologist was not ready to throw in the towel. When Burton entered the room with the spinal tap tray, the patient's family protested. "Please, no more," they said together. The patient—too frail to speak from a terminal illness—nodded, declining the spinal tap. Burton paged the oncologist and explained the family's wishes to avoid the spinal tap, but the oncologist was not ready to give up. Finally, the patient's wife grabbed Burton's arm, begging him for support in refusing the oncologist's plan to do the spinal tap. "It's not what we want," the wife pleaded. The oncologist was still determined to save the patient. He explained why the spinal tap was essential, and eventually, the family and patient gave in.

Burton performed the spinal tap, which was challenging to carry out and quite painful for the patient. The patient developed a pounding headache, fell into a coma and died three days later due to

the cancer. Although the oncologist was a prominent expert in his field, Burton remembers him “mainly for what he taught me about uncritical acceptance of believing that you ‘are doing good.’ The only way you can really know is if you ask the patient and you have a dialogue.”

In collaborations, takers rarely cross this perspective gap. They’re so focused on their own viewpoints that they never end up seeing how others are reacting to their ideas and feedback. On the other hand, researcher Jim Berry and I discovered that in creative work, givers are motivated to benefit others, so they find ways to [put themselves in other people’s shoes](#). When George Meyer was editing the work of *Simpsons* animators and writers, he was facing a perspective gap. He was cutting their favorite scenes and jokes, not his own. Recognizing that he couldn’t literally feel what they were feeling, he found a close substitute: he reflected on what it felt like to receive feedback and have his work revised when he was in their positions.

When he joined *The Simpsons* in 1989, Meyer had written a Thanksgiving episode that included a dream sequence. He thought the sequence was hilarious, but Sam Simon, the show runner at the time, didn’t agree. When Simon cut the dream from the script, Meyer was furious. “I flipped out. I was so enraged that Sam had to send me to do another task, just to get me out of the room.” When criticizing and changing the work of animators and writers, Meyer would look back on this experience. “I could relate to that sense of being eviscerated when other people were rewriting their stuff,” he told me. This made him more empathetic and considerate, helping other people to simmer down from intense states and accept his revisions.

Like Meyer, successful givers shift their frames of reference to the recipient’s perspective. For most people, this isn’t the natural starting point. Consider the common dilemma of giving a gift for a wedding or a new baby’s arrival. When the recipient has created a registry, do you pick something from the registry or send a unique gift?

One evening, my wife was searching for a wedding gift for some friends. She decided it was more thoughtful and considerate to find something that wasn’t on their registry, and chose to send candlesticks, assuming that our friends would appreciate the unique gift. Personally, I was perplexed. Several years earlier, when we received wedding gifts, my wife was often disappointed when people sent unique gifts, rather than choosing items from our registry. She knew she wanted particular items, and it was quite rare for anyone to send a gift that she preferred over the ones she had actually selected. Knowing that she preferred the registry gift when she was the recipient, why did she opt for a unique gift when she was in the giving role?

To get to the bottom of this puzzle, researchers Francesca Gino of Harvard and Frank Flynn of Stanford examined how senders and receivers react to [registry gifts and unique gifts](#). They found that senders consistently underestimated how much recipients appreciated registry gifts. In one experiment, they recruited ninety people to either give or receive a gift from Amazon.com. The receivers had twenty-four hours to create a wish list of ten products in the price range of twenty to thirty dollars. The senders accessed the wish lists and were randomly assigned to either choose a registry gift (from the list) or a unique gift (an idea of their own).

The senders expected that the recipients would appreciate the unique gift as somewhat more thoughtful and personal. In fact, the opposite was true. The recipients reported significantly greater appreciation of the registry gifts than the unique gifts. The same patterns emerged with friends giving and receiving wedding gifts and birthday gifts. The senders preferred to give unique gifts, but the recipients actually preferred the gifts they solicited on their registries and wish lists.

Why? Research shows that when we take others' perspectives, we [tend to stay within our own frames of reference](#), asking "How would *I* feel in this situation?" When we're giving a gift, we imagine the joy that we would experience in receiving the gifts that we're selecting. But this isn't the same joy that the recipient will experience, because the recipient has a different set of preferences. In the giver's role, my wife loved the candlesticks she picked out. But if our friends were enamored with those candlesticks, they would have put them on their gift registry.*

To effectively help colleagues, people need to step outside their own frames of reference. As George Meyer did, they need to ask, "How will *the recipient* feel in this situation?" This capacity to see the world from another person's perspective develops very early in life. In one experiment, Berkeley psychologists Betty Repacholi and Alison Gopnik studied fourteen-month-old and eighteen-month-old toddlers. The toddlers had two bowls of food in front of them: one with goldfish crackers and one with broccoli. The toddlers tasted food from both bowls, showing a strong preference for [goldfish crackers over broccoli](#). Then, they watched a researcher express disgust while tasting the crackers and delight while tasting the broccoli. When the researcher held out her hand and asked for some food, the toddlers had a chance to offer either the crackers or the broccoli to the researcher. Would they travel outside their own perspectives and give her the broccoli, even though they themselves hated it?

The fourteen-month-olds didn't, but the eighteen-month-olds did. At fourteen months, 87 percent shared the goldfish crackers instead of the broccoli. By eighteen months, only 31 percent made this mistake while 69 percent had learned to share what others liked, even if it differed from what they liked. This ability to imagine other people's perspectives, rather than getting stuck in our own perspectives, is a signature skill of successful givers in collaborations.* Interestingly, when George Meyer first started his career as a comedy writer, he didn't use his perspective-taking skills in the service of helping his colleagues. He saw his fellow writers as rivals:

When you start out, you see other people as obstacles to your success. But that means your world will be full of obstacles, which is bad. In the early years, when some of my colleagues and friends—even close friends—would have a rip-roaring success of some kind, it was hard for me. I would feel jealousy, that their success somehow was a reproach to me. When you start your career, naturally you're mainly interested in advancing yourself and promoting yourself.

But as Meyer worked on television shows, he began to run into the same people over and over. It was a small world, and a connected one. "I realized it's a very small pond. There are only a few hundred people at any one time writing television comedy for a living," Meyer says. "It's a good idea not to alienate these guys, and most of the jobs you get are more or less through word of mouth, or a recommendation. It's really important to have a good reputation. I quickly learned to see other comedy writers as allies." Meyer began to root for other people to succeed. "It's not a zero-sum game. So if you hear that somebody got a pilot picked up, or one of their shows went to series, in a way that's really good, because comedy is doing better."

This wasn't the path that Frank Lloyd Wright followed. He was undoubtedly a genius, but he wasn't a genius maker. When Wright succeeded, it didn't multiply the success of other architects; it usually came at their expense. As Wright's son John reflected, "You do a good job building your

buildings in keeping with your ideal. But you have been weak in your support of others in their desire for this same attainment.” When it came to apprentices, his son charged, Wright never “stood behind one and helped him up.” In one case, Wright promised his apprentices a drafting room so they could work, but it wasn’t until seven years after starting the Taliesin fellowship that he made good on his promise. At one point, a client admitted that he preferred to hire Wright’s apprentices over Wright himself, as the apprentices matched his talent but exceeded his conscientiousness when it came to completing work on schedule and within budget. Wright was enraged, and he forbade his architects from accepting independent commissions, requiring them to put his name at the top of all their work. A number of his most talented and experienced apprentices quit, protesting that Wright exploited them for personal gain and stole credit for their work. “[It is amazing](#),” de St. Aubin observes, “that few of the hundreds” of Wright’s “apprentices went on to achieve significant, independent careers as practicing architects.”

George Meyer’s success had the opposite effect on his collaborators: it rippled, cascaded, and spread to the people around him. Meyer’s colleagues call him a genius, but it’s striking that he has also been a genius maker. By helping his fellow writers on *The Simpsons*, George Meyer made them more effective at their jobs, multiplying their collective effectiveness. “He made me a better writer, inspiring me to think outside the box,” Don Payne comments. Meyer’s willingness to volunteer for unpopular tasks, help other people improve their jokes, and work long hours to achieve high collective standards rubbed off on his colleagues. “He makes everyone try harder,” Jon Vitti told a *Harvard Crimson* reporter, who exclaimed that “Meyer’s presence spurs other *Simpsons* writers to be funnier,” extolling Meyer’s gift for “inspiring greatness in those around him.”

Meyer left *The Simpsons* in 2004 and is currently working on his first novel—tentatively titled *Kick Me 1,000,000 Times or I’ll Die*—but his influence in the writers’ room persists. Today, “George’s voice is strongly in the DNA of the show,” says Payne, “and he showed me that you don’t have to be a jerk to get ahead.” Carolyn Omine adds that “We all picked up a lot of George’s comedic sense. Even though he’s not here at *The Simpsons* anymore, we sometimes think in his way.” Years later, Meyer is still working to lift his colleagues up. Despite winning five Emmy Awards, Tim Long hadn’t achieved his lifelong dream: he wanted to be published in *The New Yorker*. In 2010, Long sent Meyer a draft of a submission. Meyer responded swiftly with incisive feedback. “He just went through it line by line, and he was incredibly generous. His notes helped me fix things that were bugging me at the bottom of my soul, but I couldn’t articulate them.” Then, Meyer took his giving one step further: he reached out to an editor at *The New Yorker* to help Long get his foot in the door. By 2011, Long’s dream was fulfilled—twice.

By the time Meyer released the second issue of *Army Man*, he had thirty contributors. They all wrote jokes for free, and their careers soared along with Meyer’s. At least seven of those contributors went on to write for *The Simpsons*. One contributor, Spike Feresten, wrote a single *Simpsons* episode in 1995, and became an Emmy-nominated writer and producer on *Seinfeld*, where he wrote the famous “Soup Nazi” episode. And the *Army Man* contributors who didn’t become *Simpsons* writers achieved success elsewhere. For example, Bob Odenkirk is a well-known writer and actor, Roz Chast is a staff cartoonist for *The New Yorker*, and Andy Borowitz became a bestselling author and creator of “The Borowitz Report,” a satire column and website with millions of fans. Before that, Borowitz coproduced the hit movie *Pleasantville* and created *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, which in turn launched Will Smith’s career. By inviting them to write for *Army Man*,

Meyer helped them soar. “I just asked the people who made me laugh to contribute,” Meyer told Mike Sacks. “I didn’t realize they would become illustrious.”

