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Adam Grant Can Help You Coax Generosity Out Of Your Grumpiest Coworker

The Wharton psychologist has found that people are surprisingly giving when you make it surprisingly easy.

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BY ADAM GRANT 4 MINUTE READ

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When we need help, we often don't know where to turn. At a pharmaceutical company, an executive needed to synthesize a drug for less than the $50,000 that an outside vendor was charging. In my classroom, a student was dreaming of working at Six Flags, but they didn't recruit at Wharton.

I was surprised to see that in both cases, they got their problems solved. The executive found a colleague who had capacity in his lab and synthesized the drug for free, and the student landed an introduction to the former CEO of the amusement-park chain. The way those outcomes came about wasn't all that complicated, but it rests on a method that too few managers know how to implement. Here's how it works.

THE RECIPROCITY RING

I first learned about the "Reciprocity Ring" a dozen or so years ago from University of Michigan sociologist Wayne Baker and social scientist Cheryl Baker. It's a dynamic group exercise that's designed to make generosity so easy that it's almost impossible to avoid.

The way it works is this: Each participant makes a request to their fellow team members. Those teammates are then tasked with pooling their collective expertise, resources, and connections to help fulfill each of the requests contributed–it's that simple. The idea is to show everyone involved how *little* it usually takes to get something done when an entire group puts their energy behind one individual's needs. I've run this exercise with thousands of students as well as with execs at the likes of IBM, Boeing, and Estée Lauder, and I'm amazed at how many find it transformative.

Obviously, the Reciprocity Ring is all about tapping into one another's networks. Instead of being limited to contacting just the people you know in order to solve a problem–whether that's your immediate coworkers or a friend–you're able to access a much wider knowledge base: *Who do I know?* becomes *Who (and what) do we all know?* Simply by coming together for a chance to flip that question, people tend to realize how easy it is to share a tip or make a call that has a real benefit to others but a tiny cost to themselves.

But you really *do* need to come together intentionally in order to understand the scope of the resources your team is collectively sitting on. The hallmark of any great work culture is that people care as much about each other's success as their own. They share their knowledge, connections, and help without any strings attached.

Many organizations never reach that level of "productive generosity," and it's not because people aren't willing to give. It's because they're afraid to ask for help–they don't want to look incompetent or embarrass themselves. In doing so, they make it difficult for people to know where, when, and how to contribute. There's even evidence to suggest that 75%–90% of all helping in workplaces starts with a request. In other words, if you want people to give, you have to make it easy for people to ask.

MAKING ASKING AS EASY AS POSSIBLE

That's a key benefit of the Reciprocity Ring: Since everyone submits a request, it's clear who you can help and how. Still, Wayne Baker and I

wondered whether the most generous givers were doing the heavy lifting, leaving selfish "takers" to freeload.

So we measured people's values before they participated in the Reciprocity Ring, tracking whether they preferred to give or take. Sure enough, givers made more contributions than takers, averaging four apiece. But takers were also quite generous, giving three times more than they got. There's a social pressure at work here: Most takers don't want to get caught. Since the exercise requires people to offer help in front of the group, they know their reputations hinge on them stepping up. And Wayne's subsequent research showed that even after reputational effects fade, the gratitude people feel from receiving help motivates them to keep paying it forward.

In the years since I've been leading these exercises, and talking and writing about why helping others can drive our success, I've been asked many times whether there's a technology platform to facilitate the exercise virtually in teams and communities over time. Now there is: Wayne, Cheryl, and I developed Givitas in order to expand the impact of the Reciprocity Ring on a much broader scale.

Many technology platforms are designed to be sticky; they thrive by monopolizing as much of your time as possible. We designed Givitas to do the opposite. Too often, people fall victim to generosity burnout, investing so much energy in helping others that they exhaust themselves, and conclude that giving just isn't worth it. We don't want you spending all day parked in the platform watching for new requests and answering them. We want you in and out in five minutes a day, so you can do your work more efficiently and effectively–and help others do the same.

Cultures of productive generosity only exist when requesting and contributing help is part of the daily routine. That routine just can't last when no good deed goes unpunished. When it's *easy* to seek and offer help, givers become more energized, takers become more generous, problems become more tractable, and groups become more successful.

Adam Grant is a Wharton psychologist, a New York Times *best-selling author, and the host of* WorkLife with Adam Grant, *a TED original podcast.*

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