Adam Grant: Givers and takers - who are the best performers in the workplace?

Midweek View: Successful givers do five-minute favours, looking for ways to offer high benefits to others at a low personal cost

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"There are two kinds of people in the world," said the humorist Robert Benchley: "Those who believe there are two kinds of people in the world, and those who don't." After a decade of research in settings ranging from Google to government and military organisations, I've found that there are

Takers are the people we love to hate, who try to get as much as possible from us without giving anything back. They specialise in critical skills such as shirking and free riding, credit hogging, and self-promoting to make sure they're alone at the top. In contrast, givers enjoy helping others with no strings attached. They often go out of their way to share knowledge, solve problems and make introductions, without seeking anything in return.

You might think like a taker when negotiating your salary, and a giver when mentoring a new recruit, and it's rare for anyone to be purely one or the other. Most of the time, the majority of us are matchers – striving to stay at equilibrium between giving and taking. When someone does us a favour, we expect an equal one back. By matching others evenly, we escape the relationship and reputational damage that torments the takers, while simultaneously protecting ourselves against the exploitation and exhaustion that plague the givers. The matching approach seems like the safest way to live our professional lives, but is it the most effective way to operate?

To answer this question, I analysed studies of success in three very different arenas: engineering, medicine and sales. In each context, researchers gathered data on whether employees tended to operate like takers, givers or matchers, and then collected objective data on their success – productivity and error rates in engineering, grades in medical school, and revenue in sales.

Across all three settings, the givers were the worst performers. The engineers with the lowest productivity and the most errors were those whose colleagues rated them as doing many more favours than they received in return. Similarly, the medical students with the poorest grades, and the sales people with the lowest annual revenue, were those who agreed most strongly with statements like "I love to help others". By putting other people first, the givers ran out of time and energy to complete their own work effectively.

The engineers with the highest productivity and the fewest mistakes were those who did more favours for colleagues than they received. Engineers who took at least as much as they gave were more likely to have average results; the givers went to the extremes. The same pattern emerged in medicine and sales: the highest achievers were those most driven to help others.

What determines whether givers sink to the bottom or rise to the top? I

are not at odds with their own interests. For example, it turns out that successful givers specialise in five-minute favours, looking for ways of offering high benefit to others at a low personal cost. They also ask the people they mentor to "pay it forward", expanding their giving to a broader audience, and are more cautious when dealing with takers.

Equipped with these self-preservation strategies, givers can climb higher than takers or matchers. Their generosity tends to forge deeper relationships, while opening doors to new networks as their reputations spread. They become trusted collaborators, winning the loyalty of their colleagues, and the leaders whose staff rise to the occasion. After all, most people are matchers, so one good turn earns another.

Even if givers don't exceed the accomplishments of takers and matchers, their success takes on a different quality. Instead of cutting other people down on the way to the top, they pursue their personal goals in ways that lift other people up, earning friends, not enemies. So when givers do ascend, it isn't lonely at the top.

Adam Grant, management professor at Wharton, is the author of 'Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success'. To assess your style, see giveandtake.com

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