4

Finding the Diamond in the Rough

The Fact and Fiction of Recognizing Potential

When we treat man as he is, we make him worse than he is; when we treat him as if he already were what he potentially could be, we make him what he should be.

—attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, German writer, physicist, biologist, and artist

When Barack Obama entered the White House, a reporter asked him if he had a favorite app. Without hesitating, Obama named the iReggie, which “has my books, my newspapers, my music all in one place.” The iReggie wasn’t a piece of software, though. It was a man named [Reggie Love](#), and no one would have guessed that he would become an indispensable resource to President Obama.

Love was a star athlete at Duke, where he accomplished the rare feat of playing key roles on both the football and basketball teams. But after two years of failed NFL tryouts following graduation, he decided to shift gears. Having studied political science and public policy at Duke, Love pursued an internship on Capitol Hill. With a background as a jock and little work experience, he ended up with a position in the mailroom of Obama’s Senate office. Yet within a year, at the young age of twenty-six, Love was promoted up from the mailroom to become Obama’s body man, or personal assistant.

Love worked eighteen-hour days and flew more than 880,000 miles with Obama. “His ability to juggle so many responsibilities with so little sleep has been an inspiration to watch,” Obama said. “He is the master of what he does.” When Obama was elected president, an aide remarked that Love “took care of the president.” Love went out of his way to respond to every letter that came into his office. “I always wanted to acknowledge people, and let them know their voice was heard,” Love told me. According to a reporter, Love is “known for his exceptional and universal kindness.”

Decades earlier, in Love’s home state of North Carolina, a woman named Beth Traynham decided to go back to school to study accounting. Beth was in her early thirties, and numbers were not her strong suit. She didn’t learn to tell time on an analog clock until she was in third grade, and in high school, she leaned heavily on a boyfriend to get her through her math classes. Even in adulthood, she

struggled with percentages.

When it came time to take the certified public accountant (CPA) exam, Beth was convinced that she would fail. Beyond the fact that she had trouble with math, she was facing serious time constraints. She was juggling a full-time job with taking care of three children at home—two of whom were toddlers, both of whom came down with chicken pox within two weeks of the exam. The lowest point came when she spent an entire weekend trying to understand pension accounting, and after three days, felt like she understood less than when she started. When Beth sat down to take the CPA exam, right off the bat, she had a panic attack when she looked at the multiple-choice questions. “I would rather go through natural childbirth (again) than ever have to sit for that exam again,” Beth said. She left dejected, certain that she had failed.

On a Monday morning in August 1992, Beth’s phone rang. The voice on the other end of the line said that she had earned the gold medal on the CPA exam in North Carolina. She thought it was a friend playing a joke on her, so she called the state board later that day to verify the news. It wasn’t a joke: Beth had the single highest score in the entire state. Later, she was dumbfounded when she received another award: the national Elijah Watt Sells Award for Distinctive Performance, granted to the top ten CPA exam scores in the whole country, beating out 136,525 other candidates. Today, Beth is a widely respected partner at the accounting firm Hughes, Pittman & Gupton, LLC. She has been named an Impact 25 financial leader and one of the top twenty-five women in business in the Research Triangle.

Beth Traynham and Reggie Love have led dramatically different lives. Aside from their professional success and their North Carolina roots, there is one common thread that unites them. His name is [C. J. Skender](#), and he is a living legend.

Skender teaches accounting, but to call him an accounting professor doesn’t do him justice. He’s a unique character, known for his trademark bow ties and his ability to recite the words to thousands of songs and movies on command. He may well be the only fifty-eight-year-old man with fair skin and white hair who displays a poster of the rapper 50 Cent in his office. And while he’s a genuine numbers whiz, his impact in the classroom is impossible to quantify. Skender is one of a few professors for whom Duke University and the University of North Carolina look past their rivalry to cooperate: he is in such high demand that he has permission to teach simultaneously at both schools. He has earned more than two dozen major teaching awards, including fourteen at UNC, six at Duke, and five at North Carolina State. Across his career, he has now taught close to six hundred classes and evaluated more than thirty-five thousand students. Because of the time that he invests in his students, he has developed what may be his single most impressive skill: a remarkable eye for talent.

In 2004, Reggie Love enrolled in C. J. Skender’s accounting class at Duke. It was a summer course that Love needed to graduate, and while many professors would have written him off as a jock, Skender recognized Love’s potential beyond athletics. “For some reason, Duke football players have never flocked to my class,” Skender explains, “but I knew Reggie had what it took to succeed.” Skender went out of his way to engage Love in class, and his intuition was right that it would pay dividends. “I knew nothing about accounting before I took C. J.’s class,” Love says, “and the fundamental base of knowledge from that course helped guide me down the road to the White House.” In Obama’s mailroom, Love used the knowledge of inventory that he learned in Skender’s class to develop a more efficient process for organizing and digitizing a huge backlog of mail. “It was the number-one thing I implemented,” Love says, and it impressed Obama’s chief of staff, putting Love on

the radar. In 2011, Love left the White House to study at Wharton. He sent a note to Skender: “I’m on the train to Philly to start the executive MBA program and one of the first classes is financial accounting—and I just wanted to say thanks for sticking with me when I was in your class.”

A dozen years earlier, after Beth Traynham took the CPA exam, she approached Skender to warn him about her disappointing performance. She told him she was sure she flunked the entire exam, but Skender knew better. He promised: “If you didn’t pass, I’ll pay your mortgage.” Skender was right again—and he wasn’t just right about Beth. That spring, the silver and bronze medalists on the CPA exam in North Carolina were also his students. Skender’s students earned the top three scores of all 3,396 CPA candidates who took the exam. It was the first time in North Carolina that any school had swept the medals, and although accounting was a male-dominated field, all three of Skender’s medalists were women. In total, Skender has had more than forty different students win CPA medals by placing in the top three in the state. He has also demonstrated a knack for identifying future teachers: more than three dozen students have followed in his footsteps into university teaching. How does he know talent when he sees it?

It may sound like pure intuition, but C. J. Skender’s skill in recognizing potential has rigorous science behind it. Spotting and cultivating talent are essential skills in just about every industry; it’s difficult to overstate the value of surrounding ourselves with stars. As with networking and collaboration, when it comes to discovering the potential in others, reciprocity styles shape our approaches and effectiveness. In this chapter, I want to show you how givers succeed by recognizing potential in others. Along with tracing Skender’s techniques, we’ll take a look at how talent scouts identify world-class athletes, why people end up overinvesting in low-potential candidates, and what top musicians say about their first teachers. But the best place to start is the military, where psychologists have spent three decades investigating what it takes to identify the most talented cadets.

Star Search

In the early 1980s, a psychologist named Dov Eden published the first in a series of extraordinary results. He could tell which soldiers in the [Israel Defense Forces](#) (IDF) would become top performers before they ever started training.

Eden is a physically slight but psychologically intense man who grew up in the United States. After finishing his doctorate, he immigrated to Israel and began conducting research with the IDF. In one study, he examined comprehensive assessments of nearly a thousand soldiers who were about to arrive for training with their platoons. He had their aptitude test scores, evaluations during basic training, and appraisals from previous commanders. Using this information alone, which was gathered before the beginning of training for their current roles, Eden was able to identify a group of high-potential trainees who would emerge as stars.

Over the next eleven weeks, the trainees took tests measuring their expertise in combat tactics, maps, and standard operating procedures. They also demonstrated their skill in operating a weapon, which was evaluated by experts. Sure enough, the candidates Eden spotted as high-potentials at the outset did significantly better than their peers over the next three months: they scored 9 percent higher on the expertise tests and 10 percent higher on the weapons evaluation. What information did Eden use to identify the high-potentials? If you were a platoon leader in the IDF, what characteristics would you value above all others in your soldiers?

It's helpful to know that Eden drew his inspiration from a classic study led by the Harvard psychologist Robert Rosenthal, who teamed up with Lenore Jacobson, the principal of an elementary school in San Francisco. In eighteen different classrooms, students from kindergarten through fifth grade took a Harvard cognitive ability test. The test objectively measured students' verbal and reasoning skills, which are known to be critical to learning and problem solving. Rosenthal and Jacobson shared the test results with the teachers: approximately 20 percent of the students had shown the potential for [intellectual blooming](#), or spurring. Although they might not look different today, their test results suggested that these bloomers would show "unusual intellectual gains" over the course of the school year.

The Harvard test was discerning: when the students took the cognitive ability test a year later, the bloomers improved more than the rest of the students. The bloomers gained an average of twelve IQ points, compared with average gains of only eight points for their classmates. The bloomers outgained their peers by roughly fifteen IQ points in first grade and ten IQ points in second grade. Two years later, the bloomers were still outgaining their classmates. The intelligence test was successful in identifying high-potential students: the bloomers got smarter—and at a faster rate—than their classmates.

Based on these results, intelligence seems like a strong contender as the key differentiating factor for the high-potential students. But it wasn't—at least not in the beginning. Why not?

The students labeled as bloomers didn't actually score higher on the Harvard intelligence test. Rosenthal chose them at random.

The study was designed to find out what happened to students when teachers *believed* they had high potential. Rosenthal randomly selected 20 percent of the students in each classroom to be labeled as bloomers, and the other 80 percent were a control group. The bloomers weren't any

smarter than their peers—the difference “was in the mind of the teacher.”

Yet the bloomers became smarter than their peers, in both verbal and reasoning ability. Some students who were randomly labeled as bloomers achieved more than 50 percent intelligence gains in a single year. The ability advantage to the bloomers held up when the students had their intelligence tested at the end of the year by separate examiners who weren't aware that the experiment had occurred, let alone which students were identified as bloomers. And the students labeled as bloomers continued to show gains after two years, even when they were being taught by entirely different teachers who didn't know which students had been labeled as bloomers. Why?

Teachers' beliefs created self-fulfilling prophecies. When teachers believed their students were bloomers, they set high expectations for their success. As a result, the teachers engaged in more supportive behaviors that boosted the students' confidence and enhanced their learning and development. Teachers communicated more warmly to the bloomers, gave them more challenging assignments, called on them more often, and provided them with more feedback. Many experiments have replicated these effects, showing that teacher expectations are especially important for improving the grades and intelligence test scores of low-achieving students and members of stigmatized minority groups. In a comprehensive review of the evidence, psychologists Lee Jussim and Kent Harber concluded, “[Self-fulfilling prophecies](#) in the classroom are real.”

But we all know that children are impressionable in the early phases of intellectual development. When Dov Eden began his research at the IDF, he wondered whether these types of self-fulfilling prophecies could play out with more fully formed adults. He told some platoon leaders that he had reviewed aptitude test scores, evaluations during basic training, and appraisals from previous commanders, and that the “average command potential of your trainees is appreciably higher than the usual level . . . Therefore, you can expect unusual achievements from the trainees in your group.”

As in the elementary school study, Eden had selected these trainees as high-potentials at random. He was testing the effect of leaders believing that their trainees were high-potentials. Amazingly, the trainees randomly labeled as high-potentials did significantly better on expertise tests and weapons evaluations than the trainees who were not arbitrarily designated as high-potentials. Just like the teachers, when the platoon leaders believed in the trainees' potential, they acted in ways that made this potential a reality. The platoon leaders who held high expectations of their trainees provided more help, career advice, and feedback to their trainees. When their trainees made mistakes, instead of assuming that they lacked ability, the platoon leaders saw opportunities for teaching and learning. The supportive behaviors of the platoon leaders boosted the confidence and ability of the trainees, enabling and encouraging them to achieve higher performance.

Evidence shows that leaders' beliefs can catalyze self-fulfilling prophecies in many settings beyond the military. Management researcher Brian McNatt conducted an exhaustive analysis of seventeen different studies with nearly three thousand employees in a wide range of work organizations, from banking to retail sales to manufacturing. Overall, when managers were randomly assigned to see employees as bloomers, [employees bloomed](#). McNatt concludes that these interventions “can have a fairly large effect on performance.” He encourages managers to “recognize the possible power and influence in (a) having a genuine interest and belief in the potential of their employees . . . and (b) engaging in actions that support others and communicate that belief . . . increasing others' motivation and effort and helping them achieve that potential.”

Some managers and teachers have already internalized this message. They see people as

bloomers naturally, without ever being told. This is rarely the case for takers, who tend to place little trust in other people. Because they assume that most people are takers, they hold relatively low expectations for the potential of their peers and subordinates. Research shows that takers harbor doubts about others' intentions, so they monitor vigilantly for information that others might harm them, treating others with suspicion and distrust. These [low expectations trigger a vicious cycle](#), constraining the development and motivation of others. Even when takers are impressed by another person's capabilities or motivation, they're more likely to see this person as a threat, which means they're less willing to support and develop him or her. As a result, takers frequently fail to engage in the types of supportive behaviors that are conducive to the confidence and development of their peers and subordinates.

Matchers are better equipped to inspire self-fulfilling prophecies. Because they value reciprocity, when a peer or subordinate demonstrates high potential, matchers respond in kind, going out of their way to support, encourage, and develop their promising colleagues and direct reports. But the matcher's mistake lies in waiting for signs of high potential. Since matchers tend to play it safe, they often wait to offer support until they've seen evidence of promise. Consequently, they miss out on opportunities to develop people who don't show a spark of talent or high potential at first.

Givers don't wait for signs of potential. Because they tend to be trusting and optimistic about other people's intentions, in their roles as leaders, managers, and mentors, givers are inclined to see the potential in everyone. By default, givers start by viewing people as bloomers. This is exactly what has enabled C. J. Skender to develop so many star students. He isn't unusual in recognizing talented people; he simply starts by seeing everyone as talented and tries to bring out the best in them. In Skender's mind, every student who walks into his classroom is a diamond in the rough—able and willing to be mined, cut, and polished. He sees potential where others don't, which has set in motion a series of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Polishing the Diamond in the Rough

In 1985, a student of Skender's named Marie Arcuri sat for the CPA exam. She wasn't a good standardized test taker, and she didn't pass the first time. A few days later, she received a letter in the mail from Skender. He wrote to every single student who had taken the exam, congratulating those who passed and encouraging those who didn't. For the past quarter century, Marie has saved the letter:

Your husband, family, and friends love you because of the beautiful person you have made yourself—not because of a performance on an examination.

Remember that . . . Focus on November. Concentrate on practice . . . I want what's best for you. You WILL get through this thing, Marie. I write on my tests, "The primary purpose has already been served by your preparation for this exam" . . . Success doesn't measure a human being, effort does.

Studies show that accountants are more likely to achieve their potential when they receive the type of encouragement that Skender provided. Several years ago, seventy-two [new auditors](#) joined a Big Four accounting firm. Half of the auditors were randomly assigned to receive information that they had high potential to succeed. The study was led by researcher Brian McNatt, who had a doctorate, two accounting degrees, a CPA certification, and five years of experience as an accountant and auditor. McNatt read the résumés of the auditors who were randomly assigned to believe in their potential. Then, he met with each of the auditors and informed them that they were hired after a highly competitive selection process, management had high expectations for their success, and they had the skills to overcome challenges and be successful. Three weeks later, McNatt sent them a letter reinforcing this message. For a full month, the auditors who received McNatt's message earned higher performance ratings than the auditors in the control group, who never met with McNatt or received a letter from him. This was true even after controlling for the auditors' intelligence test scores and college grades.

This is the effect that Skender's letter had on Marie Arcuri. He encouraged her to believe in her potential and set high expectations for her to succeed. "He saw the best in his students, and still sees the best in his students," Marie says. She took the exam again and passed two sections, leaving two more to go. Along the way, Skender continued encouraging her. "He wasn't going to let me slack off one bit. He would call me and check in on my progress." She passed the final section and earned her CPA in 1987, two years after she started taking the four sections of the exam. "The difference he made in my life [was in] making sure my priorities were in order, keeping me on track, and preventing me from throwing in the towel," Marie explains. "I knew how much he'd invested in me, and I was not going to let him down." Today, Marie owns two Lexus automobile dealerships. "The accounting background and the skills in reading financial statements have been valuable. But more than C. J. taught me material for my job, he built my character, my passion, and my determination. His commitment to making sure that I got through led me to realize that I'd rather be defined by perseverance than by whether or not I passed an exam."

Skender's approach contrasts with the basic model most companies follow when it comes to

leadership development: identify high-potential people, and then provide them with the mentoring, support, and resources needed to grow to achieve their potential. To identify these high-potential future leaders, each year companies spend billions of dollars assessing and evaluating talent. Despite the popularity of this model, givers recognize that it is fatally flawed in one respect. The identification of talent may be the wrong place to start.

For many years, psychologists believed that in any domain, success depended on talent first and motivation second. To groom world-class athletes and musicians, experts looked for people with the right raw abilities, and then sought to motivate them. If you want to find people who can dunk like Michael Jordan or play piano like Beethoven, it's only natural to start by screening candidates for leaping ability and an ear for music. But in recent years, psychologists have come to believe that this approach may be backward.

In the 1960s, a pioneering psychologist named Raymond Cattell developed an [investment theory of intelligence](#). He proposed that interest is what drives people to invest their time and energy in developing particular skills and bases of knowledge. Today, we have compelling evidence that interest precedes the development of talent. It turns out that motivation is the reason that people develop talent in the first place.

In the 1980s, the psychologist Benjamin Bloom led a [landmark study of world-class musicians, scientists, and athletes](#). Bloom's team interviewed twenty-one concert pianists who were finalists in major international competitions. When the researchers began to dig into the eminent pianists' early experiences with music, they discovered an unexpected absence of raw talent. The study showed that early on most of the star pianists seemed "special only when comparing one child with others in the family or neighborhood." They didn't stand out on a local, regional, or national level—and they didn't win many early competitions.

When Bloom's team interviewed the world-class pianists and their parents, they stumbled upon another surprise. The pianists didn't start out learning from piano teachers who were experts. They typically took their first piano lessons with a teacher who lived nearby in their neighborhoods. In *The Talent Code*, Daniel Coyle writes that "From a scientific perspective, it was as if the researchers had [traced the lineage of the world's most beautiful swans](#) back to a scruffy flock of barnyard chickens." Over time, even without an expert teacher at the outset, the pianists managed to become the best musicians in the world. The pianists gained their advantage by practicing many more hours than their peers. As Malcolm Gladwell showed us in *Outliers*, research led by psychologist Anders Ericsson reveals that attaining expertise in a domain typically requires [ten thousand hours of deliberate practice](#). But what motivates people to practice at such length in the first place? This is where givers often enter the picture.

When the pianists and their parents talked about their first piano teachers, they consistently focused on one theme: the teachers were caring, kind, and patient. The pianists looked forward to piano lessons because their first teachers made music interesting and fun. "The children had very positive experiences with their first lessons. They made contact with another adult, outside their home, who was warm, supportive, and loving," Bloom's team explains. The world-class pianists had their initial interest sparked by teachers who were givers. The teachers looked for ways to make piano lessons enjoyable, which served as an early catalyst for the intense practice necessary to develop expertise. "Exploring possibilities and engaging in a wide variety of musical activities took precedence" over factors such as "right or wrong or good or bad."

The same patterns emerged for world-class tennis players. When Bloom's team interviewed eighteen American tennis players who had been ranked in the top ten in the world, they found that although their first coaches "were not exceptional coaches, they tended to be very good with young children . . . What this first coach provided was motivation for the child to become interested in tennis and to spend time practicing."

In roles as leaders and mentors, givers resist the temptation to search for talent first. By recognizing that anyone can be a bloomer, givers focus their attention on motivation. The top-ranked tennis players tended to have a first coach who took "a special interest in the tennis player," Bloom's team notes, "usually because he perceived the player as being motivated and willing to work hard, rather than because of any special physical abilities."

In the accounting classroom, looking for motivation and work ethic, not only intellectual ability, is part of what has made C. J. Skender so successful in recognizing talent. When Skender bet Beth Traynham that she would pass the CPA exam, it wasn't because she was unusually gifted in accounting. It was because he noticed "how hard she worked all semester." When Skender recognized that Reggie Love had promise, whereas others wrote him off as just another jock, it was because Love "worked diligently, and was always prepared for class," Skender says. "He was interested in learning and bettering himself." When Skender encouraged Marie Arcuri, it was because she was "the most involved and committed individual I have ever met. Her persistence set her apart."

The psychologist Angela Duckworth calls this [*grit*](#): having passion and perseverance toward long-term goals. Her research shows that above and beyond intelligence and aptitude, gritty people—by virtue of their interest, focus, and drive—achieve higher performance. "Persistence is incredibly important," says psychologist Tom Kolditz, a brigadier general who headed up behavioral sciences and leadership at the U.S. Military Academy for a dozen years. The standard selection rate for Army officers to key command positions is 12 percent; Kolditz's former faculty have been selected at rates as high as 75 percent, and he chalks much of it up to selecting candidates based on grit. As George Anders writes in *The Rare Find*, "[you can't take motivation for granted](#)."

Of course, natural talent also matters, but once you have a pool of candidates above the threshold of necessary potential, grit is a major factor that predicts how close they get to achieving their potential. This is why givers focus on gritty people: it's where givers have the greatest return on their investment, the most meaningful and lasting impact. And along with investing their time in motivating gritty people, givers like Skender strive to cultivate grit in the first place. "Setting high expectations is so important," Skender says. "You have to push people, make them stretch and do more than they think possible. When they take my tests, I want them thinking it was the toughest exam they've ever seen in their lives. It makes them better learners." To encourage effort, he gives them a half dozen past exams for practice. "They need to make a significant investment, and it pays off. Forcing them to work harder than they ever have in their lives benefits them in the long run."

One of the keys to cultivating grit is making the task at hand more interesting and motivating. In Bloom's study, across the board, the talented musicians and athletes were initially taught by givers, teachers who

liked children and rewarded them with praise, signs of approval, or even candy when they did anything right. They were extremely encouraging. They were enthusiastic about the talent field and what they had to teach these children. In

many cases . . . they treated the child as a friend of the family might. Perhaps the major quality of these teachers was that they made the initial learning very pleasant and rewarding.

This description could have been written about Skender. At first glance, he seems to fit the stereotype of an accounting whiz.* But at various stages in his life, Skender aspired to be a disc jockey, musician, actor, talk show host, and stand-up comedian. Set foot in his classroom, and you'll see that he hasn't quite given up on these dreams. True to his compulsive nature and eclectic taste, he punctuates his courses with entertaining routines to keep his students engaged, playing four songs at the start of each class and tossing candy bars to the first students who shout out the correct answers to music trivia. This is how a poster of a rapper ended up on his wall. "If you want to engage your audience, if you really want to grab their attention, you have to know the world they live in, the music they listen to, the movies they watch," he explains. "To most of these kids, accounting is like a root canal. But when they hear me quote Usher or Cee Lo Green, they say to themselves, 'Whoa, did that fat old white-haired guy just say what I thought he said?' And then you've got 'em."

By cultivating interest in accounting, Skender believes that his students will be more likely to invest the time and energy necessary to master the discipline. "C. J. is the epitome of someone who is empathetic," Reggie Love says. "He knows more about music than anyone, and he's always able to weave it into the lecture to help people connect with the material. When you think about having to take a hard course, which typically isn't very interesting, having to keep up with it is challenging. C. J. made it interesting, and I ended up working harder as a result." Love earned an A in Skender's class. David Moltz, a former student of Skender's who works at Google, elaborates that Skender "helps every single student (and person) he comes across in any way possible. He sacrifices hundreds of hours of his personal life to make an impact on the lives of students and teach as many of them as possible. He goes out of his way to make everyone that he engages with feel special."

Throwing Good Money After Bad Talent

Because they see potential all around them, givers end up investing a lot of their time in encouraging and developing people to achieve this potential. These investments don't always pay off; some candidates lack the raw talent, and others don't sustain their passion or maintain the requisite level of grit. Skender once wrote more than one hundred recommendation letters for a student who was applying to graduate programs outside of accounting. She was rejected by all of the programs in her first year, and she decided to apply again, so he dutifully rewrote the recommendation letters. When the schools turned her down once more, Skender revised his recommendation letters for a third year in a row. Finally, after three strikes, Skender encouraged her to pursue a different route.

If Skender were more of a taker or a matcher, would he have given up sooner, saving his own time and the student's? Do givers overinvest in people who possess loads of passion but fall short on aptitude, and how do they manage their priorities to focus on people who show promise while investing less in those who don't? To find out, there's nowhere better to look than professional basketball, where the annual NBA draft tests talent experts on an international stage.

The late [Stu Inman](#) is remembered as the man behind two of the worst draft mistakes in the history of the National Basketball Association. In 1972, the Portland Trail Blazers had the first pick in the draft. Inman was serving as the director of player personnel, and he picked center LaRue Martin, who turned out to be a disappointment, averaging just over five points and four rebounds per game in four seasons with the Blazers. In drafting Martin, Inman passed up two of the greatest players in NBA history. The second pick that year was Bob McAdoo, who scored more points in his first season than Martin did in his entire career. McAdoo was named Rookie of the Year, and two years later, he was the NBA's Most Valuable Player. In his fourteen-year NBA career, McAdoo won the league scoring title twice, played on two championship teams, and made five All-Star teams. In that draft, Inman also missed out on Julius Erving—better known as Dr. J.—who was selected twelfth. Erving ended up leading his teams to three championships, winning four MVP awards, making sixteen All-Star teams, and becoming one of the top five leading scorers in the history of professional basketball. Both McAdoo and Erving are members of the Basketball Hall of Fame.

A dozen years later, after being promoted to general manager of the Blazers, Stu Inman had the chance to redeem himself. In the 1984 NBA draft, Inman had the second pick. He chose another center, Sam Bowie, who was over seven feet tall, but athletic and coordinated: he could shoot, pass, and steal, not to mention block shots and grab rebounds. But Bowie never lived up to his potential. When he retired from basketball, ESPN named him the worst draft pick in the history of North American professional sports. In 2003, *Sports Illustrated*, whose cover Bowie had graced years earlier, called him the second-biggest draft flop in the history of the NBA. The biggest? LaRue Martin.

In selecting Bowie second, Inman passed up on a shooting guard from North Carolina named Michael Jordan. With the third pick, the Chicago Bulls selected Jordan, and the rest is history. After being named Rookie of the Year, Jordan racked up six championships, ten scoring titles, and eleven MVP awards while making fourteen All-Star teams and averaging more points than any player ever. He was recognized as the greatest North American athlete of the twentieth century by ESPN.

Inman recognized Jordan's potential, but the Blazers already had two strong guards. They needed

a center, so he drafted Sam Bowie. With that choice, he didn't just miss out on Michael Jordan; he also passed up future Hall of Famers Charles Barkley (drafted fifth) and John Stockton (drafted sixteenth). It was bad enough that Inman chose Martin over McAdoo and Erving, and Bowie over Jordan, Barkley, and Stockton. But drafting professional basketball players is at best an imperfect science, and even great managers and coaches make mistakes.

What was worse was that the Blazers held on to both players far longer than they should have. They kept LaRue Martin for four seasons, and by the time they decided to trade him, he had virtually no value. The Blazers couldn't even get an actual player in exchange for Martin—they gave him away in exchange for “future considerations” from the Seattle SuperSonics, who ended up letting him go before the season even started. That was the end of Martin's basketball career, and it was an embarrassing outcome for Inman. “It was a sore subject,” said Jack Ramsay, who was the Blazers' coach in Martin's last year and now serves as an ESPN analyst. “Because LaRue couldn't play. He was trying to make the team when I got there, but we had no place for him. He had no offensive game. And he wasn't a rebounder or shot blocker even though he was six-eleven. So he had no skills.” The Blazers followed a similar path with Sam Bowie. In 1989, after five lackluster seasons, the Blazers finally traded Bowie to the New Jersey Nets. Why did the Blazers hold on to Sam Bowie and LaRue Martin for so long?

Stu Inman was widely known as a giver. After playing college basketball and coaching high school basketball for a few years, Inman made the leap to college coach, eventually becoming the head coach at his alma mater, San Jose State. In this role, Inman seemed to prioritize players' interests ahead of his own success. One of Inman's star recruits was Tommie Smith, an exceptional athlete who came to San Jose State to run track and play football and basketball. On the freshman basketball team, Smith was the top scorer and rebounder, so in his sophomore year, he began practicing with the varsity basketball team under Inman. One day, Smith came by Inman's office and announced that he was going to quit basketball to focus on track. “I thought he was going to blow up at me,” Smith writes, “but he didn't. Coach Inman said, ‘Okay, Tom, I understand,’ he shook my hand and told me to be sure to come by to see him whenever I wanted to, and that I was always welcome back if I changed my mind. That was the greatest thing in the world for me.”

It wasn't so great for Inman. Smith's speed could have added a great deal to the San Jose State basketball team; a few years later, in 1968, Smith won the Olympic gold medal in the 200-meter dash, setting a world record. But Inman had wanted what was best for Smith. Along with letting top talent walk away, Inman made room for gritty players even if they lacked talent. When a skinny white player named Terry Murphy tried out for the varsity team, Inman respected his work ethic and invited him on board. Murphy recalls being one of the worst players Inman had ever coached: “I scored four points the whole year.”

Despite this lackluster performance, Inman told Murphy, “I'm never gonna cut you, you're enthusiastic and you play hard and you're a good guy.” Inman was “continually giving advice to any basketball junkie who sought it,” writes Wayne Thompson, a reporter who covered the Blazers throughout Inman's tenure. He couldn't help it: “Teaching at any level on any subject is the most rewarding thing you can do,” Inman told Thompson. “I just love to see the expression on the face of a student who gets it for the first time. Just watching the learning process come to full bloom gives me such a rush.”

Once Inman developed a positive impression of players, was he too committed to teaching and

developing them, so much that he invested in motivated players even if they lacked the requisite talent? In the classroom, C. J. Skender can afford to dedicate his time to students who demonstrate interest and drive, as he can teach and mentor a large number of students each semester. Conversely, in professional basketball and most work organizations, we face more limits: making a bet on one person's potential means passing on others.

Inman had made a commitment to developing LaRue Martin and Sam Bowie. If Inman had been more of a taker, doesn't it seem obvious that he would have cut his losses much more quickly and moved on to other players? The moment he realized that Martin and Bowie weren't contributing to his team's success, a taker wouldn't feel any sense of responsibility to them. And if Inman had been more of a matcher, wouldn't he have been more willing to let them go? Surely a matcher would grow frustrated that his investments in Martin and Bowie were not being reciprocated or rewarded.

It might seem that givers have a harder time letting go. But in reality, the exact opposite is true. It turns out that givers are the *least* vulnerable to the mistake of overinvesting in people—and that being a giver is what prevented Stu Inman from making far worse mistakes.

Facing the Mirror: Looking Good or Doing Good?

Barry Staw is a world-renowned organizational behavior professor at the University of California at Berkeley, and he has spent his career trying to understand why people make bad decisions in organizations. In an ingenious study, Staw and Ha Hoang collected data on all 240-plus players who were picked in the first two rounds of the NBA draft between 1980 and 1986, in hopes of seeing what effect draft position had on a player's career. They measured each player's performance with a series of different metrics: scoring (points per minute, field goal percentage, and free throw percentage), toughness (rebounds and blocks per minute), and quickness (assists and steals per minute). Staw and Hoang controlled for each player's performance on all of these metrics, as well as for the player's injuries and illnesses, whether the player was a guard, forward, or center, and the quality of the player's team based on win/loss records. Then they examined how much time on the court the players received and how long their teams kept them before trading them, to see if teams made the mistake of overinvesting in players just because they drafted them early.

The results produced a devastating conclusion: [teams couldn't let go of their big bets](#). They stuck with the players whom they drafted early, giving them more playing time and refusing to trade them even if they played poorly. After taking performance out of the equation, players who were drafted earlier still spent more minutes on the court and were less likely to be traded. For every slot higher in the draft, players were given an average of twenty-two more minutes in their second season, and their teams were still investing more in them by their fifth season, when each draft slot higher accounted for eleven more minutes on the court. And for every slot higher in the draft, players were 3 percent less likely to be traded.

This study is a classic case of what Staw calls *escalation of commitment* to a losing course of action. Over the past four decades, extensive research led by Staw shows that once people make an initial investment of time, energy, or resources, when it goes sour, they're at risk for increasing their investment. Gamblers in the hole believe that if they just play one more hand of poker, they'll be able to recover their losses or even win big. Struggling entrepreneurs think that if they just give their start-ups a little more sweat, they can turn it around. When an investment doesn't pay off, even if the expected value is negative, we invest more.

Economists explain this behavior using a concept known as the "sunk cost fallacy": when estimating the value of a future investment, we have trouble ignoring what we've already invested in the past. Sunk costs are part of the story, but new research shows that other factors matter more. To figure out [why and when escalation of commitment happens](#), researchers at Michigan State University analyzed 166 different studies. Sunk costs do have a small effect—decision makers are biased in favor of their previous investments—but three other factors are more powerful. One is anticipated regret: will I be sorry that I didn't give this another chance? The second is project completion: if I keep investing, I can finish the project. But the single most powerful factor is *ego threat*: if I don't keep investing, I'll look and feel like a fool. In response to ego threat, people invest more, hoping to turn the project into a success so they can prove to others—and themselves—that they were right all along.

In one study led by Staw, when [California bank customers defaulted on loans](#), the managers who originally funded the loans struggled to let go and write off the losses. "Bankers who have been

closely associated with decisions to fund problem loans are the ones to show the greatest difficulty in acknowledging the subsequent risks of these loans and the likelihood of default,” Staw and colleagues write. The study showed that when managers who originally funded the problem loans left the bank, the new managers were significantly more likely to write the loans off. The new managers had no personal responsibility for the problem loans, so their egos weren’t under threat; they didn’t feel compelled to justify the original decisions as wise.

Research suggests that due to their susceptibility to ego threat, takers are more vulnerable to escalation of commitment than givers. Imagine that you’re running an aircraft company, and you have to decide whether or not to [invest \\$1 million in a plane](#) that’s invisible to radar technology. You find out that the project is not doing well financially, and a competitor has already finished a better model. But you’ve made significant investments: the project is 50 percent complete, and you’ve already spent \$5 million and eighteen months working on it. How likely are you to invest the extra \$1 million?

In this study by Henry Moon at London Business School, before making their investment decisions, 360 people completed a questionnaire that included giver statements such as “I keep my promises” and taker statements such as “I try to get others to do my duties.” The takers were significantly more likely to invest the extra \$1 million than the givers. They felt responsible for an investment that was going bad, so they committed more to protect their pride and save face. As University of South Carolina management professors Bruce Meglino and Audrey Korsgaard explain, “although the organization itself might be better off if the decision were abandoned, such action would cause the decision maker to incur significant personal costs (e.g., loss of career mobility, loss of reputation). Because escalating his or her commitment allows the decision maker to [keep the prospect of failure hidden](#), such behavior is personally rational” from the perspective of a taker.

The givers, on the other hand, were primarily concerned about protecting other people and the organization, so they were more willing to admit their initial mistakes and de-escalate their commitment. Other studies show that people actually make more accurate and creative decisions when they’re [choosing on behalf of others](#) than themselves. When people make decisions in a self-focused state, they’re more likely to be biased by ego threat and often agonize over trying to find a choice that’s ideal in all possible dimensions. When people focus on others, as givers do naturally, they’re less likely to worry about egos and miniscule details; they look at the big picture and prioritize what matters most to others.

Armed with this understanding, it’s worth revisiting the story of Stu Inman. As a giver, although he felt invested in the players he drafted first, he felt a stronger sense of responsibility to the team. “Stu was a kind person, considerate of other people’s feelings,” Wayne Thompson told me. “But he never let that influence selections. If he didn’t think a guy could play, he put his arm around him and wished him well.” Inman wasn’t the one responsible for keeping Sam Bowie on board; Inman left the Blazers in 1986, just two years after drafting Bowie. A taker might have continued to defend the bad decision, but Inman admitted his error in choosing Bowie over Jordan. “All our scouts thought Bowie was the answer to our problems, and I did, too,” Inman said, but “it was a mistake.”*

Inman didn’t escalate his commitment to LaRue Martin either. Although the Blazers kept Martin for four seasons, Inman and his colleagues took early action in response to Martin’s poor performance. In his rookie season, when there were clear signs that Martin was floundering, a taker might have given him extra playing time in an effort to justify choosing him ahead of Bob McAdoo and Julius Erving. But this wasn’t what happened. The Blazers granted the starting center position to

the hardworking Lloyd Neal, who was just 6'7", putting Martin at backup. In his rookie season, Martin averaged less than thirteen minutes per game on the court, compared with thirty-two for McAdoo and forty-two for Erving. In his second season, Martin continued to underperform, and instead of escalating commitment by giving him more time on the court, the Blazers gave him less—under eleven minutes per game, whereas McAdoo played forty-three and Erving played over forty. Inman and his colleagues managed to overcome the temptation to keep betting on Martin.

A major reason why givers are less vulnerable than takers to escalation of commitment has to do with responses to feedback, as demonstrated in research by Audrey Korsgaard, Bruce Meglino, and Scott Lester on how givers and takers react to information about their performance. In one study, people filled out a survey indicating whether they were givers or takers and made ten decisions about how to solve problems. Then, all participants received a performance score and a suggestion to delegate their authority more when making decisions. The score was randomly assigned so that half of the participants learned that their performance was above average, whereas the other half were told that they were below average. Then, all participants made ten more decisions. Would they use the suggestion to delegate more?

When they believed they were above average, the takers followed the suggestion, delegating 30 percent more often. But when they believed they were below average, the takers only delegated 15 percent more often. Once they felt criticized, they were less willing to accept the recommendation for improvement. They protected their pride by refusing to believe that they made poor decisions, discounting the negative feedback. The givers, on the other hand, accepted the criticism and followed the suggestion. Even when they received negative feedback indicating that they were below average, the givers delegated 30 percent more often.

In escalation situations, takers often struggle to face the reality that an initial choice has gone bad. Takers tend to “discount social information and performance feedback that does not support their favorable view of themselves,” write Meglino and Korsgaard, whereas givers “may be more apt to accept and act on social information without carefully evaluating the personal consequences.” Givers focus more on the interpersonal and organizational consequences of their decisions, accepting a blow to their pride and reputations in the short term in order to make better choices in the long term.

This receptivity to negative feedback helped Stu Inman recognize when he had made a bad investment. Inman was admired around the league for his openness to criticism. Many coaches “took issue with my more incendiary critiques,” writes reporter Steve Duin, but “they never bothered Inman,” who was “patient and generous,” and “one of the most gracious men ever associated with the NBA.” When LaRue Martin underperformed, the Blazers coach at the time, Jack McCloskey, voiced his concerns to Inman. “He worked hard and was a very nice young man, but he wasn’t skilled. It was that simple. I tried to develop his skills around the basket, and he wasn’t an outside player. He didn’t have the skills to be the number-one pick.” A taker might have rejected the negative feedback, but Inman listened to it.

After Martin’s second season, in 1974, the Blazers landed the first pick in the draft again. Having de-escalated their commitment to Martin, they needed another center to replace him, so Inman drafted one, a young man from UCLA named Bill Walton. In his rookie season, Walton was the starting center, averaging thirty-three minutes a game, roughly twice as many as Martin in the backup position. This arrangement continued for another year, after which Inman unloaded Martin.

The next season was 1976–1977, and Walton led the Blazers to the NBA championship over the

Philadelphia 76ers, who were led by Julius Erving. Walton was the Finals MVP, and the next year, he was the league MVP. After he retired, he made the Basketball Hall of Fame and was named one of the fifty greatest players in NBA history. Inman was the architect of the 1977 championship team, which had been last in the division the previous year, and remains the only team in the Blazers' four-decade history to win the title. According to Jack Ramsay, who coached the winning team, Inman was "never in the spotlight, and never taking proper credit for the team he assembled."

Glimpsing Glimmers in Chunks of Coal

As a giver, Inman built this championship team with an approach that mirrored C. J. Skender's: seeing potential in players where others didn't. "Inman wanted a complete portfolio on everybody he was interested in," writes Wayne Thompson. "No doubt that is what made him so successful in finding diamonds in the rough." Half of the top six scorers on the championship team—and five of the top nine—were drafted late by Inman, in the second or third round. "He was way ahead of the curve in seeing potential," noted Steve Duin. "Stu, in the subculture of basketball gurus, was near the apex. He was considered a genius," said Mavericks president Norm Sonju. In a chronicle of the 1984 draft, Filip Bondy writes that Inman was viewed by many as "the best personnel man in the league. He was so good, so respected, that other clubs would track his scouting missions and listen very carefully to rumors about which players might interest him."

In the 1970s, most basketball teams were focusing heavily on observable physical talents such as speed, strength, coordination, agility, and vertical leap. Inman thought it was also important to pay attention to the inner attributes of players, so he decided to begin evaluating their psychological makeup. Before a draft, along with reviewing a player's statistics and watching him play, Inman wanted to understand him as a person. He would watch players closely during the pregame warm-up to see how hard they worked, and he would interview their coaches, family members, friends, and teachers about issues of motivation, mind-set, and integrity. According to the *Oregonian*, "Inman made his reputation by finding undervalued players. . . . His eye for talent was as sharp as his feel for people. He wanted players whose character and intelligence were as high as their vertical jumps."

In 1970, Inman joined the Blazers, then a brand-new NBA team, as chief talent scout. That summer, he held an open tryout for people to put their basketball skills to the test. It was partially a public relations stunt to generate local excitement about basketball, but Inman was also looking for players who had gone overlooked by other teams. None of the guys from the open tryout made the team, but Inman's fascination with unlikely candidates would bear fruit several years later. In 1975, with the twenty-fifth pick in the second round of the draft, Inman selected a little-known Jewish forward named [Bob Gross](#). Coaches and fans thought it was a mistake. Gross had played college basketball at Seattle, averaging ten points a game, and then transferred to Long Beach State, where he averaged just six and a half points in his junior year. "The story of Bob Gross's collegiate and professional basketball life was that nobody noticed him," wrote Frank Coffey in a book about the Blazers, "until they really started looking hard."

Inman happened to see a game between Long Beach and Michigan State, and his interest was piqued when Gross hustled to block a shot on what should have been an easy Spartan layup on a fast break. Inman took a closer look and saw more evidence of Gross's work ethic: he more than doubled his scoring average from his junior to senior year, when he put in more than sixteen points a game. Inman "discovered a jewel, a consistent, hardworking, extraordinarily effective basketball player," Coffey wrote. Gross was praised by one of his college coaches for "unselfish dedication to the team." When the Blazers made the Finals in his third NBA season, Gross delivered, pouring in an average of seventeen points per game. In the pivotal games five and six, he guarded Julius Erving and led the Blazers by scoring twenty-five and twenty-four points. According to Bill Walton, "Bob Gross was the 'grease guy' for that team. He made it flow . . . Bob would run relentlessly, guard and defend . . .

Without Bob . . . Portland could not have won the championship.”

Inman recognized that givers were undervalued by many teams, since they didn’t hog the spotlight or use the flashiest of moves. His philosophy was that “It’s not what a player is, but what he can become . . . that will allow him to grow.” When Inman saw a guy practice with grit and play like a giver, he classified him as a diamond in the rough. In fact, there’s a close connection between grit and giving. In my own research, I’ve found that because of their dedication to others, [givers are willing to work harder and longer](#) than takers and matchers. Even when practice is no longer enjoyable, givers continue exerting effort out of a sense of responsibility to their team.

This pattern can be seen in many other industries. Consider Russell Simmons, the cofounder of the hip-hop label [Def Jam Records](#), which launched the careers of LL Cool J and the Beastie Boys. Simmons is often called the godfather of hip-hop, and he was giving away music for free as early as 1978, long before most labels started doing that. When I asked him about his success, he attributed it to finding and promoting givers. “Good givers are great getters; they make everybody better,” Simmons explains. One of his favorite givers is Kevin Liles, who started working for free as an intern and rose all the way up to become president of Def Jam. As an intern, Liles was the first to arrive at work and the last to leave. As a promotion director, Liles was responsible for one region, but he went out of his way to promote other regions too. “Everybody started to look at Kevin as a leader, because they all looked to him for direction. He gave until people couldn’t live without him.” In selecting and promoting talent, Simmons writes, “The most important quality you can show me is a commitment to giving.”

Stu Inman knew that gritty givers would be willing to put the good of the team above their own personal interests, working hard to fulfill the roles for which they were needed. In the fabled 1984 draft, after selecting Sam Bowie, Inman took a forward named Jerome Kersey in the second round with the forty-sixth pick overall. Kersey came from Longwood College, a little-known Division II school in Virginia, yet blossomed into an excellent NBA player. A Longwood sports administrator said that Kersey “had the best work ethic of anyone that’s ever been here,” which is what led Inman to recognize his promise when few NBA insiders did. The next year, in 1985, Inman found another hidden gem of a point guard with the twenty-fourth pick in the draft: Terry Porter, a gritty giver who earned acclaim for his hustle and selflessness. He made two All-Star teams with the Blazers and played seventeen strong NBA seasons, and in 1993, he won the J. Walter Kennedy Citizenship Award, awarded annually to one player, coach, or trainer who demonstrates “outstanding service and dedication to the community.” Along with providing tickets for disadvantaged children to attend games and promoting graduation parties free of drugs and alcohol, Porter has given extensively to boys’ and girls’ clubs, working in partnership with his former teammate Jerome Kersey.

Perhaps Inman’s best investment occurred in the 1983 draft, when the Blazers had the fourteenth pick. Inman selected shooting guard [Clyde Drexler](#), who was passed up by other teams because he wasn’t regarded as a very strong shooter. Although he was the fifth shooting guard chosen, Drexler is now widely regarded as the steal of the 1983 draft. He outscored all other players in the draft, averaging more than 20 points a game in his career, and was the only player in that draft to make the all-NBA team, at least one All-Star game (he made ten of them), the Olympics, and the Basketball Hall of Fame. By the time he retired, Drexler joined legends Oscar Robertson and John Havlicek as the third player in NBA history to rack up more than 20,000 points, 6,000 rebounds, and 3,000 assists. Like Walton, Drexler was designated one of the fifty greatest players of all time. How did

Inman know Drexler would be such a star when so many other teams let him slide by?

As a giver, Inman was open to outside advice. While at San Jose State, Inman met Bruce Ogilvie, a pioneer in sports psychology who “came onto the sports scene when psychologists were referred to as ‘shrinks’ and any player going to visit one was seen as a problem.” Most general managers and coaches avoided psychologists like Ogilvie, approaching the so-called science skeptically. Some viewed psychological assessment as irrelevant; others worried that it would threaten their own expertise and standing.

Whereas takers often strive to be the smartest people in the room, givers are more receptive to expertise from others, even if it challenges their own beliefs. Inman embraced Ogilvie and his methods with open arms, requiring players to undergo several hours of evaluation before the draft. Inman worked with Ogilvie to assess players on their selflessness, desire to succeed, willingness to persevere, receptivity to being coached, and dedication to the sport. Through these assessments, Inman could develop a deep understanding of a player’s tendencies toward grit and giving. “Other NBA teams were taking psychological looks at draftable players, but none to the degree that we used it and trusted it,” Inman said. “You had to like the talent before you would consider it in your evaluation. But it provided a clear barometer as to whether the guy would fulfill his potential.”

When Ogilvie assessed Drexler, Inman was impressed with his psychological profile. Inman interviewed the coaches who had seen Drexler play at Houston, and there was a consistent theme: Drexler played like a giver. “Clyde was the glue on that team. I was taken by the almost unanimous reaction from other coaches in that league,” Inman explained. “They said he did what he had to do to win a game. His ego never interfered with his will to win.” According to Bucky Buckwalter, who was then a scout, “There was some reluctance from teams . . . He was not a great shooter.” But Inman and his team decided that Drexler could “learn to shoot from the perimeter, or somehow make up for it with his other talents.” Inman was right: Drexler “turned out to be a more skilled player . . . than I would have expected,” Buckwalter said.

Even Inman’s bad bets on the basketball court have gone on to success elsewhere; the man knew a giver when he saw one. LaRue Martin has worked at UPS for twenty-five years, most recently as the community services director in Illinois. In 2008, he received a letter out of the blue from former Blazers owner Larry Weinberg: “you certainly are a wonderful role model in the work you are doing for UPS.” Martin has played basketball with President Obama, and in 2011, he was elected to the board of directors of the Retired Players Association. “I would love to be able to give back,” Martin said.

And remember Terry Murphy, Inman’s worst player at San Jose State? Inman gave Murphy a chance but didn’t see a future for him in basketball, so he encouraged him to go out for volleyball. Inman was spot-on about his work ethic: Murphy ended up making the U.S. national volleyball team. But Murphy didn’t leave basketball behind altogether: in 1986, to raise money for the Special Olympics, he started a three-on-three street basketball tournament in Dallas. By 1992, Hoop It Up had more than 150,000 players and a million fans. Five years later, there were 302 events in twenty-seven different countries, raising millions of dollars for charity.

Perhaps the best testament to Inman’s success is that although he missed out on [Michael Jordan](#) as a player, he outdid Jordan as a talent evaluator. As a basketball executive, Jordan has developed a reputation that conveys more taker cues than giver. This was foreshadowed on the court, where Jordan was known as self-absorbed and egotistical. As Jordan himself once remarked, “To be

successful you have to be selfish.” Coaches had to walk on eggshells to give him constructive feedback, and in his Hall of Fame speech, Jordan was widely criticized for thanking few people and vilifying those who doubted him. Back in his playing days, he was a vocal advocate for a greater share of team revenues going to players. Now, as an owner, he has pushed for greater revenue to owners, presumably to put more money in his own pockets.*

When it comes to betting on talent for too long, Jordan’s moves as an executive offer a fascinating contrast with Inman’s. When Jordan became president of basketball operations for the Washington Wizards, he used the first pick in the 2001 draft to select center Kwame Brown. Brown was straight out of high school, loaded with talent, but seemed to lack grit, and never came anywhere near his potential. Later, he would be called the second-biggest NBA draft bust of the decade and one of the one hundred worst picks in sports history. After Brown, the second and third picks in the drafts were also centers, and they fared far better. The second pick was Tyson Chandler, who went on to make the 2012 U.S. Olympic team. The third pick was Pau Gasol, another young center less than a year and a half older than Brown. Gasol won the Rookie of the Year award, and in the coming decade, he would make four All-Star teams, win two NBA championships, and earn the J. Walter Kennedy Citizenship Award. Both Gasol and Chandler swamped Brown’s performance in scoring, rebounding, and blocking shots.

Brown’s disappointing results appeared to threaten Jordan’s ego. When Jordan came out of retirement to play for the Wizards alongside Brown, he routinely berated and belittled Brown, whose poor performance was hurting the team—and making Jordan’s draft choice look foolish. In his first season, Brown put up paltry numbers, averaging less than five points and four rebounds per game. Yet in his second season, Brown’s minutes on the court doubled.

Jordan was fired from the Wizards after that season, but he wasn’t ready to give up on Brown. Nearly a decade later, in 2010, Brown signed a contract with the Charlotte Bobcats, a team owned by none other than Michael Jordan. “Michael was very much a part of this,” Brown’s agent said. “He wanted this to happen.”

By that point, Brown had played ten seasons for four different teams, averaging under seven points and six rebounds in more than five hundred games. In his previous season, he was spending just thirteen minutes on the court. When Brown joined Jordan’s Bobcats, his playing time was doubled to twenty-six minutes a game. The Bobcats gave Brown more minutes than he had played in the prior two seasons combined, yet he continued to struggle, averaging under eight points and seven rebounds. Jordan “wanted to give Kwame another opportunity,” Brown’s agent said. “There’s been so much written about the fact that this was Michael’s first pick and so much criticism directed at both of them when it didn’t work out.” A giver might admit the mistake and move on, but Jordan was still trying to turn the bad investment around. “I love Michael, but he just has not done a good job,” says friend and former Olympic teammate Charles Barkley. “I don’t think Michael has hired enough people around him who will disagree.” Under Jordan’s direction, in 2012, the Bobcats finished with the worst winning percentage in NBA history.

Conversely, Inman’s teams achieved surprising levels of success. In addition to building the 1977 team that went from last place to the title in just a year with a large number of unknowns, Inman’s draft picks made the Blazers a formidable team for years to come. After he left the Blazers in 1986, the team flourished under the leadership of Drexler, Porter, and Kersey. The three hidden gems, discovered by Inman in three consecutive years, led the Blazers to the Finals twice. Once again,

Inman rarely received the credit. To the casual fan, it may appear that Inman was a failure, but basketball insiders regard him as one of the finest talent evaluators the sport has ever seen. Inman's experience, coupled with research evidence, reveals that givers don't excel only at recognizing and developing talent; they're also surprisingly good at moving on when their bets don't work out.

Stu Inman spent the last four years of his life volunteering as an assistant coach for the Lake Oswego High School basketball team in Oregon. "He had them to a T," said Lake Oswego's head coach. "Not only did he have them as basketball players, he had their characters, too. He took time not to prejudge people but to see them as they really are." At Lake Oswego, Stu Inman helped to groom a young player named Kevin Love, who has gone on to pursue the legacy that Sam Bowie and LaRue Martin never fulfilled: thrive as a big man who can shoot. As a 6'10" center, Love has made the U.S. Olympic team and two All-Star teams in his first four seasons, been named the NBA's most improved player, and won the three-point shooting championship.

"If you choose to [champion great talent](#), you will be picking one of the most altruistic things a person can do," writes George Anders. "In any given year, quick-hit operators may make more money and win more recognition, at least briefly. Over time, though, that dynamic reverses."

5

The Power of Powerless Communication

How to Be Modest and Influence People

Speak softly, but carry a big stick.

—Theodore Roosevelt, U.S. president

[Dave Walton](#) took a deep breath. He was an employment law expert who specialized in trade secrets and employee competition cases. As a partner at the firm Cozen O'Connor, Dave was one of the youngest lawyers to be elected shareholder, and he had been named a Pennsylvania Super Lawyer—Rising Star for several years. But he was about to stand up and give his first closing argument in front of a jury.

It was 2008, and Dave was representing a company that owned Acme-Hardesty, a Pennsylvania castor oil distributor that received its supplies from Jayant Oils and Derivatives in Mumbai, India. In December 2006, the CEO of Acme's parent company was informed that Jayant was setting up a U.S. office and sales organization, and would no longer supply Acme with castor oil. During the following month, Acme executives learned that Jayant was planning to sell castor oil products directly to customers in the U.S. market, competing with Acme for business.

In the summer of 2006, two Acme employees had jumped ship to Jayant and helped them set up the competing company. Acme's parent company filed suit against Jayant and the two employees, accusing them of stealing trade secrets and confidential information.

Dave prepared diligently and spoke passionately. He presented evidence that in March 2006, while still working for Acme, the employees agreed to financial terms to help Jayant start the competing distributor. In June, each of the two received initial payments of \$50,000 from Jayant for consulting services.

The employees gave notice that they were leaving and went straight to India without informing Acme of their new positions. Dave argued that in India, they incorporated knowledge from Acme into

Jayant's business plan. One employee provided Jayant with a list of U.S. customer prospects that he was paid to develop for Acme, Dave claimed, and the Jayant president admitted that Acme's documents were used to generate projections for investors. Dave further argued that while the employees were setting up the plan for Jayant in India, they used false e-mail aliases that gave them continued access to Acme's orders.

The defendants were represented by three different prominent law firms, and Dave's opponent in the trial was highly articulate. He had twenty-five years of experience, a law degree from Columbia and an undergraduate degree from Cornell, and a slew of awards under his belt, including being named one of the top one hundred lawyers in Pennsylvania and the litigator of the week for the entire country. One source described him as an "accomplished, knowledgeable, and sophisticated lawyer who is amazing on his feet in court."

The defense attorney was eloquent and polished, telling the jury that Jayant engaged in legitimate competition, as it was entitled to do. Acme did lose some customers, the lawyer admitted, but it wasn't because the employees did anything wrong. Acme was the middle man distributing Jayant's castor oil products to customers. By cutting out the middleman, Jayant was able to sell the products more cheaply, which is precisely the point of fair competition. The employees were being treated poorly at Acme: one described it as a "hellhole," the worst job of her life. The defense attorney nailed his key arguments, and he questioned the credibility of Dave's main witnesses. Dave was impressed with the skill that the defense attorney demonstrated. "He was really good. He made better arguments than we anticipated."

Dave knew the trial could go either way. On the one hand, he had painted a compelling portrait that Jayant and the two employees were guilty. On the other hand, this was a high-pressure, high-profile case. It was Dave's first time taking the lead in a jury trial; he was by far the youngest lawyer there. During one of his examinations, an old foe reared its head: Dave started stammering. This happened a few more times, and it signaled that he lacked confidence.

Dave was particularly concerned about the effect on one particular juror. During the trial, this juror made it clear that he was in favor of the defendants: he felt that Jayant and the employees had done nothing wrong. The juror responded enthusiastically to the defense attorney, nodding appreciatively throughout his arguments and laughing loudly at his jokes. In contrast, when Dave spoke, the juror avoided eye contact, smirked, and made dismissive gestures. Throughout the trial, the juror came to court wearing blue jeans. But on the day of the closing arguments, the juror arrived wearing a suit and tie. When Dave watched the juror waltz in, his heart sank. The juror wanted to be the foreman, and he was obviously vying to turn the jury against Dave's case.

Dave finished his closing, and the jury went into deliberation. When they came out, the antagonistic juror walked out first. He had been elected foreman, and he read the verdict.

The jury ruled in favor of Dave's client, to the tune of \$7 million. Dave's victory set a record for the largest trade-secret verdict in Pennsylvania. There's no doubt that Dave presented a brilliant case, speaking with conviction as a true expert in his field. But there was another factor that gave him the slightest edge.

There's something that separates Dave Walton from other distinguished lawyers—and it's something that he shares with former GE CEO Jack Welch, Vice President Joe Biden, singer Carly Simon, *20/20* anchor John Stossel, actor James Earl Jones, and Bill Walton of the Portland Trail Blazers, who is now a basketball announcer.

They all stutter.

Stuttering is a speech disorder that affects about 1 percent of the population. Growing up, Dave Walton was teased and ridiculed for stuttering. When he graduated from college, he applied for a sales job, but was turned down. “The interviewer told him he would never make it in sales because of his stutter,” his wife Mary says. When Dave decided to apply to law school, many of his friends and family members raised their eyebrows, hoping he wouldn’t have to do any public speaking. In law school, it seemed that their fears were prescient. Dave recalls that during his first mock court argument, the judge started crying. “She felt bad for me.”

Most people see stuttering as a disability, and we marvel at people like Jack Welch and James Earl Jones, whose confident demeanors typically bear little trace of their speech difficulties. But the truth is far more interesting and complex. Many people who stutter end up becoming quite successful, and it’s not always because they have conquered their stuttering. In the trade secrets trial, when Dave stammered and tripped over a couple of arguments, something strange happened.

The jurors *liked* him.

At the end of the trial, several jurors approached him. “They told me that they really respected me because they knew that I had a stutter,” Dave says. “They stressed that my stutter was minor but that they noticed it and that they talked about it. The jurors said they admired my courage in being a trial lawyer.”

Dave didn’t win the trial because of his stutter. But it may have created a stronger connection with the jury, helping to tip the balance in his favor. When the jurors commended him, Dave was “surprised and a little embarrassed . . . My first thought was, ‘I don’t remember stuttering that much.’ As the jurors walked away from me, I realized that I had something that was natural and genuine. It was an epiphany—my stutter could be an advantage.”

In this chapter, I want to explore how Dave Walton’s experience reveals critical but counterintuitive clues about influencing others—and how Dave exemplifies what givers do differently when they seek influence. In *To Sell Is Human*, Daniel Pink argues that our [success depends heavily on influence skills](#). To convince others to buy our products, use our services, accept our ideas, and invest in us, we need to communicate in ways that persuade and motivate. But the best method for influence may not be the one that first comes to mind.

Research suggests that there are two fundamental paths to influence: [dominance and prestige](#). When we establish dominance, we gain influence because others see us as strong, powerful, and authoritative. When we earn prestige, we become influential because others respect and admire us.

These two paths to influence are closely tied to our reciprocity styles. Takers are attracted to, and excel in, gaining dominance. In an effort to claim as much value as possible, they strive to be superior to others. To establish dominance, takers specialize in *powerful communication*: they speak forcefully, raise their voices to assert their authority, express certainty to project confidence, promote their accomplishments, and sell with conviction and pride. They display strength by spreading their arms in dominant poses, raising their eyebrows in challenge, commanding as much physical space as possible, and conveying anger and issuing threats when necessary. In the quest for influence, takers set the tone and control the conversation by sending powerful verbal and nonverbal signals. As a result, takers tend to be much more effective than givers in gaining dominance. But is that the most sustainable path to influence?

When our audiences are skeptical, the more we try to dominate them, the more they resist. Even

with a receptive audience, dominance is a zero-sum game: the more power and authority I have, the less you have. When takers come across someone more dominant, they're at risk of losing their influence. Conversely, prestige isn't zero-sum; there's no limit to the amount of respect and admiration that we can dole out. This means that prestige usually has more lasting value, and it's worth examining how people earn it.

The opposite of a taker's powerful communication style is called *powerless communication*. Powerless communicators tend to speak less assertively, expressing plenty of doubt and relying heavily on advice from others. They talk in ways that signal vulnerability, revealing their weaknesses and making use of disclaimers, hedges, and hesitations. In Western societies, Susan Cain writes in *Quiet*, [people expect us to communicate powerfully](#). We're told that great leaders use "power talk" and "power words" to forcefully convey their messages. By using powerless communication, surely people wind up at a disadvantage when it comes to influence.

Um, well, not quite.

I think.

In this chapter, my aim is to challenge traditional assumptions about the importance of assertiveness and projecting confidence in gaining influence. It turns out this style doesn't always serve us well, and givers instinctively adopt a powerless communication style that proves surprisingly effective in building prestige. I want to trace how givers develop prestige in four domains of influence: presenting, selling, persuading, and negotiating. Because they value the perspectives and interests of others, givers are more inclined toward asking questions than offering answers, talking tentatively than boldly, admitting their weaknesses than displaying their strengths, and seeking advice than imposing their views on others. Is it possible that these forms of powerless communication can become powerful?

Presenting: The Value of Vulnerability

At age twenty-six, two years after finishing my doctorate in organizational psychology, I was asked to teach senior military leaders how to motivate their troops. The military was trying to transition from a command-and-control model to a more collaborative approach, and I happened to be doing research related to the topic. My first assignment was a four-hour class for twenty-three colonels in the U.S. Air Force. They were former fighter pilots, having logged an average of more than 3,500 flight hours and 300 combat hours. Their aircraft of choice: F-16s carrying rockets and precision-guided munitions. And just as *Top Gun* had taught me, they had badass nicknames.

Striker was in charge of more than 53,000 officers and a \$300 million operating budget. Sand Dune was an aerospace engineer who flew combat missions in operations Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom, and Enduring Freedom. Boomer was running programs that cost more than \$15 billion, including unmanned aircraft that could be flown from New Mexico to Afghanistan by remote control.

The colonels were in their forties and fifties—twice my age. They had spent their careers in an organization that rewarded seniority, and I had none. Although I had some relevant knowledge and a doctorate, I was way out of my league, and it showed. At the end of the day, the colonels completed course feedback forms. Two comments were particularly revealing:

- Stealth: “More quality information in audience than on podium.”
- Gunner: “The instructor was very knowledgeable, but not yet experienced enough . . . slightly missed the needs of the audience. The material was very academic . . . I gained very little from the session. I trust the instructor did gain useful insight.”

Others were gentler, but the message still came through loud and clear. Bomber said, “The professors get younger every year,” and Stingray added, “I prefer that my professors be older than I am or I start to believe that I am approaching middle age and we all know that is not true . . . don’t we?”

I had started my presentation to the colonels with powerful communication: I talked confidently about my credentials. This wasn’t how I usually opened in the classroom. In my role as a professor, I’ve always felt a strong sense of responsibility to give to my students, and I tend to be more concerned about connecting with students than establishing my authority. When I teach undergraduates, I open my very first class with a story about my biggest failures. With the Air Force colonels, though, I was worried about credibility, and I only had four hours—instead of my usual four months—to establish it. Deviating from my typical vulnerable style, I adopted a dominant tone in describing my qualifications. But the more I tried to dominate, the more the colonels resisted. I failed to win their respect, and I felt disappointed and embarrassed.

I had another session with Air Force colonels coming up on my schedule, so I decided to try a different opening. Instead of talking confidently about my credentials, I opened with a more powerless, self-deprecating remark:

“I know what some of you are thinking right now:

‘What can I possibly learn from a professor who’s twelve years old?’”

There was a split second of awkward silence, and I held my breath.

Then the room erupted with bursts of laughter. A colonel named Hawk piped up: “Come on, that’s way off base. I’m pretty sure you’re thirteen.” From there, I proceeded to deliver a near carbon copy of my first presentation—after all, the information I had to deliver on motivation hadn’t changed. But afterward, when I looked at the feedback, it differed night and day from my previous session:

- “Spoke with personal experience. He was the right age! High energy; clearly successful already.”
- “Adam was obviously knowledgeable regarding the topic and this translated into his passion and interest. This allowed him to be very effective. One word—EXCELLENT!”
- “Although junior in experience, he dealt with the studies in an interesting way. Good job. Very energetic and dynamic.”
- “I can’t believe Adam is only twelve! He did a great job.”

Powerless communication had made all the difference. Instead of working to establish my credentials, I made myself vulnerable, and called out the elephant in the room. Later, I adopted the same approach when teaching Army generals and Navy flag officers, and it worked just as well. I was using my natural communication style, and it helped me connect with a skeptical audience.

Takers tend to worry that revealing weaknesses will compromise their dominance and authority. Givers are much more [comfortable expressing vulnerability](#): they’re interested in helping others, not gaining power over them, so they’re not afraid of exposing chinks in their armor. By making themselves vulnerable, givers can actually build prestige.

But there’s a twist: expressing vulnerability is only effective if the audience receives other signals establishing the speaker’s competence. In a classic experiment led by the psychologist Elliot Aronson, students listened to one of four tapes of a candidate auditioning for a Quiz Bowl team. Half of the time, the candidate was an expert, getting 92 percent of questions right. The other half of the time, the candidate had only average knowledge, getting 30 percent right.

As expected, audiences favored the expert. But an interesting wrinkle emerged when the tape included a clumsy behavior by the candidate. Dishes crashed, and the candidate said, “Oh, my goodness—I’ve spilled coffee all over my new suit.”

When the average candidate was clumsy, audiences liked him even less.

But when the expert was clumsy, audiences liked him even more.

Psychologists call this the [pratfall effect](#). Spilling a cup of coffee hurt the image of the average candidate: it was just another reason for the audience to dislike him. But the same blunder helped the expert appear human and approachable—instead of superior and distant.* This explains why Dave Walton’s stuttering made a positive impression on the jury. The fact that Dave was willing to make himself vulnerable, putting his stutter out for the world to see, earned their respect and admiration. The jurors liked and trusted him, and they listened carefully to him. This set the stage for Dave to convince them with the substance of his arguments.

Establishing vulnerability is especially important for a lawyer like Dave Walton. Dave has a giver tendency: he spends a great deal of time mentoring junior associates, and he fights passionately for justice on behalf of his clients. But these aren’t the first attributes that a jury sees: his appearance